

'That's what I said.'

There was a pause while Pratt looked slowly round the table, first at me, then at the three women, each in turn. He seemed to be reminding us that we were witnesses to the offer.

'Mike!' Mrs Schofield said. 'Mike, why don't we stop this nonsense and eat our food. It's getting cold.'

'But it isn't nonsense,' Pratt told her calmly. 'We're making a little bet.'

I noticed the servant standing at the back of the room, holding a dish of vegetables, wondering whether to come forward with them or not.

'All right, then,' Pratt said. 'I'll tell you what I want you to bet. Tell me then,' Mike said. 'I don't care what it is. I'll bet.'

Again the little smile moved the corners of Pratt's lips, and then, quite slowly, looking at Mike all the time, he said, 'I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage.'

Louise Schofield gave a jump. 'Hey!' she cried. 'No! That's not funny! Look here, Daddy, that's not funny at all.'

'No, dear,' her mother said. 'They're only joking.'

'I'm not joking,' Richard Pratt said.

'It's stupid,' Mike said. Once again, he was not in control of the situation.

'You said you'd bet anything I liked.'

'I meant money.'

'You didn't say money.'

'That's what I meant.'

'Then it's a pity you didn't say it. But, if you wish to take back your offer, that's quite all right with me.'

'It's not a question of taking back my offer, old man. It's not a proper bet because you haven't got a daughter to offer me in case you lose. And if you had, I wouldn't want to marry her.'

'I'm glad of that, dear,' his wife said.

'I'll offer anything you like,' Pratt announced. 'My house, for

example. How about my house?'

'Which one?' Mike asked, joking now.

'The country one.'

'Why not the other one as well?'

'All right, then, if you wish it. Both my houses.'

At that point I saw Mike pause. He took a step forward and placed the bottle in its basket gently down on the table. His daughter, too, had seen him pause.

'Now, Daddy!' she cried. 'Don't be *stupid!* It's all too silly for words. I refuse to be betted on like this.'

'Quite right, dear,' her mother said. 'Stop it immediately, Mike, and sit down and eat your food.'

Mike ignored her. He looked over at his daughter and he smiled, a slow, fatherly, protective smile. But in his eyes, suddenly, shone the faint light of victory. 'You know,' he said, smiling as he spoke, 'you know, Louise, we ought to think about this a bit.'

'Now stop it, Daddy! I refuse even to listen to you! Why, I've never heard anything so crazy in all my life!'

'No, seriously, my dear. Just wait a moment and hear what I have to say.'

'But I don't *want* to hear it.'

'Louise, please! It's like this. Richard, here, has offered us a serious bet. He is the one who wants to make it, not me. And if he loses, he will have to hand over a large amount of property. Now wait a minute, my dear, don't interrupt. The point is this. *He cannot possibly win.*'

'He seems to think he can.'

'Now listen to me, because I know what I'm talking about. The claret I've got here comes from a very small wine-growing area that is surrounded by many other small areas that produce different varieties of wine. He'll never get it. It's impossible.'

'You can't be sure of that,' his daughter said.

'I'm telling you I can. Though I say it myself, I understand