

'On top of the green cupboard in my study,' Mike said. 'That's the place we chose. A good spot in a room with an even temperature. Excuse me now, will you, while I get it.'

The thought of another wine to play with had cheered him up, and he hurried out of the door. He returned a minute later more slowly, walking softly, holding in both hands a wine basket in which a dark bottle lay with the name out of sight, facing downwards. 'Now!' he cried as he came towards the table. 'What about this one, Richard? You'll never name this one!'

Richard Pratt turned slowly and looked up at Mike, then his eyes travelled down to the bottle in its small basket. He stuck out his wet lower lip, suddenly proud and ugly.

'You'll never get it,' Mike said. 'Not in a hundred years.'

'A claret?' Richard Pratt said, rather rudely.

'Of course.'

'I suppose, then, that not much of this particular claret is produced?'

'Perhaps it is, Richard. And perhaps it isn't.'

'But it's a good year? One of the great years?'

'Yes, I can promise that.'

'Then it shouldn't be too difficult,' Richard Pratt said, speaking slowly, looking extremely bored. But to me there was something strange about his way of speaking; between the eyes there was a shadow of something evil, and this gave me a faint sense of discomfort as I watched him.

'This one is really rather difficult,' Mike said. 'I won't force you to bet on this one.'

'Really. And why not?'

'Because it's difficult.'

'That's rather an insult to me, you know.'

'My dear man,' Mike said, 'I'll have a bet on it with pleasure, if that's what you wish.'

'It shouldn't be too hard to name it.'

'You mean you want to bet?'

'I'm perfectly ready to bet,' Richard Pratt said.

'All right, then, we'll bet the usual. A case of the wine itself.'

'You don't think I'll be able to name it, do you?'

'As a matter of fact, and with respect, I don't,' Mike said. He was trying to remain polite, but Pratt was making little attempt to hide his low opinion of the whole business. Strangely, though, his next question seemed to show a certain interest.

'Would you like to increase the bet?'

'No, Richard. A case is enough.'

'Would you like to bet fifty cases?'

'That would be silly.'

Mike stood very still behind his chair at the head of the table, carefully holding the bottle in its basket. There was a whiteness about his nose now and his mouth was shut very tightly.

Pratt was sitting back in his chair, looking up at Mike. His eyes were half closed, and a little smile touched the corners of his lips. And again I saw, or thought I saw, something very evil about the man's face.

'So you don't want to increase the bet?'

'As far as I'm concerned, I don't care,' Mike said. 'I'll bet you anything you like.'

The three women and I sat quietly, watching the two men. Mike's wife was becoming annoyed; I felt that at any moment she was going to interrupt. Our meat lay in front of us on our plates, slowly steaming.

'So you'll bet me anything I like?'

'That's what I told you. I'll bet you anything you like.'

'Even ten thousand pounds?'

'Certainly I will, if that's the way you want it.' Mike was more confident now. He knew quite well that he could afford any sum that Pratt mentioned.

'So you say that I can name the bet?' Pratt asked again.