

perhaps take a bit of a chance, but this time I must move carefully, must I not?' He looked up at Mike and he smiled, a thick-lipped, wet-lipped smile. Mike did not smile back.

'First, then, which area of Bordeaux does this wine come from? That's not too difficult to guess. It's far too light to be from either St Emilion or Graves. It's obviously a Médoc. There's no doubt about *that*. Now, from which part of Médoc does it come? That should not be too difficult to decide. Margaux? No, it cannot be Margaux. Pauillac? It cannot be Pauillac, either. It is too gentle for Pauillac. No, no, this is a very gentle wine. Unmistakably this is a St Julien.'

He leaned back in his chair and placed his fingers carefully together. I found myself waiting rather anxiously for him to go on. The girl, Louise, was lighting a cigarette. Pratt heard the match strike and he turned on her, suddenly very angry. 'Please!' he said. 'Please don't do that! It's a terrible habit, to smoke at table!'

She looked up at him, slowly and disrespectfully, still holding the burning match in one hand. She blew out the match, but continued to hold the unlighted cigarette in her fingers.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' Pratt said, 'but I simply cannot have smoking at table.'

She didn't look at him again.

'Now, let me see – where were we?' he said. 'Ah yes. This wine is from Bordeaux, from St Julien, in the area of Médoc. So far, so good. But now we come to the more difficult part – the name of the producer. For in St Julien there are so many, and as our host so rightly remarked, there is often not much difference between the wine of one and the wine of another. But we shall see.'

He picked up his glass and took another small drink.

'Yes,' he said, sucking his lips, 'I was right. Now I am sure of it. It's from a very good year – from a great year, in fact. That's better! Now we are closing in! Who are the wine producers in the area of St Julien?'

Again he paused. He took up his glass. Then I saw his tongue shoot out, pink and narrow, the end of it reaching into the wine. A horrible sight. When he lowered his glass, his eyes remained closed. Only his lips were moving, sliding over each other like two pieces of wet rubber.

'There it is again!' he cried. 'Something in the middle taste. Yes, yes, of course! Now I have it! The wine comes from around Beychevelle. I remember now. The Beychevelle area, and the river and the little port. Could it actually be Beychevelle itself? No, I don't think so. Not quite. But it is somewhere very close. Talbot? Could it be Talbot? Yes, it could. Wait one moment.'

He drank a little more wine, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed Mike Schofield and how he was leaning further and further forward over the table, his mouth slightly open, his small eyes fixed on Richard Pratt.

'No, I was wrong. It is not a Talbot. A Talbot comes forward to you just a little more quickly than this one; the fruit is nearer the surface. If it is a '34, which I believe it is, then it couldn't be a Talbot. Well, well, let me think. It is not a Beychevelle and it is not a Talbot, but – but it is so close to both of them, so close, that it must be from somewhere almost in between. Now, which could that be?'

He was silent, and we waited, watching his face. Everyone, even Mike's wife, was watching him now. I heard the servant put down the dish of vegetables on a table behind me, gently, so as not to break the silence.

'Ah!' he cried. 'I have it! Yes, I think I have it!'

For the last time, he drank some wine. Then, still holding the glass up near his mouth, he turned to Mike and he smiled, a slow, silky smile, and he said, 'You know what this is? This is the little Château Branaire-Ducru.'

Mike sat tight, not moving.

'And the year, 1934.'