METHUEN

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Description of Terms
used in connection
with Hocks and Moselles
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"AUSLESE" Selected grapes.

"BEEREN AUSLESE" These are chosen berries from the best bunches.

"TROCKENBEEREN AUSLESE" The selection of dried berries is really a refinement of the "Beeren Auslese". It is understood that in "Trockenbeeren Auslese" only the shrivelled raisin-like grapes are used.

Only very particular owners in quite exceptional years make a "Trockenbeeren Auslese" as it requires the greatest possible care, much time and very skilled staff.

"EDELREIFE" and "EDELFAULE" (Pourriture noble)

These grapes produce marvellous "Spitzengewachse" (Tete) which combine wonderful fruit, marvellous flavour and unique sweetness. On the other hand they are very, very rare and fetch fantastic prices.

"GOLDBEEREN AUSLESE"

Are made sometimes in years when the

"EDELREIFE" and "EDELFAULE" (Pourriture noble)

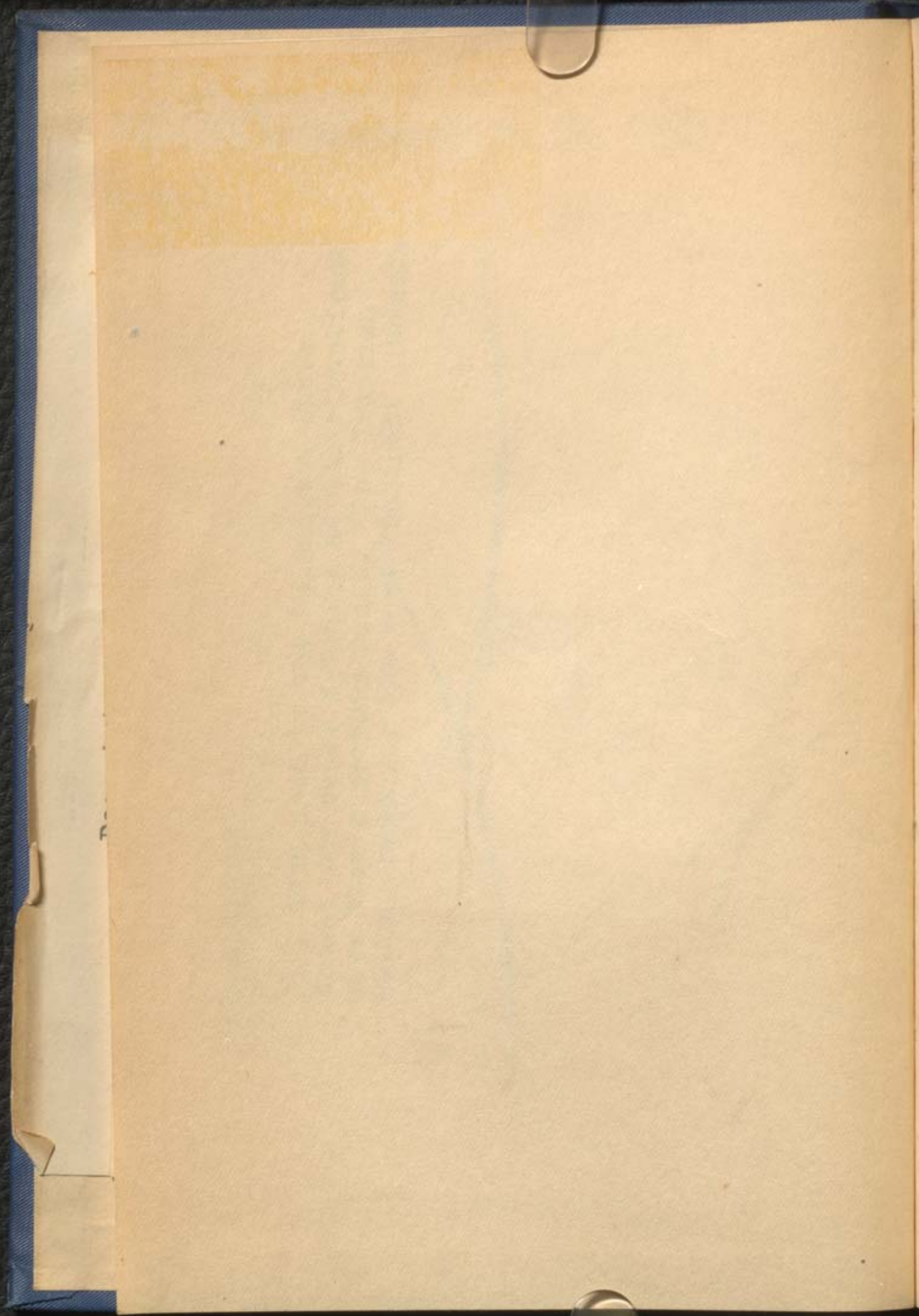
These grapes produce marvellous "Spitzengewachse" (Tete) which combine wonderful fruit, marvellous flavour and unique sweetness. On the other hand they are very, very rare and fetch fantastic prices.

"GOLDBEEREN AUSLESE"

Are made sometimes in years when the Autumn is very dry and sunny and the grapes remain perfectly sound and do not present the "Edelfaule". Through the intense heat of the Sun they often turn a brownish golden tint. In such years "Goldbeeren Auslese" can be made.

"SPATLESE"

Grapes gathered later than the normal fixed time for picking, i.e., if the time is fixed for, say, the 15th September, the vintner may leave his grapes two, three or four weeks longer on the vine so that with favourable weather he gets much better wines.



MR. CLERIHEW, WINE MERCHANT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ITALY FROM END TO END
THE WINES OF FRANCE
ETC.

MR. CLERIHEW
WINE MERCHANT

BY

H. WARNER ALLEN

865519

First Published in 1933 by Methuen & Co. Ltd.
36 Essex Street, London, W.C. 2

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

TO

CHARLES WALTER BERRY

PRINCE OF WINE-LOVERS

DEAR WALTER,

I dedicate this book to you, because without you it would never have been written. Readers of your *Viniana* will see at once how much it owes to you. If it calls up a smile once and again, it will have served its purpose.

Yours ever,

H. WARNER ALLEN

NOTE

The Methuen Wine Label (1740-1750), reproduced on the title-page and the binding-case, records the influence exercised by the Methuen treaty with Portugal in establishing the popularity of Port during the 18th century at the expense of light French wines. This treaty provided that Portuguese wines should be admitted into England upon payment of £7 a tun, while French wines were compelled to pay £55 a tun. It would seem from this label that a wine was imported from Portugal under the name of 'Methuen' to commemorate the treaty negotiated by John Methuen, Lord Chancellor of Ireland, who was sent to Portugal in 1703 to ask the King whether he would 'recede from his alliance with France and Spain or persist therein,' and his son Paul Methuen, the Ambassador at Lisbon.

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CHAPTER I

BERNCASTLER DOCTOR TROCKENBEEREN AUSLESE 1921

MR. CLERIHEW'S shop—he never called it an office—lay between two busy West End thoroughfares. It was a cosy oblong room with an old-fashioned bow window looking out on a sleepy ancient courtyard with a sundial in the centre. The house had been built in the fifteenth century, and the planks of the strangely tilted floor tapered after the shape of the trunks they came from. Wine bottles of all ages and sizes were marshalled in the window and the shelves round the shop. There was no such complete collection to be found in the museums of the world. Nowhere else could the lover of wine study to such advantage the history of the bottle from the Roman amphora and the glass bottle of Petronius' Trimalchio to the stumpy glass receptacle in which wine was drawn from the wood in Tudor days. A complete series illustrated the gradual evolution of that fat, pot-bellied bottle designed merely to stand firmly on the table to the cylindrical bottle of our own day, which can be binned away so that the wine may mature slowly

and at peace, protected by its own liquid from the air that may filter in through the cork.

In one corner stood a gigantic pair of wooden scales which had been employed for the last three centuries in weighing the customers of the house of Clerihew. The weights of the most famous men of their time were registered in red-backed ledgers dating back to the early eighteenth century and religiously preserved in a fireproof safe. Opposite sat Mr. Clerihew at a large desk. Behind him came a smaller desk for Tom Clerihew, his nephew and junior partner. In another corner was a tall desk at which Mr. Clerihew's clerks sat, and near it a worm-eaten trap-door backed with steel gave access to the cellars which spread for hundreds of yards under the neighbouring houses. Their precious contents were protected by armour of steel and concrete. At the back a tiny dining-room opened out from the shop. Hung with signed caricatures of celebrities and customers, it offered each day at lunch wines of the rarest vintages and the perfection of simple English fare to Mr. Clerihew's friends and most honoured clients.

Mr. William Clerihew, the head of the ancient firm, seemed to fit perfectly into the old-world peace and comfort of the little shop. Personally he dealt only in the most precious jewels of the grape, wines that it would have been a sin to waste on any but the most cultured palate, and watched over them for the works of art that they were with the solicitude

of a guardian of the crown jewels. He was slight and wiry with sandy hair, and round glasses gave him a Pickwickian air which his profile contradicted with an eager aquiline nose and a firm chin. Shy and retiring, he cultivated the manners of age, and the casual visitor might credit him with twenty years more than his actual tale, which had not long exceeded forty.

His nephew was a big, burly fellow of five and twenty, downright in manner and a good salesman. He was concerned with the sale of honest wines, less rare and precious than those which were his uncle's province, but in the bulk more profitable, and of popular, if vulgar, spirits, such as gin, whisky and liqueurs. An all-round sportsman, he regarded his uncle with an anachronistic respect and affection.

The silent shop was an oasis in the noise of London. Mr. Clerihew's friends and customers dropped in to discuss wine in subdued tones just as bibliophiles used to gossip about books with an old-fashioned bookseller. It was rare that any disturbance found its way inside those peaceful walls, though now and then some exuberant client might shock Mr. Clerihew by raising his voice and behaving as though the shop were not a temple of wine but a den of jazz and cocktails.

One morning Viscount Westermain, that Victorian statesman, who was one of Mr. Clerihew's oldest customers, was laying down the law with portly

dignity and the authority of white whiskers on the relative virtues of claret and burgundy. Mr. Clerihew was agreeing, with an occasional gentle difference. Suddenly a whirlwind broke into the shop. An excitable little man with a high-pitched voice and spasmodic gesticulations shattered the atmosphere of quietude; Marco Antonelli, the world-famous violinist, who had never grown out of being an infant prodigy though his hair was now as long as his body had been when he first enraptured a London audience.

With a face which was never in repose, at one moment rapt in artistic ecstasy, at another sulking like a naughty child after some absurdity, he rather annoyed Mr. Clerihew, who in his shop liked things to be done in order, but he was a good customer. Music lovers all over the world laid their riches at his feet, and the money that flowed in with the strains of his violin more than kept pace with his extravagance and eccentricities. Supremely vain, he had a passion for rare wines, beautiful women and precious stones, and claimed that genius raised him above the moral code. Mr. Clerihew did not approve of the artist's wild enthusiasms and transcendental immorality—he was a moral man himself and believed in self-restraint—but he had a sneaking sympathy with those who lived dangerously, and was far too businesslike to quarrel with a rich man who indulged his fancies for expensive wines.

Antonelli was always in a tearing hurry. He swept

down on Mr. Clerihew, regardless of the decorous conversation that was proceeding with the Viscount. Tom, ever ready for such emergencies, adroitly slipped between the violinist and his uncle.

'No, no,' cried Antonelli, dancing on the tips of his toes, 'I haven't a minute to spare. I don't want you. I want Clerihew himself. It is terribly important. I have to practise. A genius' time is more precious than money. I owe it to the world. I'm going to give a dinner-party, such a dinner-party as has never been since the days of Nero, a dinner-party as perfect as my own music. . . .'

Tom skilfully steered the exuberant violinist to the tasting-slab, and checked the flow of his words for an instant with a glass of his favourite Amontillado.

'One moment,' he said in a low voice, 'my uncle will come to you at once. I will take his place with the Viscount.'

Tom was as good as his word. He had learnt tact in a good school. Without a hint of 'butting in', he slid into the Viscount's conversation and diverted it from red wines to the Grand National. With a discreet nudge he sent off his uncle to the impatient Antonelli who was just swallowing the last mouthful of sherry.

'Clerihew, my angel, to-day week I am giving a dinner-party to the most charming people in the world, and that would be impossible without you. Will you come ?'

'Thank you very much,' said Mr. Clerihew without excessive enthusiasm.

'You cold unsympathetic Englishman! You do not understand. My party is going to be a surprise party, a party worthy of myself and you. You will wear a dinner-jacket. I ordain dinner-jackets, though the loveliest women you have ever seen will be there. I am having one made for the occasion—imperial purple trimmed with ermine.'

Mr. Clerihew shuddered inwardly.

'I am going to show you,' Antonelli whispered impressively, 'the most famous ruby in history, the Borgia ruby, the Luck of Lusitania, but not a word of that to any one. No one but my guests must know that it has left the bank.'

Mr. Clerihew absent-mindedly promised the secrecy of the grave. He was not then particularly interested in rubies, not even in the Luck of Lusitania, which had figured so prominently in the newspapers of late. However, business was business, and Antonelli wanted wine.

'We shall be eight, four sympathetic men and four beautiful women. The wine, Moselle, perfect of its kind, fresh, sweet and flowerlike as the kiss of a girl of twenty.'

The violinist burst into falsetto song—'Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty.' The Viscount turned and looked at him with raised eyebrows.

'The dishes will be created by the incomparable Paolo Paolucci, the Antonelli of the kitchen, and I

have threatened him with the Death of the Thousand Cuts if he forgets for one instant that wine is the crown of the feast.'

Mr. Clerihew jotted down on a slip of paper a list of wines. Antonelli had a Mayfair flat which he only occupied for a few weeks in the year, as he and his violin were perpetually wandering. It had no cellar, and like many another flat-dweller he stored his wines with Mr. Clerihew.

'Finest Amontillado,' murmured Mr. Clerihew, as he wrote, 'from your own stock. Then you have some Eitelsbacher Karthäuserhofberg 1929, very nice and light to begin with, say three bottles. Two bottles of the fine Avelsbacher Herrenberg 1921 to follow, and finally, if you are in a reckless mood, a bottle of the finest Moselle ever made, Berncastler Doctor Trockenbeeren Auslese 1921, but I warn you it is very expensive.'

'What is expense to me?'

'Six guineas the bottle.'

'A trifle.'

'To wind up, a little Tokay Essence 1811 and Grande Fine Champagne 1858.'

'That will do unless I can think of something better. I will write to you. You will send the wines round and see that they are properly treated, temperature and so on.'

Mr. Clerihew nodded assent and handed the slip of paper to the violinist, who dashed off as wildly as he had come. Peace fell again on the shop and that

quiet solid respectability into which its master seemed to fit so perfectly. It would be hard to conceive anything less adventurous. Yet it must be confessed that in this respect Mr. Clerihew was a whited sepulchre. Outside his shop the gentle little man was devoured by a craving for adventure. He was a model merchant, always punctual, polite and methodical, but every now and then he would give way to the lust for danger and speed, which lurked somewhere deep down in his nature. Under an assumed name, he had been a balloonist, one of the first of British airmen and a racing motor driver famed for his cool recklessness. It was his secret hope that he might go out one day in a blaze of glory, pursuing 'the heroic for earth too hard'. In the war he had landed spies from an aeroplane behind the enemy lines and, when this job had grown tame, found a post in the Secret Service that enabled him to risk his life perpetually. Only a very few of Mr. Clerihew's closest friends knew that this very respectable wine merchant was at heart a desperado ; for he was not talkative about himself.

Adventure, it is said, comes to the adventurous, and Mr. Clerihew had had his share. For the past year or two, however, his life had been serenely placid. He could not reckon as an excitement a flight over Abdul Krim's lines in Morocco in a Spanish aeroplane of pre-war vintage, which seemed to be tied together with wire and string, and a narrow escape from being shot down—a little picnic

he had arranged for himself when visiting Jerez in quest of fine sherry.

The adventurous imp inside him was becoming restless, and its restlessness reached a climax on the morning of Antonelli's dinner-party. Antonelli was a Lusitanian, and had spoken of the Luck of Lusitania. The name of Lusitania invariably threw Mr. Clerihew into a state of silence and irritation. The Court had been famous throughout the world for its high standard of living in days when, generally speaking, the poverty of monarchs was a commonplace, and he provided it with wines, but never mentioned its name. Lusitania, a little state which had for centuries kept European diplomatists in the condition of health-giving disquiet produced by the flea in the wild dog, had been much in the papers of late. It had indulged in a revolution, exiled its King and set up a Soviet. The King minus most of the crown jewels had escaped with the Court and taken refuge in the home of exiled monarchs. They had been prudent enough to deposit in London banks before the disaster just enough money to keep them in lower middle-class style, but not nearly enough to finance royal pomp in exile or a counter-revolution.

The new Lusitanian Government once established had made the surprising discovery that, when they had divided the whole wealth of the country between all its citizens, everybody seemed much poorer than they had been before. No one had any money to pay taxes. The Treasury was compelled to fall back

on the confiscated crown jewels. Chief among these gems was a historical ruby which had glowed for centuries in the crown above the brow of the Lusitanian sovereign.

Tradition said that it had belonged to a Roman Emperor, had adorned the sceptre of Charlemagne and in the Renaissance had found its way into the treasures of the Borgia. The Luck of Lusitania, as it was called throughout the kingdom, was the centre of a whole cycle of legends and superstitions. Its possession was held to confer the right of sovereignty. Six times a year it was displayed on the royal head and healed a multitude of diseases. It sweated when death threatened the royal family. Its presence shielded the land from pestilence, famine, earthquake and untold calamities.

The new Government had proclaimed the end of superstition and the reign of scientific reason, but the people of Lusitania knew more about their legends than science. Their rulers' respect for the liberty they offered to all was so extreme that they shrank from no measures of coercion in its cause. An iron censorship made it impossible for the ill-disposed to speak evil of freedom, but it could not gag Rumour, who spread the news that the Luck of Lusitania had been prised from the crown and was being offered for sale in London by a hero of the Revolution.

Abroad the papers announced far and wide that the finest ruby in the world was looking for a buyer.

They published pictures of the Luck of Lusitania, in the crown and out of it, dramatic tales of other famous jewels and speculated on the fantastic sum it would fetch at auction. Then one day they announced it had been sold privately to an unknown purchaser.

The *News First* appeared with a scoop that it had been bought by a Lusitanian, the Paganini of his day, Marco Antonelli, who had just been left half a million dollars by an American admirer, the relict of a Canned Music King. It hinted that the violinist might emulate Paderewski and return to his country as the owner of the Luck of Lusitania and President of a new Republic.

Its rival the *Trumpeter* weighed in with a new sensation. The hero of the Revolution who had sold the ruby had disappeared with the money. His plans had been well laid ; for nothing more was heard of him and the last hope of balancing the Lusitanian Budget vanished. The Lusitanian Minister vaguely threatened legal proceedings against Antonelli, but the violinist possessed a curious streak of commercial shrewdness and had made his position unassailable.

Antonelli had spoken of showing the Luck of Lusitania to his guests. It had occurred to Mr. Clerihew that there were a number of Lusitanian aristocrats, newly come to London, who might be invited for such an occasion. There were certain Lusitanian aristocrats whom he had no desire to

meet ; at least there was one Lusitanian aristocrat, no less a person than the Marchesa di Camerano, wife of the hereditary Lord High Chamberlain, whom he had not seen for years, not since the days when she was not a Lusitanian aristocrat at all, but an English girl in an English village—and he did not know in the least whether he wanted to see her again or not.

'There is something wrong with me,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself ; 'I'm getting stale, vegetating in this shop. I must take some time off. A few weeks big game shooting would do me a world of good.'

His impatience was wasted, for he was on the threshold of the adventure of his life.

The door opened and a man came in. Mr. Clerihew looked up. He saw a black-haired, round-faced man of about thirty with a pleasant expression, red cheeks and a small moustache, who removed his hat politely. A clerk went forward to ask his business.

'A Frenchman,' thought Mr. Clerihew, 'probably a Bordelais ; but isn't there something funny about his clothes ? '

He held that any man who spent his life in discriminating between the subtle delicacies of great wines was bound to be observant and sensitive to little shades of difference which might escape a less trained attention. The visitor had a black felt hat in his hand and was wearing a smart enough suit of a nondescript grey colour such as any one might

wear, yet Mr. Clerihew thought that he detected something odd about it.

The clerk came back to Mr. Clerihew and said in the low tone which suited the surroundings: 'He comes from Mr. Antonelli and wants to speak to you, sir.'

Mr. Clerihew rose and went towards the door.

'My name is Clément,' said the newcomer with a slight French accent, 'Léon Clément. I am Mr. Antonelli's secretary and he has sent me round for the wine for his dinner-party.'

'Oh!' said Mr. Clerihew in some surprise, 'I thought he wanted one of my men to go over and look after things. I wondered why I had not heard from him.'

'He had forgotten that I should be back in time. I have been away on a holiday at my home near Bordeaux. I come of a family of wine-growers. Perhaps you know the Cléments of Château Monselet.'

Mr. Clerihew of course knew Château Monselet as one of the minor *crus* of the Médoc, though it was not connected in his mind with the name of Clément.

'Mr. Antonelli says that, as I am back, there will be no need to trouble one of your men. He gave me the list of wines you had made out for him.'

Clément handed the wine merchant the slip of paper. The violinist had made no change. Nothing could be more natural, yet at the back of Mr. Clerihew's mind there flitted just the ghost of a doubt. It was certainly singular that the secretary of a man

who was so lavish to his dependants and so particular as to their appearance should be wearing a suit with an outside ticket pocket on the left-hand side of the coat, but the French were always economical. Anyhow, to take no risks, Mr. Clerihew went into his back room and looked up Château Monselet in the encyclopaedic 'Bordeaux et ses Vins'; he found that Jules and Léon Clément were given as joint proprietors of the *cru*.

He returned and chatted with the secretary, whose knowledge of viticulture and wine-making was above suspicion, until the wines were brought up from the cellar.

Just after Clément had gone, one of the cellarmen came up from below looking rather self-conscious, as he was clearly dressed in his Sunday best.

'Taking your best girl to the pictures, George?' asked Mr. Clerihew with a smile.

George blushed and mumbled.

'The suit fits you very well,' said Mr. Clerihew.

'It might have been made for me,' said George proudly, as he went off, quite unconcerned by the fact that he too was wearing a suit with the outside ticket pocket on the left.

'Observation is a curious thing,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'I wonder how many people would have noticed it.'

That night dressing for dinner, Mr. Clerihew was unaccountably elated. His mood had changed. He felt adventure in the air, and made no attempt to

resist the childish impulse which so often beset him. He was a collector of weapons of many kinds and a first-rate pistol shot. Psychologists might attribute his love of going armed, of feeling that he had a man's life in his pocket, to wish-frustration long ago. That night at any rate he dropped into the pocket of his dinner-jacket an extremely neat and deadly Derringer pistol.

Mr. Clerihew, ever punctual, was the first of Antonelli's guests to arrive. The maestro received him with that wild exuberance which always made the quiet little wine merchant uncomfortable.

'Ah! Clerihew, my friend, my seraph, my archangel! No dinner could be perfect without you, Prince of wine-lovers, and to-night I am offering you a feast worthy of you and myself. The wines you know—perfection!—the food also.'

Antonelli kissed the tips of his fingers rapturously, and poured out a glass of sherry for his guest.

'Then, my Clerihew, the company. They are friends I met on an enchanted sea-trip in the Mediterranean. Alas! one has failed us at the last moment—Carlotta Roselli, that sweet singer and exquisite woman. Influenza, she says; it may be a new lover, happy man. There remain two of the loveliest women in the world, the sinuous, sinister Leonora, the serpentine dancer, who has set the world crazy with her green eyes and enigmatic beauty. A riddle, mon cher, and a dangerous one.'

Mr. Clerihew grunted.

'Next to you, my friend, will sit an even greater beauty, not so intriguing perhaps, but incomparable with her golden hair and deep blue eyes and ivory skin. I shan't tell you her name, you old fox. For she knows you, Clerihew, and when I told her that you were coming, her eyes danced and smiled. Clerihew, you're a lucky old dog.'

'The Marchese and Marchesa di Camerano,' announced the servant.

Mr. Clerihew set down his half-full glass so carelessly that he upset a part of its precious contents. Yet he was sure he had never been more calm in his life.

The Marchesa shook hands with Antonelli. At her coming the room was bathed in brilliant golden light. The Chinese lacquer which was one of Antonelli's hobbies came to life in the background with writhing dragons, magic birds and solemn mandarins, as she passed on and held out her hand to Mr. Clerihew. There was a smell of spring and primroses in the air.

'Ariadne,' he said, lingering over every letter of the name he loved, 'you have forgotten me?'

'Will,' she replied with the old impetuous decisiveness, 'it is good to see you again after all these years.'

Mr. Clerihew's eyes were entangled in the blue depths of Ariadne's gaze, and it was with an effort that he detached them and realized that the Marchese was waiting for his attention. The Marchese di Camerano was a small thin man with burning eyes

and a pale haughty face that seemed to have been hewn in marble or rather moulded into the perfection of a Greek statue by the merciless pressure of one idea. His thin lips lengthened into the semblance of a smile.

'I believe,' he said with condescension, 'you knew the Marchesa before I married her.'

'I had that honour,' said Mr. Clerihew, meeting his stare unwinkingly, 'before she married you.'

It may only have been a foreign turn of phrase masked by the Marchese's perfect accent, but Mr. Clerihew resented like hell the suggestion that any one in the world, were he of blood royal or divine, could confer a favour upon Ariadne by marrying her. He was quite unmoved by any contempt the Marchese might feel for a tradesman, though there may have been a glimmer of triumph in his expression when Ariadne laid her hand on his sleeve and took him away into a window apart.

'Will, I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you again, but I do wish that you were not here to-night.'

Mr. Clerihew thought he detected a note of real anxiety in Ariadne's tone. Surely she could not be worrying over her husband's attitude.

'Why, what's the matter?'

'Nothing, nothing,' said Ariadne quickly, 'only you'll be bored to death.'

Mr. Clerihew challenged this absurd remark by looking straight into her eyes, which met his for an instant before they withdrew into that ivory tower

of elusiveness in which the Ariadne of his youth had always dwelt.

'We shall talk nothing but Lusitanian politics, and you can't be interested in them. You know we exiles are all plotting hard. As a matter of fact, we should not be here at all, if we were not trying to persuade Antonelli to throw in his lot with us. He has prestige, money and . . . and the Luck. The Marchese . . .'

She hesitated, and Mr. Clerihew gaily finished the sentence.

'Does not usually consort with low-born musicians and tradesmen.'

Ariadne laughed merrily. 'It seems so funny to us, doesn't it? but it is really rather pathetic. He is a bit of a fanatic about birth. He was brought up in it as if it were a religion. Poor dear, he can't help it. He can never quite forgive me for not having enough quarterings or whatever they are.'

The arrival of the other guests soon dragged Mr. Clerihew away from his happy window-seat. He was introduced to the enigmatic Leonora, who was living up to her serpentine reputation in a tight green scaly dress cut very low. Miss Dora Griffiths, a young lady with curls and eyelashes and a lip-stick mouth, was more generous with her back than Leonora with her front. Mr. Clerihew had met her before. She had been secretary to Sir Harry Holman, once British Minister to Lusitania, when he was writing his Memoirs, and one summer day he had

brought her to lunch in Sun Dial Court with what seemed to Mr. Clerihew's old-fashioned ideas practically no clothes on. She was inscribed on his memory, because she was clothed in a virulent heliotrope scent which had ruined a fine claret. Happily that night her perfume was more discreet, but Mr. Clerihew did not like her. The last arrival was Mr. Jack Lancaster, a hearty broad-shouldered young man with a dark moustache and shifty eyes.

Antonelli's dining-room was designed to give his guests a shock after the restful harmony of the Chinese drawing-room. It was a place of violent hues and contrasts, the walls slashed and zigzagged with unexpected colours like a camouflaged ship and hung with pictures which seemed to Mr. Clerihew to be standing on their heads. His eyes found some relief in the sober lighting. The table was lighted by a single shaded bulb above its centre. The room was small for so large a party, and Mr. Clerihew had to squeeze carefully past a spindly-legged table carrying a lamp set in a Chinese vase, which threw additional light for the service on the sideboard with its marshalled bottles and decanters.

The seven guests were seated at a round table. Antonelli had the Marchesa on his right and Leonora on his left. Mr. Clerihew was on the other side of the Marchesa with Dora Griffiths on his right. The Marchese was on Leonora's left separated from Dora by Jack Lancaster. In the centre of the table a revolving dumb waiter brought such accessories as

olives and salted almonds within the reach of any guest at a touch.

Mr. Clerihew sat as one in a vision. The food was lost on him. The noble wines he had chosen might have been the synthetic products of an unscrupulous grocer for all the attention they received from his palate. Ariadne, whom he had not seen for a lifetime and whom he had never hoped to see again, was sitting at his side. She was talking to him, looking into his face as frankly as ever, and he was all ears and eyes to miss nothing of her. She talked of old times, of an English village, a wood and primroses. If any one mentioned Lusitanian politics, he did not know it. He was not bored.

Yet at times he had a feeling that Ariadne was not quite at her ease. The abandon with which she threw herself into memories of the past would be suddenly checked by something more than politeness to her host, who certainly saw more of her white shoulder than her face. It was as if she had her eye on a clock, waiting for something to happen when it struck.

Yet nothing happened. Mr. Clerihew's nose and palate were dimly aware of the Elysian bouquet and aroma of the incomparable Berncastler. Dessert and Tokay followed and the servants departed. The only thing that mattered, conversation with Ariadne, was maddeningly interrupted. Antonelli stood up and cleared a space on the dumb waiter under his nose. Silence fell. He made a dramatic gesture and

then drew from his pocket like a conjurer a purple jewel-case. Mr. Clerihew cursed him secretly, for Ariadne's attention was now riveted on her host.

Very slowly Antonelli opened the case, gazed at something inside it and set it down open on the dumb waiter.

'My friends,' he cried, 'Antonelli surpasses Antonelli. I promised you a crown of the banquet, worthy of the occasion, worthy of the wines, worthy of the beauty of the ladies, worthy of myself. I set before you a jewel beyond price or compare, the peerless Borgia ruby, the Luck of Lusitania.'

A little murmur of applause went up from the guests warmed with their wine.

'You all know its history. It is itself frozen history. How many heroes have given their lives, how many beautiful women their virtue, to possess it. There is a devil in the fire that glows in its heart. It would tempt a saint to steal.'

Antonelli, who had worked himself into a state of excitement which seemed to Mr. Clerihew quite ridiculous, looked round his guests with suspicion written on his face.

'I am almost sorry that I have brought it from the bank. I trust none of you, no, not even Clerihew, who sets more store by a bottle of fine wine than by the rarest gem or loveliest woman—at least so he says, or used to say.'

The violinist spoke the last words slowly and almost insolently and threw an ambiguous glance

towards the wine merchant and Ariadne. He had certainly had quite enough to drink. Mr. Clerihew felt that Antonelli had far overpassed the limits of indulgence to be conceded to a host. He was on the point of replying angrily: 'That's enough, Antonelli. Have you brought us here to insult us? I wouldn't take your beastly ruby as a gift.' There came the soft pressure of Ariadne's hand on his arm and with a gulp he checked himself.

Antonelli turned back to the ruby. 'Behold the Luck of Lusitania glowing like fire on its bed of satin. High and low I sought for a shrine worthy of its beauty. The Marchese found me an artist jeweller who created for it the case in which it lies. The light is reflected in little mirrors and radiates round the gem on every side, and nothing of its perfection is lost. There is no need to move it. It must not be touched. Bend over it as closely as you please, but touch nothing beyond the case. The legend threatens a nameless death to whoever touches the Luck irreverently. I will make sure that the prophecy comes true, for with my own hand I will shoot any one, man or woman, who attempts to handle it.'

With a theatrical lack of taste which gave Mr. Clerihew a shiver down his spine, Antonelli planked down a revolver on the table beside him.

'A Mad Hatter's dinner-party,' muttered Mr. Clerihew, loud enough for Ariadne to hear.

Antonelli gave a slight turn to the dumb waiter and brought the ruby under Leonora's eyes.

She gave a scream of rapture, half rose from her seat and devoured the jewel with her snakelike eyes.

'Antonelli,' she murmured, 'let me wear it, let me wear it, just once. Think of it burning on my forehead when I dance Salome. Antonelli, do let me.'

She looked beseechingly at the violinist, who merely shook his head and moved the jewel on to the Marchese. He glanced at it haughtily and his pale face showed no sign of emotion.

'Stolen goods,' he said icily, 'bring ill luck. The Luck of Lusitania belongs to my King and no one . . .'

Antonelli broke in, slapping himself on the chest.

'Who has a better right to the Luck than I, the genius of Lusitania? Maybe we shall return together to our home. There may yet be a second and greater Paderewski.'

The Marchese looked unutterable contempt.

'At any rate,' Ariadne broke in, 'Signor Antonelli is not to blame. He paid good money for it. Far better that our greatest musician should possess the Luck than the traitors who were false to their King.'

'All beauty,' cried Antonelli, 'is the birthright of the genius, the beauty of art, the beauty of precious stones, the beauty of women.'

His eyes lingered for a moment on Ariadne with a daring that infuriated Mr. Clerihew. Once again the pressure of her hand was needed to keep him quiet.

Miss Griffiths licked her lips and looked slyly at the ruby like a cat coveting a forbidden saucer of cream. For the first time Mr. Clerihew observed

that she was on particularly good terms with Jack Lancaster, who was looking over her shoulder. Lancaster was a cousin of Sir Harry Holman, and though the two had quarrelled some time before, might have met her when she was helping the ex-Minister write his Memoirs. He at any rate did not disguise his greed for the stone.

'My God! if it was mine, how soon I'd sell it.'

Mr. Clerihew's turn followed. The stone was certainly beautiful, gleaming in a tiny nest of cunningly contrived mirrors, but it impressed him with little but a sense of wickedness. There was something devilish in the fires that glowed in its heart. He infinitely preferred Ariadne's eyes.

'I would rather have a magnum of Lafite 1864,' he said aloud.

His voice shook a little, because he felt the nearness of Ariadne who was leaning over his shoulder to get a first sight of the ruby before her turn. She was breathing quickly, and it surprised him that the country girl he had known so well could be so excited about a mere stone.

The Luck passed on to her. She leaned close over the case. Mr. Clerihew watched her from a distance and thought that she was infinitely more beautiful and desirable than any gem. Her face was set in an anxious smile. Her long fingers caressed the edges of the case.

She began to move it to and fro to catch the light.

'See, Will, how it flashes, as it moves.'

Mr. Clerihew was not slow to accept the invitation to bring his face very near to hers.

'Look, Mr. Antonelli, isn't it wonderful ?'

To Mr. Clerihew's disgust, their host came as close to Ariadne on her left as he was on her right. They were both looking over her shoulder a few inches from the ruby, when suddenly the lid of the case, that was held from opening flat by two ribbons, shut with a snap.

'Oh !' exclaimed Ariadne.

She handed the case to Antonelli who made to put it back into his pocket.

'Have you all seen enough ?' he asked.

'I'm sure the ladies would like to have another look,' said the Marchese, and Leonora and Miss Griffiths said that they must really have one more look.

'All right,' said Antonelli, as he sat down. He put back the jewel-case on the dumb waiter and fumbled with its fastening. He opened the lid.

For a moment he sat silent, frozen white with horror.

Then he shrieked : 'My God, a miracle. My ruby has gone !'

As he screamed, he sprang to his feet, pushing back his chair. Mr. Clerihew saw the big lamp on the lacquer table behind totter and collapse. It came to the ground with a crash of breaking crockery. Darkness fell. The lights had fused.

Instantly Mr. Clerihew's hand moved to his pocket for the lighter which he always carried, though for

his palate's sake he never smoked. He brought it out and was on the point of pressing the catch, when a strange rush of ideas to his brain made him pause.

Antonelli had lost his head completely. He was blundering about the room and shouting: 'It's gone, it's gone, my ruby, the Luck! Light, for God's sake, light. Strike a match, some one.'

Mr. Clerihew's quick senses were aware of swift purposeful movements around him. He had a notion that Ariadne was no longer beside him, that she had moved softly away and was bending down near the fallen lamp.

'Damn!' said Mr. Clerihew aloud, as he let his lighter slip through his fingers.

There were several clicks at the other end of the room. A dim light appeared, but went out at once. From exclamation and apologies, it appeared that Lancaster had at last succeeded in getting his lighter to light and then unfortunately collided with the Marchese and dropped it.

At the instant of that brief flicker, Mr. Clerihew was stooping down, presumably in quest of his lighter, and caught a glimpse of Ariadne bent over the fallen lamp. A second later his face was buried in the perfume of her hair, his mouth near her ear. His hands came in contact with hers where they were busy about the lamp.

Ariadne gave a little gasp.

There was a struggle between their hands and a whispered duologue.

'Do they make you do all the dirty work, dear ?'

'Will, you don't understand.'

'Never mind, darling, leave it to me. You can trust me.'

Ariadne gave way. Mr. Clerihew was dimly aware of the door opening and shutting, as he occupied himself with a piece of business which a flash of inspiration had told him would be necessary. His movements were quick and neat, though his mind was otherwise engaged, marvelling at his own audacity in calling Ariadne 'darling'.

The Marchese spoke from near the door. 'The lights will be on in a moment. They are mending the fuse.'

'Yes,' said Antonelli, panting desperately, 'your man, Clerihew, says he can do it.'

Mr. Clerihew was lifting the remains of the lamp.

'My man !' he exclaimed in utter amazement.

His voice was drowned by the Marchese at the telephone.

'Victoria 7000. . . . Scotland Yard. . . . Is Inspector Park there ? . . . The Marchese di Camerano . . . he'll know. . . . Is that you, Inspector ? . . . Can you come at once to 17 Beverley Gardens . . . Marco Antonelli's flat, you know the violinist . . . his ruby, the famous Luck of Lusitania, has disappeared . . . not a minute to lose.'

While the Marchese was speaking, Mr. Clerihew finished his job. He took two steps to the open window, threw something out of it, and was back in

his place, when the centre light came on. The Marchese was still at the telephone. Mr. Clerihew began to wonder why Ariadne's husband was ringing up Scotland Yard instead of the local police. Probably he had had dealings with Park over police protection for the exiled King. What on earth had Antonelli meant when he said 'Your man, Clerihew'?

Every one looked dishevelled and frightened. Ariadne was very pale with her hand against her heart, and Mr. Clerihew noticed that her eyes were fixed on the half-open door with an expression of apprehension. Leonora had her hand stretched out towards the jewel-case where it lay on the dumb waiter. Antonelli snatched it up before she could reach it and was opening it again when things began to happen.

Ariadne gave a low cry and stepped back against the wall. Instinctively Mr. Clerihew moved in front of her as a shield and found himself looking down the barrel of a pistol held by a masked man in the doorway.

'Hands up!'

Mr. Clerihew, caught unawares, obeyed.

'Hands up, every one, ladies too,' reiterated the man with the gun, as two other masked men passed swiftly behind him to the window. Mr. Clerihew observed with a thrill that one of them, who disappeared for a time on the balcony, had the flap of his ticket pocket on the left of his coat. He was

evidently securing a retreat by the window in case of accident.

'Park,' thought Mr. Clerihew, 'must be on his way, if the Marchese really called him up—but perhaps that was all bluff. I'd give a lot to know whether Ariadne was expecting this.'

The first gunman secured Antonelli's revolver, which was still on the table. Antonelli in a state of collapse had turned to face him, and his right hand held the unopened jewel-case level with his ear.

'Ah!' said the masked man, 'that is what we have come for. Excuse me, will you?'

With a quick movement, he snatched it out of Antonelli's hand. The violinist fell into his chair and, regardless of orders to keep his hands up and threats, buried his head in his hands and wept loud and long. The gunman had some difficulty in opening the fastening of the jewel-case with one hand, the other being occupied with his pistol, but at last he succeeded.

'Accidente!' he swore in Italian, 'the ruby's not there. Who's got it?'

He was a cool hand. He looked quietly round the room and weighed up Antonelli's guests. Their names were evidently known to him.

'Leonora,' he said, talking to himself, 'probably not. The Marchese, Mr. Lancaster, perhaps. Miss Griffiths, probably not. Mr. Clerihew, certainly not; rich wine merchants don't pocket rubies. The Marchesa, perhaps.'

His pistol moved round the table as he spoke.

'Just see those men over there aren't armed,' he called to his companions by the window; 'the Marchese is almost sure to have a gun on him.'

Sure enough, Mr. Clerihew's friend with the odd ticket pocket extracted a revolver from the Marchese's hip pocket. Search showed that Lancaster was unarmed.

'No need to worry about Mr. Clerihew,' said the leader contemptuously, 'he'll give no trouble. He is much too frightened.'

Mr. Clerihew's raised hands were all of a quiver, and he was trembling all over. He could feel the scorn of Ariadne's eyes. He was a pitiable figure.

'This is an outrage,' he stammered, 'you'll repent . . .'

'Shut up. We've no time to lose. One of you people has got that ruby. Hand it over at once or it will be the worse for you. We're not in a mood to stick at anything.'

Again the bandit's pistol moved round the table and called forth a chorus of 'I've not got it, I've no idea where it is.'

'God,' he said fiercely, 'I'll make the person who has got it wish he or she had never been born. Here, boys, one of the men has probably got it. Try the Marchese first and then Lancaster, while I go through Antonelli.'

With amazing skill and neatness, the three men searched the Marchese, Lancaster and Antonelli to

the skin, never failing to keep at least one pistol pointing in the direction of any possible trouble. Their efforts, however, were in vain, and when their leader broke into blood-curdling threats, Mr. Clerihew gave a pitiable exhibition of teeth-chattering. Ariadne had turned her head away from him in disgust.

'It must be one of the women. Their clothes are damned tricky, for all they wear so few of them. Come on, you bitches, strip at once. Take off every bit of clothing you are wearing and lay it on the table, shoes, stockings and all. I'm sorry for your modesty, but we've got to have that ruby, and, if you don't give it over at once, we'll add your jewellery, though that's not worth much.'

Mr. Clerihew had a feeling that Ariadne was about to hurl herself at the speaker without a thought for pistols.

'No, no, no,' he stuttered, 'that's too much. I'd rather you had the ruby. As a matter of fact, I've got it.'

'You!' exclaimed the astonished gunman.

'Yes, here it is.'

Still holding up his shaking left hand, Mr. Clerihew gently lowered his right into the side pocket of his dinner-jacket and fumbled about for a moment, while the bandits gazed at him with undisguised amazement.

A loud explosion, a tinkling of broken glass. For the second time that evening, the room was in darkness.

Mr. Clerihew had shot out the central and only light with his Derringer, firing through the cloth of his pocket. As he fired, he pushed Ariadne violently into the corner out of danger's way and ducked. A second explosion on the heels of the first. A bullet grazed his scalp, and he hurled himself like a tiger at the place where he reckoned the gunman's legs should be. Luck was on his side, for he collared him low and neatly. Mr. Clerihew had played Rugby in his day and was much stronger than he looked. With a mighty heave, he threw his man headlong into the middle of the dinner-table among the olives and salted almonds of the dumb waiter with a smash of crockery and glass. To judge from the oaths, the man had hurt himself.

Panting from his effort, Mr. Clerihew sprang to Ariadne's corner, put his arm round her and drew her towards the door.

'Don't be frightened, dear; it is all right.'

Ariadne was laughing. 'I'm not frightened, Will,' came the answer between two low giggles, 'but I thought you were, and I'm so ashamed of myself.'

Leonora and Miss Griffiths were expressing their feelings in sobs and shrieks. The noise of a scuffle by the window was suddenly hushed. The flat bell began to ring like the last trump and the outer door echoed with a violent knocking. Some one shouted, 'The police!' There was a scurry at the other end of the room. The masked men were leaving by the window. A crash of splintering wood told that

the door had given under pressure of a stalwart shoulder.

'That sounds like friend Park,' said Mr. Clerihew to Ariadne, 'just in the nick of time. He must have heard the shots. I was wondering if the Marchese had really telephoned to him or not.'

The door was opened cautiously and a ray of light began to play about the room. Outside a motor started up with a whirr.

'What's all this?' asked a deep voice; 'is any one hurt? I heard shooting when I was coming upstairs.'

'Is that you, Park? I'm Clerihew, you know Clerihew of Sun Dial Court. There has been a bit of shooting, but there's no serious damage done.'

The beam of the detective's torch fell on Mr. Clerihew, who was standing very close to Ariadne. His tie and collar had gone to glory. His arm was no longer round her waist, and he was mopping up a thin trickle of blood that ran down his forehead from a wound in the scalp. Ariadne saw him and snatched his handkerchief with that swift impetuosity of hers, crying, 'Oh! Will, are you hurt? And I thought you were a coward. What a beast I am!'

'It's nothing, Ariadne, only a scratch. Do be careful of your dress. You will get it covered with blood.'

Mr. Park's light danced away to play on the other guests, and what happened in the darkness only Ariadne and Mr. Clerihew knew.

The torch showed up the Marchese. His clothes, unbuttoned and disordered by the searchers, were in a hopeless mess and he was a mere caricature of the smart, disdainful aristocrat who had come to Antonelli's party. He seemed to have been wrestling in the dark with Lancaster, who was protesting.

'Damn it, man, I should have collared one of them, if you hadn't made for me.'

'Sorry,' said the Marchese, 'in the darkness I took you for an escaping gunman.'

'Ah! there you are, Marchese,' said Park, 'you rang me up and I came at once. What does it all mean?'

'Held up,' said the Marchese grimly, 'three masked gunmen; they have just escaped by the window. Didn't you hear their car starting?'

'Will you all please stay exactly where you are,' said the detective sternly. His torch had shown him the telephone. His feet trod heavily on broken glass, as he stepped towards it. In a surprisingly short time, he was on to the police station and had given his orders. His voice calmed Leonora and Miss Griffiths, and Antonelli's unmusical lament—he had been sobbing over the table with his head on his arms—faded into a snivel.

'Now,' said the Inspector to the company, 'we can do nothing in the dark. Stay here while I see what I can do with the fuse.'

He was away for a minute or two and then returned.

'Please come this way,' he said, 'the light is on in the drawing-room. Please leave everything as it is, and be careful to move nothing.'

One after the other Antonelli and his six guests filed out into the passage and from there into the lighted drawing-room. Ariadne was still holding Mr. Clerihew's handkerchief to his head without a thought for her dress. His head was smarting and aching and he had blacked an eye against one of the gunman's knees, but he had never felt so happy in his life.

In the drawing-room the Marchese suddenly turned on his wife.

'Mr. Clerihew has been most heroic and quixotic and we all owe him a debt of gratitude, especially as he got none of us killed, but is there any reason why you should ruin your dress with his blood?'

Ariadne flashed one glance at her husband and uttered a single word which had no meaning for Mr. Clerihew: 'Rinaldi.' It appeared to have a meaning for the Marchese, since he started as if he had been slapped in the face and turned on his heel to examine Antonelli's lacquer.

Inspector Park was standing by the door. As soon as they had all passed in, he said hurriedly: 'The first thing is to put our hands on those gunmen. I suppose they have got away with the ruby.'

'Oh, don't worry about the gunmen,' said Antonelli, wringing his hands, 'find me my ruby, the Luck of Lusitania. It had disappeared before they held us up.'

'Yes,' said the Marchese, looking up from a Chinese cabinet, 'I rang you up before they came.'

'What an odd coincidence,' said Mr. Park, 'I couldn't think how you could have telephoned when they were holding you up.'

Mr. Clerihew reluctantly dragged himself from Ariadne's ministering hands.

'Look here, Park,' he said, 'aren't we wasting precious time? The first thing is to catch those gunmen. They've got a good start as it is. Never mind about the ruby for the moment. Personally, I think the fellow who nearly made a hole in my skull deserves your attention. You see I identified one of the masked men.'

Park had no intention of being bustled by Mr. Clerihew. He had a will of his own and knew that nothing could be done until the police arrived.

'First I had better have a look at your head. It seems to be bleeding a good deal.'

'Only a graze,' said the Inspector after a brief examination, 'but an exceedingly narrow escape. One of the gunmen's bullets, I suppose. I can tell you I hurried when I heard the shots. A fraction of an inch lower and you'd have had no need of bandages.'

Very deftly he applied first aid and tied up Mr. Clerihew's head. He was a big fat man with a round red face and a head that was completely bald, and the agility of his fingers contrasted strangely with his elephantine size.

'That will do for the moment,' he said with a grunt; 'now what about this masked man?'

Mr. Clerihew began to speak, but was interrupted by the arrival of the police. Park opened the door and called in a sergeant.

'I'm pretty sure that one of the gunmen who stood by the window was a man who came to my shop this morning and said his name was Léon Clément.'

'How did you recognize him?'

'I happened to notice that Clément was wearing a suit with the flap of the ticket pocket on the left-hand side of the coat. No tailor in the world ever made a suit that way. That made me rather suspicious of him.'

Mr. Park confessed that he was unable to grasp the significance of the ticket pocket.

'You see he said he was Antonelli's secretary.'

'My secretary!' exclaimed Antonelli, 'why, he's in Paris.'

'Well, this fellow told me that you had sent him for the wines for to-night and brought with him the list I had made out for you.'

'But I wrote to you asking you to send one of your men and enclosed the list. What's more, one of your men came. He uncorked the bottles and set out the wines and I told the servants to give him supper. He was out in the hall when the lights fused.'

'I couldn't think what you meant when you said that "my man" was mending the fuse, but things

happened so fast after that that I had no time to say anything. Evidently this man Clément got in here with the wine, pretending to be one of my men. No doubt he let in the other gunmen and joined them. I should not have thought twice about him, if it had not been for that lucky ticket pocket.'

'What on earth has the ticket pocket to do with it ?' asked Mr. Park impatiently.

Mr. Clerihew had no objection to demonstrating his own perspicacity.

'I thought,' he said, with a gentle dig at his old friend Park, 'that none of these things were hidden from you gentry at Scotland Yard. I admit that I only learned the meaning of that ticket pocket through chance. Not long ago I gave an old suit to one of my cellarmen. He came round wearing it one day, and it looked exactly like a new suit except that the ticket pocket was on the wrong side. I asked him why, and he told me that he had had the suit turned. The tailor who turned it had either to stitch the ticket pocket up, which would have been rather unsightly, or else leave it on the wrong side where it naturally went when the suit was turned.'

'But what is there suspicious,' asked Lancaster, 'about wearing a turned suit ?'

'It seemed odd to me, because I knew that Antonelli pays his people very well and is very particular about their appearance, though he is a Bohemian.

Somehow I could not imagine that he would choose as a secretary the sort of man who would wear a turned suit. However, my suspicions faded away when he gave me the list of wines. Moreover, he seemed a nice young fellow with a rather remarkable knowledge of wine.'

'I suppose,' said Park, cutting short Mr. Clerihew's story, 'that one of the gunmen was wearing a similar suit.'

'That's it. When I noticed his ticket pocket, I concluded that he was the same person who called on me as Antonelli's secretary.'

'What was he like ?'

'About my height, dark-haired with brown eyes and a small black moustache, round-faced with red cheeks, speaks English well with a slight French accent.'

'Good,' said Mr. Park, 'we will have that description circulated at once.'

He jotted down the particulars and the sergeant went off with them.

'Now,' he said,' we must come to this odd business of the ruby. You say it had disappeared before the hold-up.'

Several people began to talk at once and the detective checked them with a motion of his hand.

'We shall get nowhere if everybody speaks at once. Mr. Clerihew, you are an old friend of mine and have a clear brain. If your head is not aching too badly, will you tell the whole story ?'

Mr. Clerihew began at the point where the Luck of Lusitania was passing round the table.

'When it came to the Marchesa, she took the open jewel-case between her hands and moved it about to show how the ruby flashed in different lights. She tilted it and the lid fell and snapped to. She certainly never touched the stone. I can swear to that, as I was looking over her shoulder all the time.'

'So was Mr. Antonelli,' said Ariadne.

'That's true,' said the violinist, 'I was watching from the other side and never took my eyes off the ruby. It was still in the case when the lid closed. It must have been spontaneous combustion or else a miracle, a judgement on me for meddling with a sacred stone.'

'Please let Mr. Clerihew go on with his story,' said Park.

'Antonelli picked up the case and was putting it in his pocket unopened, when some one suggested that we should all have another look at the ruby.'

'That was my suggestion,' said the Marchese.

'He agreed,' Mr. Clerihew went on, 'and fumbled with the fastening. The case came open rather violently. He stared at it for a second in amazement and then shouted, "My ruby has gone!" In his excitement, he dropped the case on the dumb waiter and jumped up, pushing back his chair. A lamp in a Chinese jar on a table just behind him tottered and collapsed, fusing all the lights and leaving us in darkness.'

Mr. Clerihew paused and Park turned to Antonelli.

'Are you quite sure that the ruby had vanished when you opened the case ?'

'Sure ? Certain, absolutely certain, archi-certain. I must believe the evidence of my own eyes. The case was empty. Why else should I have started up and knocked the lamp over ?'

'Did any one else see that the case was empty at that moment ?'

'I did,' said Leonora without hesitation. 'I was watching Antonelli open the case, and I'm certain that there was nothing in it—only white satin with a depression, shaped like the stone and lined with looking-glass, in the middle.'

'Could you suggest,' asked Park suavely, 'any means by which the stone could have been spirited away ?'

'How can I ? I could not see that the Marchesa had not touched it, as the gentlemen on either side of her could.'

Leonora's tone hinted that if she had been in their place, she would have seen a great deal more.

'Marchesa,' said Park, 'you were sitting on the other side of your host. Did you see that the case was empty ?'

Ariadne answered with some hesitation. 'It all happened in a flash. I had a glimpse of the case. Then I saw the lamp falling and tried to save it. My impression was that the case was empty, but now it seems so impossible that I don't feel certain. I

should hardly like to swear that the ruby was not there.'

'Marchesa,' screamed Antonelli, 'how can you say such a thing? You must have seen the case was empty. If it wasn't, I'm mad.'

'Steady, Mr. Antonelli,' said Park, 'steady. We are only trying to get to the truth. Is there any one else who saw into the case in the second before the lights were fused?'

'Well,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'I did not have a very clear view, but I was leaning over in that direction and caught a glimpse, when Antonelli opened the case. I certainly thought it was empty, but like the Marchesa, when I think it over, I'm inclined to doubt my senses. On the whole, I should not like to swear that the ruby was not there.'

The others agreed that as they were sitting it had been impossible for them to see the inside of the case, and that they had taken it for granted from Antonelli's exclamation that the ruby had disappeared.

'Anyhow,' said Lancaster, 'the ruby wasn't there when the gunmen came.'

Mr. Park got up as if an idea had struck him and went out saying that he would be back in a minute. He returned almost at once with a purple jewel-case in his hand.

'This,' he said, 'was found on the floor of the dining-room. Is it the case from which the ruby disappeared? Can you identify it, Mr. Antonelli?'

As he spoke, he opened the case, fumbling a little over the stiff catch.

'Yes, that's it,' said Antonelli, as he sadly displayed its emptiness to the room.

It was a pretty piece of work. A shallow hollow, sunk in a deep bed of padded satin and cunningly lined with tiny mirrors, provided a home for the missing Luck of Lusitania. The detective took it back from Antonelli, inspected it closely and concluded his examination with a magnifying glass, only to shake his head doubtfully.

'Nothing there,' he said. 'Now that Mr. Clerihew has brought us to the disappearance of the ruby, will each of you in turn tell me exactly what you did in the dark?'

'I was distraught,' said Antonelli. 'When my senses returned, I could not find the matches that ought to have been on the sideboard. Of course there could be no smoking while we were drinking such a rare Moselle. I blundered about calling for some one to light a match. I really did not know what I was doing. At last I groped my way out to tell the servants to mend the fuse. The same idea had occurred to the Marchese, and we collided in the hall. The person we thought was Mr. Clerihew's man was already working at the fuse by the light of a match, and we came back to the dining-room together.'

'Now, Marchesa, what did you do?'

'I'm afraid I was rather foolish. I tried to save

the lamp when I saw it falling. I was too late and stooped down to pick up the bits as if they would light again as soon as they were back on the table. It was not till the light came on that I realized how silly I was.'

'Quite a natural thing to do. What did you do, Mr. Clerihew?'

Mr. Clerihew, who felt Ariadne's calm gaze upon him, replied without turning a hair: 'I fumbled for my lighter in my waistcoat pocket, and when I got it out the miserable thing slipped through my fingers. I spent the rest of the time groping about for it on the floor.'

Miss Griffiths blushed unnecessarily when it came to her turn, and it occurred to Mr. Clerihew that there might have been time for a tender passage between her and Lancaster in the dark. Lancaster had certainly taken some time to get out his lighter.

'I did nothing,' said Miss Griffiths, 'I sat and waited for the lights to come on again. You see, it wasn't my ruby.'

Lancaster was distinctly on the defensive.

'I got out my lighter as quickly as I could, but for some time it would not light. It must have been short of petrol. At last I got a feeble flame. Then the Marchese bumped into me and I dropped it. Like Mr. Clerihew, I spent the rest of the time looking for it.'

'Yes, I'm sorry, Mr. Lancaster. I'm not a smoker

and I had no lighter. I could hear your lighter clicking, but as it didn't work, I thought I had better go and see if I could mend the fuse. Unluckily I collided with you just as it lighted. When I saw that there was already some one mending the fuse, I came back and telephoned to Mr. Park.'

'I sat tight,' said Leonora, 'with my eyes shut, my elbows on the table and my head in my hands. I was frightened, not so frightened as I was afterwards, when the gunmen came, but I'm always frightened in the dark.'

'It seems singularly unfortunate,' said Mr. Park, 'that you gentlemen took so long to strike a light. However . . . perhaps Mr. Clerihew will go on with the rest of the story.'

Mr. Clerihew described the coming of the bandits and their anger at not finding the ruby.

'They searched the Marchese and Mr. Lancaster. I noticed they paid very little attention to me, but I thought it better to wait till the last moment, so as to give you as much time as possible. Of course I heard the Marchese telephone to you. Then they . . . insulted the ladies and I had to act. So I shot out the light—I had a pistol in my pocket—and we had a bit of a rough and tumble. As soon as they heard you at the door, they bolted by the window.'

Mr. Park asked a number of questions, most of which seemed to Mr. Clerihew rather wide of the

mark and the answers he received threw no light on the mystery. At last he said:

'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid I must ask you to submit to the formality of a search. Then you had all better go to bed and leave my men to make a methodical search of the apartment.'

CHAPTER II

AMOROSO

IT was past three in the morning before Mr. Clerihew got back to the bedroom above his shop where he sometimes stayed when he was dining in town. The police search had given no result. There was no sign of the missing ruby. His wounded head was aching. He had called at a doctor's and had the graze neatly plastered. None the less he had no desire to go to bed. He was much too happy. Sleep was ridiculous when he could stay awake and remember Ariadne and, as he thought of her, he began to work out his explanation of the disappearance of the Luck of Lusitania and the strange events that had followed it. Somewhere about six o'clock he dropped asleep in his armchair and dreamed strange dreams.

Four hours later he was sitting at his desk as fresh and neat as ever except for the plaster on his head and a slight blackening round one eye. Then Tom came in and gasped with astonishment to see the senior partner sitting in his place.

'What a relief!' he exclaimed, 'I was afraid you were badly hurt. I bought this at the station coming up.'

He laid down on the desk one of the sensational papers Mr. Clerihew never read and pointed to a streamer across the principal page : ' World-Famous Violinist Robbed of Ruby at Pistol's Point,' and to a stack of headlines below, underlining with his finger

Gunmen in Mayfair Flat
Well-Known Wine-Merchant Wounded.

' Damn,' said Mr. Clerihew.

That was not at all the kind of advertisement he liked for his business. Adventure, he considered, should be kept entirely apart from trade. Tom grinned irreverently and expressed a fear that his uncle was keeping bad company. In the end Mr. Clerihew was compelled to give his nephew a very garbled account of the events of the previous night and retired to the inner room for fear that customers might ask awkward questions when they saw the plaster and the black eye.

He took Tom's paper with him and studied the account of the hold-up. There was no suggestion that the ruby had disappeared before the invasion of the gunmen, and the only point in the confused narrative that interested him was a statement that the stone was not insured.

Suddenly it struck him that his conscience was not working as it should. Here he was, a wine merchant of unblemished reputation, throwing dust in the eyes of the police, perilously like an accomplice in down-

right robbery, and not a single qualm did he feel about it. Moreover he had called another man's wife 'darling'. Well, he simply couldn't worry over that, indeed he gloried in the memory. He didn't like the Marchese. The fellow's blood might be as blue as you please, but no foreigner had a right to marry Ariadne. The thing was preposterous. Of course he couldn't appreciate her and she didn't love him. The Marchese was a nasty piece of work.

Mr. Clerihew's conscience was given little leisure for repentance. It was interrupted by the telephone. The News Editor of the *Trumpeter* would like to send a reporter to see Mr. Clerihew. Would he kindly give an interview on the Mayfair Flat Outrage. 'No,' said Mr. Clerihew, hanging up the receiver. He had the telephone switched on to the clerks and told Tom to throw any reporter who might turn up into the street.

Conscience was given another couple of minutes. Then back came Tom: 'Sir Harry Holman won't go without seeing you. He says he is sure you will see him, if I give you this.'

Tom handed the senior partner a screwed-up piece of paper. Mr. Clerihew unfolded it, smoothed it out and read the two words scrawled on it, 'golden Ariadne'. Tom saw on his uncle's face an expression he had never seen before. Almost at once it vanished and the paper was crumpled up and thrown into the fire.

'Dash the man. I suppose I must see him. He's a good customer.'

Tom went back and Mr. Clerihew asked himself what the devil Sir Harry meant. Of course he had been for years British Minister to Lusitania and was bound to know the Marchesa di Camerano, but he was not the kind of person one wanted to be intimate with Ariadne. No doubt he moved in the best circles, was indeed a close friend of the exiled King of Lusitania, but Mr. Clerihew considered him a horrid old man. A smart Victorian beau, with white hair becoming rather scanty, an imperial, a waxed moustache, a monocle and a suggestion of side whiskers, Sir Harry clung so tenaciously to the fashions of a bygone age that he seemed older than he was. He was probably not much over sixty and had cultivated a bachelor's eccentricity since the death of his wife, a woman of great wealth, who had presided over the Minister's entertainments in Lusitania with more than Ambassadorial lavishness. A weakness for very young and pretty girls, of which he was proud—'there is life in the old dog yet'—disgusted the romantic Mr. Clerihew, but Sir Harry was a connoisseur who drank good wine and a neighbour. For he had a gloomy house on Richmond Hill, which his grandfather had bought. There he lived in two rooms in melancholy loneliness. For despite his wealth he had failed to keep a single servant except his dark and taciturn factotum, Samuel.

'Ha! ha!' chuckled the old reprobate as he came in rubbing his hands, 'I thought those two words would serve as a passport and buy me a drink. I've intended to try them on you for years, but I've always forgotten, until I saw this morning that you had been shot up at Antonelli's party in the presence of golden Ariadne.'

The last word made Mr. Clerihew flush, but he asserted stoutly that he had no idea what Sir Harry was talking about.

'My dear Clerihew, I ought to have been at the party myself. It was only diplomacy that made me refuse. If it hadn't been for little Dora Griffiths, I might have been shot myself instead of you. By the way, I'm glad to see that you're not seriously hurt.'

'A mere graze, nothing at all.'

'You see I'm courting the fair Griffiths; make no mistake, my friend *pour le bon motif*. Intentions strictly honourable. It's time I married again and settled down. I must have youth and beauty about my house. Between ourselves she has been a little *difficile* lately. These modern girls open their mouths so wide. Of course you remembered Dora when you met her last night. I brought her here one day to lunch.'

'I remember,' said Mr. Clerihew drily, 'she wore a scent that ruined the claret.'

'Much must be forgiven to exquisite young things like Dora. As an old hand at the game, I thought

the time had come to make her a little jealous. So I hinted that I had refused Antonelli's invitation, because I had a date with a dear little blonde who loved me for my *beaux yeux*.'

Mr. Clerihew's dislike for Sir Harry was steadily increasing.

'We men of the old school give the ladies something they cannot get from the younger generation. We have a way with us that has been forgotten. We can sin like gentlemen. That's what I tell Dora when she is *difficile*.'

'I hope Miss Griffiths is none the worse for the shock.'

'Not a bit. I rang her up this morning. These modern girls have nerves like steel. She sounded much more cheerful than I was.'

'She seemed fairly calm last night.'

'To tell the truth,' said Sir Harry, 'I did make a bit of a night of it. I was feeling anything but well when I blinked at the paper this morning and saw headlines about Antonelli and you and the Luck of Lusitania. Then I read that some one else whose name shall be silence, the most wonderful woman of our time, was there.'

Sir Harry kissed the tips of his fingers ecstatically.

'Do you mean Miss Griffiths?' asked Mr. Clerihew.

Sir Harry shook his head. 'Dora is a dear affectionate little thing who will make a delightful

wife, if she is spoiled and petted by a man of experience.'

Mr. Clerihew kept to himself his doubt whether she was or would.

'The lady I referred to is a *grande dame* to her finger-tips, beautiful, ambitious, self-willed, born to inspire a *grande passion*, a queen among women, but no wife for me. When I saw her name, I bethought me of something she once told me, which I have never remembered to repeat to you. So I said to myself, I will call round and see how Clerihew is. He is the only man in London who could put up a drink to set me right again.'

Mr. Clerihew's curiosity was aroused, but he did not at once take the hint.

'Ah ! you lucky man, to have been shot at under the eyes of golden Ariadne as we used to call her, when she couldn't overhear, and to have escaped with a scratch.'

'Do you mean the Marchesa di Camerano ? '

Sir Harry pointed a long and skinny finger at the wine merchant.

'None of your innocence, you old fox. I know she was a flame of yours. Years ago when, like every one else in Lusitania, I was at her feet, she spoke to me of you. You had written a book on wine and she was studying it, expected her admirers to know it too. She calmly told me—she was snubbing me—that you were the only man she had ever cared for.'

'Sir Harry,' said Mr. Clerihew, confused as if he

were eavesdropping, 'you said that you were feeling rather under the weather. What would you like? A glass of Tokay Essence, a wonderful restorative, or shall we split a bottle of champagne, say Pommery 1904? I feel that I could do with something myself after last night's excitement.'

'I ask for nothing better than Pommery '04. You did call her Ariadne, didn't you, you rogue?'

'Well, we were brought up together as children,' said Mr. Clerihew apologetically.

'Then, you lucky devil, you are the only man ever allowed to call her Ariadne to her face. She used to say that her lovers might call her Vittoria, her second name, but only the man she loved Ariadne. Her husband calls her Vittoria, the King called her Vittoria, but no one in Lusitania dared call her Ariadne to her face. We were all afraid of her. She was the most fearless, quick-tempered, downright woman I ever met. That is how she lost her hold on the King. He worshipped her, until she tried to drive him; then he rebelled.'

Mr. Clerihew's head gave him a twinge. Of course kings had loved Ariadne. It would have been a sin, if her beauty had not been worshipped.

The champagne appeared and Sir Harry raised his glass.

'Here's a health to Lusitania's only hope, the Marchesa, the divine Vittoria, golden Ariadne as you alone are permitted to call her.'

Mr. Clerihew drank the toast, and carried suddenly

away by the memory of Jacobite toasts snapped the stem of his glass so that it could never be dishonoured by a baser health. Annoyed with his own childishness, he murmured something about carelessness, but Sir Harry was not deceived.

'A pretty compliment to the divine Vittoria,' he said with a bow, 'such as only past generations could pay. Young men to-day have neither gallantry nor imagination. Now seriously, Clerihew, what has happened to that ruby?'

Mr. Clerihew shrugged his shoulders.

'Dora had an extraordinary yarn that it vanished before the gunmen turned up. Was that so?'

'I have no more idea what happened to the ruby than you have.'

'You see it matters a good deal to me. I hold a number of Lusitanian shares and as things are, they are valueless. If the Bolshies have recovered the Luck, I may as well burn them. On the other hand, if the Royalists have it, they will go back again.'

'I know,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'that the ruby is a very valuable stone, but I don't see why it should affect the stock and share market.'

'If the Royalists can get possession of it, sooner or later there will be a counter-revolution. The Luck is much more than a precious stone in Lusitania. The natives worship it with a superstitious reverence, and you can hardly eradicate superstitions that are rooted in national legends in less than a generation. Of course the Communists thought they were going

to modernize everything in a day and a night, but they realize now what damned fools they were to let the Luck go out of the country. I'm afraid they've got it back now. Tell me, Clerihew, exactly what did happen.'

'I'm not at all sure myself,' said Mr. Clerihew, speaking very warily, 'just before the gunmen came in, Antonelli kicked up a fuss, saying the ruby had vanished, but you know the kind of chap he is, loses his head on the smallest pretext. Anyhow, so far as I know, the gunmen didn't find it.'

'It's an odd business. Now I wonder if that cousin of mine, Jack Lancaster, could have got hold of it. Dora tells me that he was going the pace with the dancer Leonora last night. Did you notice it ?'

Mr. Clerihew, impressed by Dora's audacity, made a non-committal noise and did not tell Sir Harry that Mr. Lancaster had been far too occupied with Miss Griffiths to spare more than a casual word for Leonora. Later he had cause to regret this omission.

'Jack is a thoroughpaced wrong 'un. That's why I threw him out. You know I intended to adopt him and make him my heir. I imagine that Miss Leonora wants something more expensive than chocolates and I know he would stick at nothing.'

'I don't think he had a chance of pocketing the ruby.'

'Then the Marchesa, the divine Vittoria, and her husband too, they would steal the Luck without a pang of conscience for the Cause. They regard it as

the property of their sovereign and Antonelli as a receiver of stolen goods.'

'The Marchese said something about stolen goods when he looked at the stone.'

'The Marchesa is the heart and soul of the Royalist cause. The King was led away by strange women to his destruction, but if he were restored, he might return to his old love.'

Mr. Clerihew changed the subject hastily. 'What about the Marchese? What sort of a chap is he?'

'He is mad about aristocracy and the privileges of birth. He would murder a commoner for kissing his wife's hand, but he'd bow to the ground, if he found the King in his wife's bed. He expected his wife to kneel down and worship him, because he is the only grandee in the world who has the right to sit covered in the presence of any Royalty, but he caught a Tartar.'

Sir Harry laughed at a recollection.

'One night at Rinaldi's, the best restaurant in Lusitania, when the King was there and it was packed with the most fashionable people of the capital, she slapped his face publicly. The Marchese has never forgiven her. It was a damned dangerous thing to do; for the Cameranos have always prided themselves on their record as wife-murderers. It is an amiable failing of theirs. If the Marchese had followed the tradition and stabbed Vittoria, he would have gone scot-free. Even the King could have done nothing.'

'So that,' thought Mr. Clerihew, 'was what Ariadne meant by "Rinaldi."'

Certain murderous thoughts flashed through his respectable brain.

'I suppose,' he said aloud, 'you see a good deal of the Marchese?'

'As a matter of fact I have not seen him or his wife for some years, but I had a letter from the divine Vittoria not long ago, asking me to find a place for some fellow who had been major-domo to the royal household. After the revolution the man was on the rocks and wanted a place as butler. I didn't want a butler myself, so I sent on the letter to Lexington.'

'I know Lord Lexington was looking for one.'

'By the way, Clerihew, what value would you put on Lafite 1874 and Sandeman 1884? I have been offered a few dozen and I'm not at all sure what I ought to pay.'

'It depends on the condition of the wines and on how badly you want them. If you make sure that the bottles are not ullaged and the wine in good condition, I will name a fair price and buy them from you if you do not need them.'

Mr. Clerihew had a curious idea at the back of his mind that Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84 were connected with something important that he had forgotten.

'That brings me, Clerihew, to a favour I want to ask you. Will you be my executor? If Dora accepts

me and I think she will—on terms—I shall have to make a new will. I have a great opinion of your judgement and as a small compensation for the trouble, I shall leave you my cellar. Then I know the wines will be appreciated.'

'You are as likely as not to outlive me. You had far better choose some one younger as executor.'

'Don't you believe it, Clerihew, I have lived too hard to have much time left. I shall be quite satisfied with a year or two of married bliss. I should really be grateful if you would accept.'

Mr. Clerihew, unwilling to refuse a good customer and knowing that Sir Harry had a remarkable cellar, consented with reluctance.

'Many thanks,' said Sir Harry, as he left, 'you have really taken quite a load off my mind.'

Mr. Clerihew was not at all surprised to hear a few minutes later that Inspector Park of Scotland Yard wished to see him. The detective often dropped in at Sun Dial Court and Mr. Clerihew liked discussing crime with an authority. Mr. Park's drink was beer and Mr. Clerihew, though he did not deal in that beverage, always had a bottle or two ready for his visit.

'Well,' said Mr. Clerihew, after the Inspector's glass had been filled, 'any news of the ruby or the gunmen ?'

'None yet. The gunmen have vanished, car and all. They probably belong to some organized international gang. Communist criminals have a big

advantage, because they get help from Communists of all nationalities, and Heaven knows there are enough of them in London.'

'Have you made up your mind how the ruby disappeared?'

Mr. Park put on his most judicial air.

'My dear Mr. Clerihew, I never thought that one day you would be on my list of suspects; yet I must admit that you are.'

'Dear, dear,' said Mr. Clerihew in mock terror, 'I hope you have not come to arrest me.'

'It has not come to that yet, but I should like to know how it was you took so long looking for the lighter you dropped in the dark.'

'I wish,' said Mr. Clerihew viciously, 'that you had had to look for a lighter in the dark on a floor covered with loose mats among ever so many feet kicking about and stamping in panic.'

'Then how was it you had a pistol so conveniently in your pocket?'

'Childish foolishness, though it turned out so luckily. It is a silly notion of mine, but I do like the feeling of being armed and ready for anything. I have carried a pistol about with me for years off and on in the hope of an opportunity that never came until last night. Ask your Deputy Assistant Commissioner what I told him when I persuaded him to let me have a permit.'

'There is another point, rather a delicate one, I'm afraid. What are your relations with the Mar-

chesa di Camerano ? She is a charming woman, but she is mixed up in any amount of plots and intrigues to restore the King of Lusitania. It seemed to me that you were on very friendly terms with her.'

'Of course you know she is English by birth. We were brought up together as children. Before she was married, our parents lived next door to one another. Actually I had seen nothing of her at all since she was married ten years ago until last night, and then I had no idea that I was going to meet her.'

Mr. Park thought a minute. 'I should like to say that I have wiped you entirely off my list of suspects, but I cannot quite say that, though I think your innocence is sufficiently proved to justify my telling you my views on the case.'

Mr. Clerihew sat back in his chair and crossed his legs in a confidential attitude. Park's friendliness had put him on his guard and he suspected a trap, but he was all innocence in appearance.

'At first my suspicions turned to the Marchese and Marchesa. Their party want the Luck of Lusitania very badly and would regard stealing it as no more than the recovery of stolen property. They both behaved suspiciously, and the ruby disappeared just after the case was in the Marchesa's hands.'

'I'm certain she never touched the stone.'

Mr. Park looked at the wine merchant with a quizzical expression on his fat face, and Mr. Clerihew blushed.

'Of course, I could not doubt your word, Mr. Clerihew, but your evidence about your childhood's friend can hardly be regarded as impartial. However Antonelli is equally emphatic. Yet I should like to know if it was an accident that the Marchese bumped into Lancaster just at the moment he had got his lighter going.'

'As by that time the ruby had disappeared, it doesn't seem to matter much. Besides it was the Marchese who had the presence of mind to telephone to you.'

'Yes, that's true. On the whole I am inclined to rule them out.'

'Now perhaps, if you have quite finished insulting me and calling me a liar, while you drink my beer, you will tell me who did steal the Luck of Lusitania.'

'I'm really afraid that it wasn't stolen at all. Much against my will I'm beginning to believe that Antonelli himself was the culprit.'

'Antonelli!' There was no affectation in Mr. Clerihew's surprise.

'Yes, I should much prefer it to be one of his guests. If I am right, there will be no arrest, no credit at all, just another unsolved crime for journalists to bring up against the police when they are short of copy.'

'But I saw in the paper that the ruby wasn't insured.'

'Yes, that's just it. No crime has been committed except by the gunmen who came in too late and tried

to shoot you. Antonelli doesn't want money. Rich musical women go mad on him and leave him fortunes. What he wants is to gloat over his jewel secretly and safely. So long as the Communists know that it is in his possession, they will be after him and never give him a moment's peace.'

Mr. Clerihew was becoming more and more wary. Park's suspicions seemed to be directed towards a safe quarter, but there might be a trap somewhere. It would never do to show satisfaction.

'Surely you cannot mean that Antonelli arranged for the jewel to disappear and then had us invaded by that gang of toughs who nearly killed me.'

'I don't think he arranged for the gunmen. I'm pretty sure they were a genuine attempt on the part of the Communists to steal the ruby, which happened too late. They were just a coincidence that confused the issue. My theory for the moment is—I know there are objections to it—that somehow or other Antonelli made away with the ruby.'

'But how on earth could he have done it ?'

'It would have needed sleight of hand, but it is not impossible. Suppose that the real ruby was never there, that all of you gazed at nothing but a mere shell made to imitate it. You are all agreed that none of you touched it. Antonelli may have seized a moment after the case had left the Marchesa when your attentions were elsewhere to palm the imitation. Then he knocked the lamp over deliberately and got rid of the shell. Perhaps he threw it

out of the window in the darkness, though my men have not been able to find it after a long search.'

'An ingenious theory! but I admit I'm not quite converted. I don't see how Antonelli had a chance to touch the stone or its dummy. However, I'll waive that, as I know how the quickness of a conjurer's hand can deceive the eye. I've watched the three-card sharp.'

'You'll admit that for Antonelli, but not for the Marchesa.'

Mr. Clerihew waved away the insinuation.

'Anyhow, I cannot believe that any imitation stone could have reproduced so perfectly the fire of a fine ruby. Moreover I don't think that Antonelli ever went anywhere near the window.'

'Well, suppose that the actual stone was in the case and Antonelli took advantage of the darkness to conceal it in some pre-arranged hiding place.'

'Surely you would have found it.'

'That is one of the two things that defeat me. We have been through the flat with a tooth-comb; there is not a fraction of an inch that we have not searched; yet not a shadow of that ruby can we find.'

'Two things?' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'my dear Park, it sounds to me as if we were coming very near to that little surprise which I'm sure you have up your sleeve.'

Aloud he asked casually: 'What is the other thing that defeats your great mind?'

'This,' said Park, taking something from his pocket and dropping it on the table under Mr. Clerihew's nose, 'what do you make of it?'

Mr. Clerihew could feel the detective's sharp eyes fixed on him, as he picked up a long piece of silk thread with a hook fastened to one end and an eye about two inches from the hook. He gazed at it and shook his head.

'It doesn't look like a hat guard,' he said blandly, looking up into Park's eyes, 'why does it worry you?'

'My men found that outside the dining-room window of Antonelli's flat, when they were looking for the dummy ruby or anything that might have been thrown out.'

Mr. Clerihew fitted the hook into the eye and poked a finger through the loop. 'I suppose,' he said, 'that this loop wouldn't have fitted over the stone.'

'The ruby was oval and would have slipped through. If I knew what that thread was used for, I should be much closer to the solution of the problem, but at present I confess it baffles me.'

Park drank up his second bottle of beer and said good-bye. As he departed, Mr. Clerihew said to himself: 'How right the man is, but he would only have been more mystified, if I had told him that I had thrown the silk thread—Ariadne's thread, so to speak—out of the window myself.'

A minute or two later Mr. Clerihew sprang so suddenly from his chair that he startled his nephew.

Such violent movement rarely disturbed that peaceful shop. Tom looked up in surprise and saw standing in the door a singularly attractive woman. Something in her pose and the swift eagerness with which she darted towards Mr. Clerihew called to Tom's mind the Victory of Samothrace at the Louvre, that epitome of high courage and swift motion. A little black hat with a diamond buckle showed a single wave of golden hair over the forehead; her frank blue eyes and the little curl of her lips delighted Tom. He too jumped up to receive her at the door, but he was anticipated by the chief clerk who had slipped off his high stool at the sight of the beautiful visitor with an expedition foreign to all his traditions of slow-moving dignity. Mr. Clerihew beat them both in the race to the door. The chief clerk stopped, raised his eyebrows and returned dejectedly to his desk. It was unprecedented that the senior partner himself should welcome at the door a lady customer, however charming or high-born.

'Well I'm damned,' said Tom to himself, as he went back to his chair whistling very softly, 'the governor's a luckier dog than I ever imagined.'

Mr. Clerihew had forgotten the very existence of his nephew, his clerk and the shop itself. He was in a world of golden light brighter than the summer sun at midday and could think of nothing but a line of Shelley:

Flashed from her motion splendour like the Morn's.

'Will,' said Ariadne, holding out her hand, 'I have come to thank you.'

There was nothing conventional in the affectionate thrill of her voice, and it may have been to restore Mr. Clerihew's *sang froid* that she added lightly: 'I've been hiding for ages in the hat shop opposite Sun Dial Court. I saw Mr. Park come in and thought I'd better wait until he'd gone.'

Mr. Clerihew had drawn up a chair for Ariadne beside his table.

'Ariadne, I never enjoyed an evening so much in my life.'

He looked into Ariadne's eyes and something for which he could not account emboldened him to say in a very low voice, 'In the excitement of the moment, I had the cheek to call you "darling", and you didn't snub me. I never hoped for that in my wildest dreams.'

Ariadne flinched a little—was it with pain or pleasure or both ?—at the word of endearment and sighed. Then in a flash she became the practical woman of the world and spoke with a decision as clear-cut as her features.

'Will, you must have nothing more to do with us. It was a shame you were dragged into the thing at all. What have you to do with Lusitania and its plots and quarrels ?'

'My dear, I'll go and be naturalized a Lusitanian at once, if you'll let me help you. Perhaps I know more about what happened last night than you

fancy. I'm conceited enough to think that I've worked it all out pretty accurately except for one point.'

'In that case you're cleverer at mathematics—at putting two and two together—than I ever knew. But not a word more about last night. You must ask me nothing and tell me nothing. For you the episode is closed and I wish I could give you something better than my heart-felt thanks.'

'No, no, you must listen. I know more than you think, Ariadne. I fancy that I have guessed how the Luck of Lusitania disappeared in the instant that elapsed between the case closing and Antonelli opening it.'

Mr. Clerihew was leaning across the table, talking very low, almost whispering, less perhaps for fear of being overheard than because her head had come so near his lips to hear.

'Supposing,' he said, 'that that jewel-case had a false bottom held up in the lid by a spring. Antonelli told us that he had bought a special case for the occasion. Supposing that your fingers touched a spring outside the case, which brought down the lid and released the false bottom. Then when he opened the case, the ruby would appear to have vanished, though it was still there lying in its bed of satin and mirrors under the false bottom.'

'You are clever, Will,' said Ariadne, looking straight into his eyes, 'go on supposing.'

'Supposing that to make quite sure the lamp

collapsed at the right moment when Antonelli started to his feet, some one had fixed a silk thread to the shade of that lamp on the rickety lacquer table with a hook and eye, supposing that the lady sitting on my left tugged the thread at the critical moment. . . . You know it struck me that the lamp did not fall quite naturally and that was why I let my lighter slip through my fingers instead of throwing a light on the mysterious movements that were going on on my left.'

'You were a dear.'

'You have no idea how that piece of thread has worried my friend, Mr. Park. I dropped it out of the window, as I could think of no way of accounting for it, if it were found in my pocket, and one of his men picked it up on the railings.'

'Poor Mr. Park.'

'I can see that in the darkness it was easy enough for the Marchese to take possession of the trick case with the ruby still inside it and leave an ordinary empty case in its stead, but I am not sure how he got rid of it, before the masked men turned up. Another thing I should like to know is how you had everything so nicely arranged beforehand. The masked men were Communists, weren't they? I saw you were expecting them.'

'As you know so much, I had better make a clean breast of everything,but remember that I am putting a good man's life into your hands. You will be cautious, won't you?'

'My lips are sealed.'

'Léon, the man who came to you for the wines, was one of us. He used to be in the King's household and after the crash pretended to join the revolutionaries. Somehow he gained their confidence, but he was always loyal. When we heard that Antonelli had bought the ruby and would not give it back to its lawful owner, we made up our minds to recover it as soon as possible. It was worth much more to us than mere money, though Heaven knows we want money, for the Lusitanians are still superstitious and when the day comes, the Luck will be a trump card in our hands.'

Ariadne paused.

'It was a pity,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'that I spotted his turned suit. Somehow I felt that you were displeased when I told Park about it, but of course I had no idea that he was on your side.'

'Yes, it was unfortunate he wore it, but, poor chap, he was terribly hard up. I warned him to get rid of it at once. Well, he told us that the Communists intended to hold up Antonelli's dinner-party and steal the ruby. They had worked it all out. They intercepted Antonelli's letter to you, asking you to send a man with the wine. Léon was to impersonate your man—he knew all about wines—and admit the other two at an appointed time, when we were all likely to be off our guard.'

'Quite an ingenious scheme.'

'We decided to make sure of the ruby before they

came and worked out a plot of our own. Antonelli had consulted the Marchese about a new case to show the stone off well and, as you guessed, we provided one with a false bottom. The Marchese had in his pocket another case, its exact double except for the false bottom. Léon arranged the lamp close enough to Antonelli's chair and hooked the thread to the shade, pinning the other end to the table-cloth near my chair. Then he retired into the background ready to fuse the lights from the hall, if anything went wrong. Everything went splendidly. Indeed I don't think that I need have pulled the thread at all, as Antonelli started back so violently.'

'His chair certainly hit the table with the lamp.'

'I stooped down at once in the darkness to make away with the tell-tale thread and, I can tell you, I was terrified when I felt you bending down beside me. You cannot imagine my relief when you whispered that you would help me.'

'It was glorious,' said Mr. Clerihew, as though he was recalling a victory.

'Meantime the Marchese had pulled round the dumb waiter, pocketed the ruby in the case and put back the empty case which he moved back opposite to Antonelli's chair. He put out Lancaster's lighter, as we wanted to postpone the light as long as possible, and slipped out into the hall where he gave the case and the ruby to Léon. It was in Léon's pocket, while he was holding us up at the pistol's point.'

'Ah! that explains it. I was in doubt as to

how the Marchese had disposed of the ruby. It was a brilliant notion to telephone to Park at that moment and make sure that the gunmen would not have everything their own way.'

'We reckoned that he might be useful if the gunmen turned nasty and it looked well. Léon had made sure of his escape by the window. He let in the Communists, as had been arranged, and got away from them as soon as he could. He is in a safe hiding place now, but I'm always afraid that they may find out his connexion with us. They would have no mercy.'

'Where is the ruby now ?'

'Ah ! that you must not ask. It is a dangerous secret and the fewer the people who know it, the better. For all you did, I wish I could give you something better than my heartfelt thanks.'

Mr. Clerihew was conscious of a strange elation, of a glow of unfamiliar happiness, just because of the tone of Ariadne's voice when she spoke of the impossible something better than her heartfelt thanks.

'Do let me help you,' he pleaded, 'Sir Harry Holman has just been in, talking about you and Lusitania. Couldn't you find some use for a volunteer, not altogether destitute of this world's goods, who has had some little experience of danger and adventure ? It's only the outside which is the smug respectable shopkeeper. Inside I get bored to death. I have done a few risky things in my life

and I should love to take part in a revolution. I really shouldn't mind being killed in a good cause.'

'No, Will, that is impossible. I'm not going to have you risking your life in a cause that means nothing to you. We won last night, but the game has only just begun and Heaven knows how it will end. Probably in tragedy. Besides, there is no way you can help us at present.'

'Promise at least that, if things go wrong and I can be of any use, you will let me know. You cannot guess how happy it would make me to help.'

Ariadne was sitting with her elbow on Mr. Clerihew's table. Her chin was in her hand and there was a far-away look in her eyes. Tom, who pretended to be deep in a ledger, shot from time to time quick glances at them, glances of amusement and perhaps a little envy at his uncle and of admiration at Ariadne.

'I oughtn't to do it, Will,' she said at last, 'why should I disturb your peaceful existence? Yet you say it would make you happy. Well in the last resort, if the worst comes to the worst, I'll let you know, and if you insist on coming to the rescue, there is no reward I can offer you except my thanks.'

'I'd rather have your thanks than the Luck of Lusitania.'

'Now let's stop being serious and play the game of "Do you remember?" We have only a few minutes to be together.'

'Together.' Why did the word set Mr. Clerihew's heart singing?

'I should never have dared to come, if I hadn't been sure that the enemy were too worried looking after their own skins after last night to have time to watch me, as they've been doing. They'll soon pull themselves together and I mustn't stay more than half an hour.'

'Do stay to lunch.'

'I wish I could, but that is impossible. I should love to taste some of your wine. You know, Will, in the old days when I was supposed to be a great hostess at the Lusitanian Court, they used to tease me about your book on wine. They called it my bible.'

'Golden Ariadne,' Mr. Clerihew ventured to whisper.

Did she blush? Mr. Clerihew was not sure. He only knew that her eyes were turned away.

'I suppose that's Sir Harry,' said Ariadne, 'I wouldn't let any one call me Ariadne. That name belonged to England and the old days. But really your book was most awfully useful. I picked up quite a lot about vintages and do hope that my palate does you credit.'

Mr. Clerihew laughed like a boy of twenty.

'Let me put it to the test. Stay to lunch and I'll bring up the rarest wines I possess.'

'Some day perhaps, but not to-day,' said Ariadne decidedly, 'don't press me; it's only waste of time.

Let's talk about the dear old days. Do you remember . . . ? '

Mr. Clerihew did remember and for thirty enchanted minutes found himself wandering again in the magic woods and pastures of his youth with the girl he had loved beside him. When at last she got up to go, he delayed her for one more precious moment :

' You must have just a glass of sherry.'

He called to Tom to bring the finest Amontillado. How was it that the scrupulously accurate junior partner filled their glasses with a richer wine ? How was it that a blush cut short Mr. Clerihew's protest at the unpardonable mistake when Ariadne's laughing glance carried his eyes to the label of the bottle : Amoroso ? These things are mysteries, but the wine was good, if a little full for an *apéritif*.

' We shall not meet for a long time,' said Ariadne as she left, ' perhaps never. I cannot give you an address, because conspirators don't have fixed addresses, but some day I'll write to you.'

CHAPTER III

SANDEMAN '84

ONCE again Ariadne vanished. Time passed with leaden feet and often Mr. Clerihew was exasperated almost beyond endurance by the monotony of his sleepy wine-shop. Yet the thought was always with him that Ariadne had been divinely sympathetic, life had a new meaning and at any moment the call to romance and adventure might come. So he went on discussing wine with his customers as if it were the only thing in life and showing to the world that placid exterior which concealed a surge of volcanic revolt against 'the trivial round, the common task.' He could afford to be patient. The story which he had thought ended so many years ago, when she was married, was only just beginning.

The Mayfair Flat Outrage found a place on the principal page of the newspapers for a day or two, though there was never a hint that the Luck of Lusitania had disappeared before the gunmen came. It was revived occasionally by mysterious hints of new clues, which found their way into print when Crime Experts were at their wits' end to justify their salaries and expenses, but gradually it faded

away into the oblivion that gathers over an unsolved crime.

Inspector Park dropped in at Sun Dial Court from time to time for a glass of beer, but it was no longer to discuss the case. He seemed convinced that Antonelli had played the dirty on the police by making away with his own ruby. As to the length of silk thread with hook and eye—Ariadne's thread, Mr. Clerihew still called it to himself—he regretted that it had ever been found. It was a stumbling-block to his theory, one of those inconvenient facts which really had no excuse for turning up and complicating the work of an honest detective.

Apparently his annoyance found an outlet in a broad hint to Antonelli of his suspicions. At any rate the violinist turned up one day at Mr. Clerihew's in a furious temper.

'Look here, Clerihew,' he said, 'you know that infernal policeman, Park. Can you persuade him not to make a damned fool of himself ? I've a good mind to prosecute him for slander. He told me, me, Antonelli, the Prince of Musicians, the Paganini of the Century, in almost as many words, that I had stolen my own ruby. Can't you make him understand that I'm a genius, not a lunatic ? '

Mr. Clerihew regretted that the English police were lacking in appreciation of the artistic temperament.

'Temperament,' shrieked Antonelli, 'that monster Park hasn't the temperament of a cooked mussel.

I tell him that the Luck disappeared by miracle to punish me for irreverence and he threatens to arrest me for stealing my own property.'

'Irreverence,' repeated Mr. Clerihew with some surprise.

'Yes, even Antonelli may be punished for being false to himself. What has he to do with the Luck of Lusitania? He is called to higher things than politics. It is better to be Antonelli the beloved violinist than Emperor of the World.'

Mr. Clerihew began to think that the loss of his ruby had been too much for the sanity of the unbalanced musician and wished that he would go away, but Antonelli had come determined to talk and relieve his mind.

'I was wrong to buy that ruby. There is a curse on it. I have never had a moment's peace since I bought it. First of all, there was the Marchese hissing into my ear all the evil things that awaited the unlawful possessor of the sacred Luck of the Kings of Lusitania. I half promised him that I would restore it to the King when I had satisfied my sense of beauty with gazing on its loveliness.'

'Take a glass of sherry,' said Mr. Clerihew to the agitated violinist, who gulped down a whole glass of the finest Amontillado with as much reverence as if it had been one of those cocktails that the wine merchant's heart abhorred.

'Then,' Antonelli went on, 'the devil whispered to me that I should go back to Lusitania in triumph

with the ruby glowing on my forehead to rule the people with justice and wisdom and make them happy with my music. Antonelli was false to himself. The bow of his violin sways the world with greater puissance than any monarch's sceptre.'

' Do you want any wine to-day ? ' asked Mr. Clerihew, who was beginning to lose his temper.

Antonelli paid no attention.

' After that, I was persecuted by the Bolsheviks —spawn of the devil—who have no respect for God or even my music. They threatened to kill me when I had the ruby. They are still threatening me when I have no idea where it is. They say they will break my violins—think of the sacrilege, my wonderful violins !—and my neck as well. Oh, I wish to God I had never known that the Luck of Lusitania had existed.'

' What will you do with it if it is recovered ? '

' Do with it ? ' shouted Antonelli, ' I'll take a boat and sail out to sea and drop it in mid-ocean.'

' You wouldn't restore it to the King.'

' Of course I shouldn't. My violins would be broken and I should be murdered within a week.'

' Or give it back to the Bolsheviks ? '

' Never, I know now that the Curse would be on me for trafficking with sacred things.'

' Perhaps you might sell it to some third independent party.'

It had occurred to Mr. Clerihew that Antonelli might be open to a secret deal. He was ready to

dive deep into his private fortune to buy Antonelli's rights in the missing ruby for Ariadne.

'For nothing in the world,' answered Antonelli decidedly, 'that would be worst of all. The Royalists and Communists and the Curse would all be after my soul.'

He was obviously not in a mood for argument; so Mr. Clerihew gave him another glass of sherry and pushed him out of the shop.

A morning or two later, a smart middle-aged man strolled in with an air of being thoroughly at home.

'Who on earth is it?' asked Mr. Clerihew of himself, 'he is very like some one I know and seems to know the place.'

It took him half a minute to realize that it was Sir Harry Holman metamorphosed. Gone were the side whiskers, stock, broad-brimmed top-hat, everything that characterized the old-world beau. He was cropped and polished with a flower in his buttonhole as a lingering old-fashioned touch. Mr. Clerihew felt as if the world were coming to an end. One day he might see Sir Harry in plus-fours. Perish the dreadful vision.

The wine merchant did not like the look of the new-born, up-to-date Sir Harry much better than that of the old-fashioned buck, but none the less was glad to see him. He was one of the very few persons who might have come to talk about Ariadne and Lusitania.

With something more than his old jauntiness,

Sir Harry smote Mr. Clerihew on the shoulder and said: 'Clerihew, my lad, I've come to tell you a secret.'

The wine merchant poured out a glass of sherry, hoping madly that the secret might be a message from Ariadne.

'Drink my health,' said Sir Harry.

He leaned forward and whispered into Mr. Clerihew's ear: 'Dora has accepted me.'

Mr. Clerihew hid his disappointment under mumbled congratulations.

'Yes,' said Sir Harry, sipping his wine with appreciation, 'I'm going to be married. I have been growing mouldy and musty, living in the past, just wasting my life. We middle-aged fellows, Clerihew, need to be in contact with youth and love, if we are not to grow stale.'

The wine merchant who reckoned that he was twenty years younger than Sir Harry was not altogether complimented, but he agreed politely.

'What I say is that we men of experience are the only people who can really please a pretty girl. Young men with their cocktails and golf and plus-fours haven't a chance against us. We are the stayers in love, eh, Clerihew? What about golden Ariadne, you old rogue?'

'The Marchesa di Camerano,' said Mr. Clerihew stiffly, 'has nothing to do with the matter.'

'All right, all right, don't be stuffy, because I know your secret. It's safe with me. I want to

talk over with you privately a matter that concerns the Marchesa.'

Mr. Clerihew's manner changed. 'Come into the back room where we shall not be disturbed. I'm entirely at your disposal.'

Sir Harry sat down in the little dining-room and made an abortive attempt to pull the imperial he had left at the barber's.

'You promised to be my executor, Clerihew, I've left you my cellar, and there'll be no trouble about that. I'm afraid Dora is a bit of a cocktail girl and is far happier with a bottle of sticky Sparkling Muscatel than a good claret. Of course I'm a good bit older than she is—not that I intend to shuffle off this mortal coil yet awhile—I feel that I'm only just beginning life—but I must leave things comfortable for her in case of accidents.'

Mr. Clerihew expressed approval without enthusiasm.

'At the same time I'm not sure that it would be really kind to leave her too much. She has always told me that she does not care about my money. At bottom she is an un-having little thing, though she does like expensive presents. If I died, a large fortune would simply be a bait for undesirables.'

'Surely,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'this is a matter that concerns no one but you and your fiancée. What has the Marchesa to do with it? Or I for that matter?'

'Wait and I'll explain. I feel that I shall be

taking real thought for her happiness, if I leave her a generous legacy, say ten thousand—I shall settle ten thousand on her—enough to make her comfortable.'

Mr. Clerihew had his doubts as to whether Miss Griffiths would regard ten thousand as adequate compensation for marrying Sir Harry, if there was any chance of getting more, but he kept them to himself and merely remarked : ' I thought that you really had no one to leave your money to.'

Sir Harry postponed a reply with a gesture.

' I'm a fairly rich man and in the enthusiasm of the moment when Dora accepted me three days ago, I made a will leaving her everything except for the cellar and a few legacies. Don't you think it might be in Dora's real interest to alter that will ? '

' Does she know of its existence ? '

' Yes,' said Sir Harry with some hesitation, ' as a matter of fact, she went with me to the solicitors.'

Mr. Clerihew saw a vivid picture of the astute Miss Griffiths securing her rights over her doting lover.

' Why don't you ask her yourself what she thinks about it ? '

Sir Harry looked confused. ' I'm afraid that perhaps she would not understand. It might look as if I did not trust her, though I really have very special reasons for altering the will. That is where the Marchesa comes in. You see there is no reason for Dora to know, and it would worry her if she did.'

Mr. Clerihew had it on the tip of his tongue to tell Sir Harry he was a nasty old man, lose a good customer and wash his hands of the business, when the mention of Ariadne checked him. He must at any cost find out how this hoary-headed scoundrel was mixed up with her plans. After all it would serve Sir Harry right to marry Dora, who would certainly not marry him except for his money, and it would serve Dora right to be cheated over the bargain.

'You see,' Sir Harry went on, 'I have been a fool. I have allowed Ar . . .—I beg your pardon, the Marchesa, if you prefer it—to entangle me in her plots and the Lusitanian Communists are taking an unhealthy interest in me.'

Mr. Clerihew was furious that Ariadne should have taken this senile idiot into her confidence, when he could not even appreciate the honour.

'I always have been weak where a pretty woman is concerned and I once was head over heels in love with the Marchesa. Anyhow I have helped her to lead the Communists up the garden and nearly every post brings me a blackmailing or threatening letter. I'm too old for that kind of thing. They imagine I've got the damned ruby. Didn't you suppose that the Communists had collared it that night at Antonelli's?'

Mr. Clerihew murmured something.

'Well, we were wrong. Somehow Ariadne got hold of it, and when their attentions grew too press-

ing, she persuaded me to draw a red herring across the trail. Now I've had enough of it. I don't want to be murdered before I'm married, and I've had a bright idea to keep them quiet. That is why I'm here.'

'I'm quite at your disposal. You can switch them on to me, if you like.'

Mr. Clerihew saw that Sir Harry was genuinely scared. If only Dora's fiancé could be persuaded to pass over the danger, how gladly he would welcome it. He would help Ariadne even against her will.

'Very kind of you, I'm sure, Clerihew,' said Sir Harry with real feeling, 'but that is impossible. This is my idea. The trouble with the Lusitanians is that they have no money. The Communists are at their wits' end because they are bankrupt. That is why they were fools enough to try and sell the Luck. The Royalists cannot start a revolution, even if they have the Luck, because they are too hard up.'

'Yes, I understand that.'

'As I said, I have a good deal of money and it doesn't matter to me what happens to it after I'm dead. I don't want the Bolshies to stick a knife into me and they are getting dangerous. I'm not going to be blackmailed. The best thing I can do is to give them an interest in my life. If I leave the bulk of my fortune to the exiled King, they are more likely to guard me than to kill me; for a few hundred thousand might make all the difference to a counter-revolution.'

Mr. Clerihew thought the suggestion over and put it to the only test that mattered : 'Would it please Ariadne ? ' He decided that it would and at once dismissed all compunction for the cheated Dora. However, a feeling of fairness made him raise an objection.

'It is an ingenious idea,' he said, 'but it won't work, unless the Communists know of your will. Isn't your fiancée sure to hear of it ? '

'Ariadne will let the right people know secretly. These conspirators always have means of communication with the other side. Dora knows nothing of Lusitania or politics of any kind. She'll never hear of it. Besides, if she ever did, she would only be too glad to know that her husband was safe.'

'I wonder,' said Mr. Clerihew cynically to himself.

'I'm glad you approve. I'll go at once to my solicitors and have the whole thing settled. It'll be a load off my mind if I can let the Bolshies know that by killing me, they will be merely enriching the King. Could you manage to call round to-morrow night after dinner ? '

Mr. Clerihew was doubtful if he would be free.

'I'm afraid I cannot offer you dinner. It is Samuel's night off and he is not much of a cook at the best of times, but as soon as I'm married, I promise you a first-rate meal. Dora knows what is good. I shall be able to offer you a spot of good brandy and, I'll tell you what, if you come, I'll show you some photographs of the old days in Lusitania.

There is a miniature of Ariadne that you could have if you liked. If I kept it, it might put ideas into Dora's head. Anyhow I should like to talk my will over with you and get everything quite straight.'

Mr. Clerihew was certain that he would be free.

The next evening in a bitter wind Mr. Clerihew set out to visit Sir Harry. He would have faced a blizzard with the bait of Ariadne's miniature before him. He tramped the half-mile, merrily singing to himself in the dark. He rang the bell and waited. Samuel was out, so Sir Harry would have to come and let him in. He rang again and listened. There was not a sound in the house or in the wilderness of a garden through which he had come to the front door. Yet there was a light in a room on the left which he knew to be Sir Harry's study. Again he rang and waited. Then he trotted down the steps and threw a handful of gravel to patter against the study windows.

For once he was unarmed. He span round with clenched fists, when the garden gate behind him suddenly clicked and a doubtful step came towards him along the path. It was a relief to find that it was only Samuel back rather sooner than was expected. He let Mr. Clerihew in with his key.

'Sir Harry must have fallen asleep,' said Mr. Clerihew, as Samuel opened the study door.

The servant started violently back, exclaiming, 'Good God!'

Mr. Clerihew looked in. Sir Harry was lying

doubled up in an armchair with staring eyes and a dropped jaw, which could not mask an expression of terror and amazement. The scene brought back Mr. Clerihew to war days, when the worst fear was met by an order and obedience. 'Ring up the doctor and the police at once,' he ordered the pale and trembling Samuel. A brief inspection convinced him that it was too late to do anything for Sir Harry. His pulse had ceased to beat. Of course he might have had a fit, but Mr. Clerihew thought of those threatening letters.

He took a rapid survey of the room. On the table was a wine bottle with a splash of whitewash on one side, suggestive of vintage port. Beside it, stood an almost empty tumbler with a scum of sediment dimming its transparency and a little muddy puddle of dark red fluid at the bottom.

'Good God,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'a tumbler!'

He bent over it and, without touching it, sniffed at the dregs.

'Port,' he said, 'vintage port, and I think I can just detect the very faintest smell of something else, the least suspicion of something that reminds me of trampled nettles, but I could hardly swear to it.'

Then he inspected the dregs as closely as he could without bringing his face in contact with the glass.

'Beeswing,' he muttered, 'and, if I'm not mistaken, there's a lot of broken crust in that sediment. How very odd!'

Hastily he turned to the bottle. Putting a lighted

match behind it, he peered through it in all directions. It was more than half-empty.

'That settles it,' he exclaimed.

There was nothing else on the table except a blue bottle with a red poison label and a corkscrew with a cork impaled upon it. Mr. Clerihew pursed up his lips when he deciphered the branded inscription, 'Sandeman 1884.'

'Curiouser and curiouser! That's the very wine Sir Harry mentioned in connection with Lafite 1874. If only I could remember how it was those two wines were already connected in my mind.'

He held his nose cautiously over the poison bottle which was empty. Again that smell of crushed nettles, a little more pronounced, but still so faint that only a trained nose could detect it.

'I don't like it at all.'

Again he looked at the two bottles, the tumbler and the corkscrew.

'Suicide? No, it can't be suicide. It's murder as sure as I'm a wine merchant, but how was it done? There's something missing.'

He glanced round again and noticed on the side-board a half-bottle of 1864 Cognac still unopened, no doubt the brandy Sir Harry had promised him, and, joy of joys! a miniature, the miniature of Ariadne. It almost did her justice. Mr. Clerihew was tempted and he fell. The miniature was there with a lot of old photographs. Samuel who was at the telephone in the hall could not have seen it,

unless it was there when he went out in the morning, and that seemed unlikely. Sir Harry had promised it Mr. Clerihew. Mr. Clerihew pocketed it. As he did so, his eye fell on a medicine bottle behind it with a label, 'Indigestion Mixture.'

'Ah!' he exclaimed, 'that might explain it.'

Now the highly respectable wine merchant had just committed something not unlike petty larceny, but his mind was occupied with a very different matter. His attitude towards the police had changed since that night at Antonelli's. He was still strongly on the side of law and order, but he was hanged if he wanted them poking their noses into Ariadne's affairs. She was an exceptional case. He was convinced that Sir Harry's death was connected with Lusitania. Even the local police must surely stumble on that. On the whole, he decided, it would be safer to inform Park of the affair at once.

He locked the study door to prevent Samuel from messing about while he telephoned. Inspector Park was at Scotland Yard and came to the telephone.

'Clerihew speaking. . . . I've just found Sir Harry Holman dead in his house, Wentworth Grove, Richmond Hill . . . poisoned . . . I cannot believe he has committed suicide . . . the Lusitanian Communists were threatening him . . . they had some idea he had got the Luck of Lusitania.'

The mention of the ruby was enough for Park. He would be there as soon as a car could carry him.

The doctor and the local police arrived almost simultaneously. The doctor's examination was brief. 'Poison,' he remarked curtly, 'I'm not sure what. Some Eastern poison I should say, almost instantaneous in its action.'

He sniffed at the poison bottle and the wine glass. 'Quite odourless, but he clearly took it in the wine. Every appearance of suicide.'

The local police sergeant was not at all pleased to hear that Inspector Park was coming from Scotland Yard.

'You say Sir Harry was getting threatening letters, but how could any one have poisoned him? You can't force poison down a man's throat without a struggle, and that empty poison bottle doesn't look like concealment.'

He made a careful study of a fat pocket-book which he drew from Sir Harry's inner breast pocket. There was a good-sized wad of notes and a number of letters. After a time the sergeant looked up from the perusal of a letter over which he had been poring intently.

'It's a clear case of suicide,' he said with finality, 'Mr. Park will not thank you for bringing him here for nothing.'

As he spoke, the Scotland Yard man arrived and had a conversation with the local sergeant in the hall.

'I'm afraid, Mr. Clerihew, you have brought me on a wild goose chase. Everything points to suicide.'

Mr. Clerihew took off his rather owl-like glasses and wiped them thoughtfully.

'Do you think so?' he asked with some hesitation, 'you know Sir Harry was not a port man.'

'A port man!' exclaimed the Inspector. 'Oh, you mean he was not fond of port. Port-lovers are not the only people who commit suicide. When a man is going to kill himself, he is not likely to be fastidious about the wine in which he takes his poison. The first bottle that comes to hand will suit him.'

'But it was Sandeman 1884,' objected Mr. Clerihew.

Seeing that the title of this rare and noble wine kindled no answering spark in the breast of a beer-drinking policeman, he changed his line of argument.

'Then look at the tumbler and the sediment. Besides, why should Sir Harry commit suicide? I saw him yesterday in the best of spirits. He said that he had been receiving threatening letters, but he had thought of a way of settling the Lusitanian Communists, who accused him of having the ruby.'

'You don't suspect him of actually having it, do you?'

'Good heavens, no. He was all excitement, because he was going to be married again.'

'That explains the suicide,' answered Park, 'these old men when they go mad on a young girl are capable of anything. Here is a letter the sergeant found in his pocket-book. It makes the whole thing

clear. You can see from the postmark that it was posted in Paris yesterday morning.'

The letter, dated from a Paris hotel, was written in a copper-plate feminine hand.

MY DEAR HARRY,—I am *terribly* sorry that now I have had time to think things over I must break off our engagement. I cannot *bear* to hurt your feelings. You have always been *so* good to me. You have often said that the difference between our ages and positions is no bar to our happiness, and I still feel that that is true. But I feel I cannot love you and love is the only thing that counts. Do let us try to be friends and nothing more.—Your sincerely grateful DORA GRIFFITHS

Mr. Clerihew's certainty was a little shaken by this letter. It needed reflection. As he read it, he was thinking to himself: 'What do I want Park to think about Sir Harry's death? What will suit Ariadne best? The evidence of the wine and the sediment in the tumbler is staring him in the face, but he'll never see it, unless I rub his nose in it. Caution, my lad, caution is your line of country. If he wants it to be a suicide, let it be one as long as it suits us.'

He read the letter a second time and handed it back to the detective with the unspoken comment, 'damned clever'. He did think it wise, however, to draw attention to the Indigestion Mixture.

'I suppose there is no possibility of that having anything to do with Sir Harry's death.'

'How could it?' asked Park, taking the cork out of the bottle and smelling it, 'it is one of those

ordinary medicines chemists make up. However, if it will give you any satisfaction, I will have it analysed.'

The Inspector rang the bell for Samuel.

'Did Sir Harry receive a foreign letter this morning?'

'Yes, sir, when I laid the letters on the hall table, before I went out, there was one with a French stamp. Sir Harry used to receive letters regularly in that handwriting: Miss Griffiths, I think, sir, his fiancée. I understand she was over in Paris buying her trousseau.'

'You see,' said Park to Mr. Clerihew, 'it is just as I thought. That letter sent the poor old chap clean off his head. The Bolshy threats were only a coincidence. If the Lusitanians had done it, they would have used a knife or pistol, not poison. Besides they would have searched the house high and low for that ruby.'

Samuel brought further confirmation to the suicide theory by identifying the poison bottle as one that had been kept by Sir Harry in a locked cupboard for years.

'All right,' said Mr. Clerihew to Park, 'have it your own way.'

That night Mr. Clerihew went to bed with a stolen miniature under his pillow and lay awake for hours. Thoughts of Ariadne alternated with brain-racking speculations as to Sir Harry's death. To any one but a wine-lover the evidence for suicide

might seem conclusive, but a connoisseur simply could not believe it. He had a feeling that he had collected all the stray pieces of the problem, but they were diabolically hard to piece together and he was not entirely satisfied with his solution, when at last he fell asleep.

Mr. Clerihew was never tired when he was excited. Next morning he hurried over dressing and breakfast in order to visit the local chemist before he went to town. Neither suicide nor murder would excuse lateness at the shop. Happily the chemist was on the way to the station.

'A bottle of Indigestion Mixture,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'the same as you supplied to Sir Harry Holman. Poor Sir Harry always said there was nothing like it.'

The chemist looked up from a report of Sir Harry's death in his paper, all eagerness to discuss the affair.

'Poor gentleman! What a tragedy! I suppose we all have our troubles in these days, but he always seemed so lighthearted. He told me that he was going to be married. It does seem sad.'

Mr. Clerihew agreed.

'It is a strange thing, but Sir Harry once said to me that my Indigestion Mixture had saved him from suicide. Till he took it, he suffered terribly from internal pains. He must have recommended it to all his friends. Only a few days ago I had another gentleman in, asking for the medicine that had saved Sir Harry's life.'

'Ah, I wonder if I know him.'

'A tall thin gentleman with a fair moustache, a crooked nose and a funny accent. I put him down as one of Sir Harry's foreign friends. He had been in the Diplomatic Service, you know.'

Mr. Clerihew continued the conversation for a few minutes, before he dashed off to catch his train to town. As he sat in the corner of his carriage with a hand on a miniature in his coat pocket, he thought a good deal more about that Indigestion Mixture than the chemist could have expected. Yet he left the bottle he had bought behind him in the train.

That afternoon he handed over the shop to Tom's charge, while he called on Sir Harry's solicitor, Mr. Richard Beaumont of New Inn.

'I'm glad to see you,' said Mr. Beaumont, 'I was just going to write to you. I saw the sad news in the morning paper. Poor Sir Harry. Our firm has acted for him and his family for generations. To tell the truth, I was sometimes afraid that he might land himself in serious difficulties, but of course, "*de mortuis. . . .*"'

'I have never understood why,' said Mr. Clerihew quite seriously, but his remark was lost on the earnest lawyer.

'It is really a relief to me to find that my fellow executor is a merchant of your standing and reputation.'

'Sir Harry asked me to be his executor.'

'Yes, you are the executor of what we can only

suppose to be his last will and testament, since he made it about twenty-four hours ago. I do not think he would have made another without coming to us, though he was very difficult in the matter of wills. He had a habit of making and re-making them with a speed that almost made me dizzy.'

It seemed inconceivable that Mr. Beaumont, a comparatively young man, whose youth had been swallowed by the dignity of the law, could be made dizzy by anything.

'I have heard that his heart was rather susceptible.'

'Susceptible ?' groaned Mr. Beaumont, 'he fell in love three or four times a year, and three or four times a year he bequeathed all he possessed to this or that young lady except for the legacies left with affectionate memories to the young ladies of the past. I fancy he preferred to express his affection by a draft on the future rather than by cash down.'

'Probably a more economical method in what Sir Harry called love than it is in what I call business.'

'Quite so,' said Mr. Beaumont vaguely, not quite clear as to Mr. Clerihew's meaning, 'anyhow as soon as he had left the major part of his estate to some young person, he decided that it was not really fair to throw such a responsibility on any one so young and altered his will.'

'Not without profit to his solicitors,' suggested Mr. Clerihew, who was lacking in respect for the legal profession.

'Our fees,' said Mr. Beaumont seriously, 'were no compensation for the personal anxiety which this—what shall I say?—this instability on the part of a valued client was bound to cause us. I really hoped that all this was over when Sir Harry announced that he was going to be married and made a will in favour of his fiancée, a Miss . . .'

'Dora Griffiths,' Mr. Clerihew filled up the lacuna in Mr. Beaumont's memory.

'Yes, it has been rather hard to keep pace with the ladies' names. Yet in two or three days he was back here again. There was a generous settlement and legacy for Miss Griffiths, but the residuary estate was to go to the . . .'

'Ex-King of Lusitania.'

'An extraordinary proposal, Mr. Clerihew, eccentric, most eccentric, but still I cannot see why he committed suicide. At the time he was in the best of spirits.'

'Apparently Miss Griffiths thought better of the engagement and broke it off.'

'I wonder why he took it so much to heart. It is just as well she didn't jilt him a day or two earlier; for if she had, she would have inherited practically all his fortune. You will agree with me that it is better that the estate—and it is by no means a small

one—should go to a king. It is really quite a windfall for an exiled Royalty.'

The solicitor's concluding remark suggested to Mr. Clerihew an alarming possibility. Was it conceivable that some Lusitanian Royalist had learned of Sir Harry's latest will and made sure that he should not change his mind ? It was certain that Ariadne would have no truck with murder, but there might be some lunatic or fanatic among her followers.

'No,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'I shall keep my eye on the lady who is going to be terribly disappointed. She is sure to have a cast-iron alibi, and I shall keep my thoughts to myself and bide my time.'

Post-mortem and police evidence coincided in a conclusion of poison self-administered. The poison was a rare one, painless and instantaneous, which Sir Harry had brought with him from Lusitania. He had mentioned it to Samuel and several friends as 'an easy way out, if life became too difficult.' There was ample proof of its presence in a lethal dose in the wine glass, but not a trace in the port bottle or the Indigestion Mixture. There were no finger-prints other than those of the dead man. Dora Griffiths' letter provided a motive in the disappointment of a senile passion, and the inquest verdict of suicide while in a state of temporary insanity was a foregone conclusion.

At the funeral Mr. Clerihew observed a nameless

and expensive wreath of white flowers, which he had a feeling represented Dora's tears.

'She doesn't know yet that she was a few hours too late. However, ten thousand is a tidy sum and she may think it worth it.'

After the ceremony, he went down to the cellar with the solicitor and inspected the wines which Sir Harry had left him. There were several bins of fine old claret over which he smacked his lips—it was really rather difficult to feel very sorry about Sir Harry's death—and a bare dozen of vintage port, but, as he expected, not a single bottle of the wine in which Sir Harry had taken the fatal dose, Sandeman 1884.

A few days later Beaumont wrote to Miss Griffiths who had returned to London, presumably without her trousseau, about her legacy. The next day Dora appeared at Sun Dial Court in deep mourning, and Mr. Clerihew almost accused himself of wronging her. For if she was fluffy, clinging and seemingly rather silly, her make-up was eminently discreet.

'Oh, Mr. Clerihew,' she exclaimed with a tiny handkerchief clasped in her hand, 'what am I to do? I feel I cannot accept poor dear Sir Harry's legacy. I can never forgive myself for writing that letter. Perhaps if I had waited to come to England and told him myself, it would have altered things. We were so fond of one another, but there was such a difference between our ages. I am sure, dear

Mr. Clerihew, you will sympathize with me and help me. What am I to do ? '

Mr. Clerihew beamed benevolently through his glasses on the pretty dark-eyed blonde.

' I am sure, Miss Griffiths, that you have an absolutely clear conscience. You know what Sir Harry would have wished. Perhaps you know that he left most of his money to the ex-King of Lusitania. If you refused your legacy, it would be a mere flea-bite to his Majesty, who will come in for several hundred thousand pounds, perhaps half a million.'

The fair Dora's hand closed convulsively on her handkerchief and raised it to her eyes. It was a minute or two before she could speak.

' Perhaps you could tell me one thing, Mr. Clerihew. When did Sir Harry make his will ? Did he leave me all this money after he had received my letter ? It would make all the difference to me, if I knew that he had forgiven me. He was so wonderfully forgiving.'

' He made his will the day before he heard from you.'

Miss Griffiths gave a spasmodic sob, and the wine merchant went on : ' If the . . . the unfortunate event had occurred a few hours earlier, you would have been in the position of the ex-King, at least so I understand from the solicitors, and that would have been even more embarrassing for you.'

Mr. Clerihew, observing that the young lady's grief was in no way decreased by this statement of fact, administered a glass of champagne.

'Ten thousand pounds is a great deal of money,' said Miss Griffiths, visibly revived, 'it is a great temptation. I have always been poor and had to work so hard for my living. You know how hard it is for a young girl to make her way, unless . . .'

She delicately avoided an ending to the sentence.

'Tell me, Mr. Clerihew, you don't think it would be very dreadful of me to take the legacy, even though I'm going to be married.'

'And who is the happy man ? '

'I'm engaged,' said Miss Griffiths, coyly twisting a modest diamond ring round her engagement finger, 'to Jack, Mr. Lancaster, Sir Harry's cousin. You remember you met him that terrible night at Antonelli's when you were so heroic and saved us from dreadful things.'

'I'm sure I wish you all the happiness you deserve.'

'Oh, Mr. Clerihew,' said the girl, suddenly changing her mood, 'don't think I'm heartless. How can I ever be happy when I have to go through life, always remembering the terrible consequences of my letter to Sir Harry. I feel I am responsible for his death. But for me he would never have taken his own life.'

Miss Griffiths broke down utterly and sobbed.

'If it is any comfort to you,' said Mr. Clerihew in a kind consoling voice, 'I am by no means certain that Sir Harry did take his own life.'

In amazement Miss Griffiths looked up over her handkerchief and Mr. Clerihew thought he detected a glimmer of fear in the dark eyes which did not seem so dimmed with tears as might have been expected.

'What!' she exclaimed, 'I thought it was all settled at the inquest. Do you mean that it might have been an accident?'

'No,' said Mr. Clerihew very slowly with his eyes fixed on hers, 'not an accident, but . . . foul play . . . murder.'

'Oh, Mr. Clerihew, how awful,' cried Dora, biting her handkerchief, 'what can make you think that? It is even worse than the other—though of course it would relieve me of responsibility.'

'The police are satisfied that it was suicide, but there are certain things in the case that puzzle me.'

'Oh, tell me what they are. If poor Sir Harry was murdered, we must spare no expense to find out the truth. But how could any one have poisoned him?'

Mr. Clerihew resisted all coaxing and refused to divulge the circumstances which made him doubt Sir Harry's suicide. Miss Griffiths departed in a shaken frame of mind, unenlightened despite all her efforts at cajolery. Mr. Clerihew would say no more

than that these ideas were a fancy of his own and that the police did not share them.

'I doubt,' said he grimly to himself, 'if I have increased the happiness of that engaged pair. I had better beware of Sandeman 1884.'

CHAPTER IV

PERRIER JOUET 1911

ONCE again Mr. Clerihew returned to the routine of his business and for a time neither Miss Dora Griffiths nor her fiancé nor the ghost of Sir Harry Holman disturbed the monotony of his life. Yet he was always on the *qui vive.* Every letter that came in, every ring of the telephone bell, every opening of the shop door, might turn out to be Ariadne's summons, the call to adventure, for which his soul craved. At last after many disappointments news came from her.

Mr. Clerihew running his eye through his correspondence gasped at the sight of a shoddy blue envelope with a French stamp and Paris postmark. Surely, surely, he knew the wild but determined handwriting in which it was addressed, though he had not seen it for years and years. He was so afraid of being disappointed that for some time he could not bring himself to open the envelope. Then with a rush he tore it open, unfolded the letter it contained and saw with a tingling shock the scrawled signature, Ariadne.

The precious document was only a few lines

scribbled on the squared thin paper which is to be found in a Paris café—it is always cheap and nasty, because the waiters have to buy it—and the writing showed that it had been penned with a sputtering café nib.

Dear Will,—How soon will the King have Sir Harry's money? We need it badly. If you want to help, hurry things up as quickly as possible. Drop me a line, 23A Rue des Martyrs, where we have taken a furnished flat, but remember that it may be read by hostile eyes. Ariadne

So Ariadne was in Paris. Mr. Clerihew's mind was made up at once. There was a hint in her letter that she needed help. He would leave for Paris that afternoon. Beaumont was one of those solemn, old-fashioned solicitors who counter every suggestion of a short-cut with a snail-like observance of legal formality—Mr. Clerihew did not blame him, as he knew it was his living—and months would pass before Sir Harry's estate had been wound up and duties paid. If Ariadne wanted money, the House of Clerihew would be proud to be her banker. On his arrival he would drop a line at the flat himself and if hostile eyes read it, they would learn no more than that he was at the Hôtel de l'Univers et Lusitanie, awaiting her orders. Just for the prospect of seeing her again he would have signed a cheque of fantastic size.

Tom was out inspecting a customer's cellar.

'Mallard,' said Mr. Clerihew to his chief clerk,

'I'm going to Paris this afternoon—the usual address. I may be away a few days.'

'Yes, sir. I suppose you will be having a look at the Dupont cellars.'

Mr. Clerihew had quite forgotten a highly important sale which in the past would have engrossed his attention. A famous Paris restaurant was putting up its wines to auction and among them were certain rarities which ought to find a home in the Clerihew cellars.

'Of course,' he replied, 'of course.'

The next morning he left a note for Ariadne, saying that he would not move from his hotel, until he had heard from her. After a day and night of suspense she rang him up. She spoke with her old crisp decisiveness: 'Will, you're a fool to have come. I wanted to keep you out of this. However, since you are asking for it, meet me for lunch at Armenonville.' She had cut off, almost before he had gulped out his delight in an ecstatic 'yes.'

He was at the restaurant in the Bois betimes and secured with extravagant largesse an ideal table which had the advantage of being concealed from the rest of the room by a bank of flowers. It was a disappointment when Ariadne, arriving a quarter of an hour late, would have none of this discreet privacy. Nothing would please her but a table bang in the middle of the restaurant.

'I must be able to see,' she said, 'if any one is listening to what we say.'

'Now,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'what will you have to drink? I have ordered a simple meal which will go with practically any wine. How I wish we were in my little dining-room at Sun Dial Court. Then I would show you what my cellar can do. However, the wine list here is pretty fair. Do you prefer champagne?'

'What a question to ask of a student of your books! I leave champagne to the Marchese who cares for nothing else. He thinks it the only drink suitable for the aristocracy and was quite insulted with Antonelli's wonderful Moselles. I don't like champagne; it always gives me hiccoughs. Claret for me any day.'

'Then I suggest that we begin with half a bottle of Grand Chablis 1921 and follow it with a bottle of Château Margaux 1899. I warned the waiter to have them ready.'

'Whatever you say will be perfect. Now what about Sir Harry's money?'

'I'm afraid it will take a long time yet. You cannot hurry the law. But if the King wants an advance at once, I should be proud to be his banker.'

'Nonsense, he would never pay you back. I know him well enough not to trust him.'

Ariadne threw the last words defiantly at Mr. Clerihew, who flinched and for a moment was tongue-tied. Then he said gently:

'Ariadne dear, you said you wanted the money badly. Can't I help somehow?'

She looked at him doubtfully.

'Will, I don't know and . . . I don't deserve it. It isn't fair to upset your peaceful comfortable life.'

'I hate peace and comfort, I tell you. My nephew can look after the business just as well as I can. Listen, Ariadne, you can make my life worth living, if you will give me something exciting and dangerous to do. I really don't mind danger and can think of no greater happiness than to run risks in a cause you are interested in.'

'Oh Will, I mustn't smash up your life a second time.'

For an instant Mr. Clerihew remembered the agony of a bewildered youth, when he first learned that the friend of his childhood was to marry a foreigner who would take her far away. He had never imagined that Ariadne could have guessed.

'That was not your fault. I never blamed you.'

Ariadne picked up her glass hastily. She bent over it, so that her eyes were hidden, hesitated a little and took a tiny sip. Then she screwed up her nose and asked apologetically: 'Will, isn't this wine slightly corked ? '

Mr. Clerihew was covered with confusion. He had no idea whether he had or had not been eating and for the first time in his life had omitted the chief duty of a host, the ritual of sampling the wine before his guest.

'Ariadne, I am sorry. Yes, you are right, it has a slight taint of cork. I am ashamed of myself.

You know very few people would have detected it. What a wonderful palate you must have.'

'I'm glad I'm right. I have a perfect horror of corked wine.'

'Quite right too,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he called the waiter and ordered the half bottle of Chablis to be taken away.

Then he became earnest again. 'Enlist me as a Lusitanian Royalist,' he pleaded, 'already I have done my little bit.'

'There's the enemy.'

Ariadne, serene and beautiful, leant back in her chair, as she spoke, taking her head further away from Mr. Clerihew's. A man, squat, square-shouldered and swarthy with eyebrows that met over his nose had come in and sat down at a neighbouring table.

Mr. Clerihew returned suddenly to the world of reality and perceived that they had reached the coffee stage. Never before had he drunk Château Margaux 1899 with such scanty appreciation. He imitated Ariadne's casual glance at the newcomer and asked her what liqueur she would take.

'Cognac,' she replied, 'I dislike all spirits except an occasional good Fine.'

'Oh! I am glad. I have brought you a little present, but I was not sure you would care for it. It is a small bottle of the finest brandy I have ever known, Grande Fine Champagne 1830, authentic and unrefreshed.'

Mr. Clerihew handed her a small packet.

'I shall love it,' said Ariadne, 'and keep it for the most special occasions. I am a conspirator nowadays and there are moments in a conspirator's life when a mouthful of fine cognac may save it.'

'Well, I doubt if you will find any better in the world.'

'We must be careful what we say before that fellow there. He is an Italian by birth, but he has lived for years in America and has very sharp ears. I'm not sure that he does not know something about lip-reading.'

Ariadne's lips hardly moved, as she spoke.

'I'll be careful,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'let us talk the old dialect. He is not likely to make much out of that.'

Years ago as children, they had built up a patois of their own, based mainly on the gardener's Hampshire, but enriched with words and expressions from all quarters. It had to be talked very broadly, to the disgust of the grown-ups who had finicking ideas on pronunciation and accent.

Ariadne's eyes danced.

'What fun!' she said and broke at once into the language of their childhood.

'What oi wants, Wully, is to get rid of 'e. A noosance be 'e.'

'Yer doan' saiy. Seemly aisy enough. Oi bash 'e in eye loike at once. Police coom and taike us both oop.'

With the gleam of battle in his eye, Mr. Clerihew rose from his chair, preparing his fists for action.

'Nay, nay, Wully, too forthright ye be. Bide a wee, bide a wee. 'Tis a young rock he be arter, a red young rock.'

For an instant puzzled, Mr. Clerihew remembered that 'young rock' had been a synonym for a stone precious or otherwise.

'Sit ye still, while I leave ye, but when ye glimpse me at foot of yon stair, roise swiftly loike and meet me behoind screen.'

Mr. Clerihew nodded. Ariadne got up quietly and walked out with that queenly grace of hers, which made his heart beat almost painfully. During her absence he beguiled the time by studying the man who was causing Ariadne trouble. Something about his general cut seemed familiar. He might very well be the leader of the masked men, whose bullet had combed Mr. Clerihew's hair and whom Mr. Clerihew had shot into the middle of the dining-room table with a tackle that it did his heart good to remember. There were a couple of fresh scars on his face. They might very well be due to contact with a broken wine glass or two on that occasion. Mr. Clerihew hoped they were.

Ariadne appeared at the foot of the staircase. Mr. Clerihew was on his feet instantly; before the enemy could move, he had pushed her gently behind the waiter's screen. She had a small parcel in her hand and held it out to him.

'I hope,' she whispered, 'that this will draw him off. I want you to give it him, after he has followed you about an hour.'

As he took the packet, he kissed the hand that held it and for a moment felt it press against his lips. They came out together and Mr. Clerihew slipped the parcel into his pocket with just enough clumsiness to attract the spy's attention. The spy was staring into one of the mirrors that reflected them and did not move from his place.

'And what do we do now?' asked Mr. Clerihew.

'Pay and let us go.'

The watcher managed to call a waiter before them, paid for his drink and went out.

'Have you a taxi here?' asked Ariadne.

'Better than that, my dear,' said Mr. Clerihew with some pride, 'a racing car that will do ninety, if you want it. I borrowed it from a French friend. You know I was a bit of a racing driver myself once.'

'Will, you are better than a fairy godmother,' said Ariadne gleefully, 'I can't afford racing cars and came in a taxi. Oh! we'll lead him a dance and have a nice talk, before we start business. I'll drive.'

The watcher was standing beside a sporting two-seater to which, Mr. Clerihew decided, the big car could give the slip whenever required. Ariadne sat at the wheel of the Isotta Fraschini and pulled out very gently. She crawled away down the Bois at ten miles an hour and as she drove began to talk.

'That nice gentleman is Erricone. You met him at Antonelli's party. He tried to shoot you and you marked his face.'

'I'm glad of that.'

'He is a member of the Italian Camorra and was quite a successful gangster in New York. He has been attached to my person for I don't know how long. There is a Lusitanian who never leaves the Marchese. With your assistance I want to give Erricone the slip for an hour. I hope he'll think that I've given you the Luck, and if you'll leave me the car, he is almost sure to stick to you. Will you trust me with it? It's a beauty. I'll leave it anywhere you say.'

'Run it into the Seine, if it gives you any pleasure. I'll pay for it. It doesn't matter.'

'You tempt me to steal it for a day or two, but it is too conspicuous. No, I'll leave it in the Rue Royale garage, if you'll pick it up there. Now seriously, when shall we get Sir Harry's money? It makes a lot of difference.'

'Not for some months, unless you'll allow me to be useful.'

'I won't allow you to be useful in that way. We shall just have to wait. But tell me, wasn't it rather odd, Sir Harry committing suicide so conveniently for us? He was an old fool in many ways, but I did not think he was capable of that.'

Ariadne suddenly accelerated, skidded round several corners to right and left and came to a

standstill. The car behind overshot its mark and laboriously backed to the last corner.

'Ariadne,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'I suppose that there is no possibility of any of your people having murdered Sir Harry.'

'Heavens, no! we draw the line at murder, but I thought it was clearly proved that he had committed suicide, poisoned himself because Dora Griffiths had broken off their engagement.'

'That's what the Coroner said and the police believe, but I know they are wrong. Sir Harry was murdered.'

'What have you seen that every one else missed?'

'You know I found Sir Harry dead in his study. There was a bottle of vintage port on the table and he appeared to have taken the poison in a tumbler of the wine—as if he would drink port in a tumbler —after he had drunk about half the bottle. The dregs in the glass contained a poison which had been in his possession for a long time.'

'There was no sign that any one else had been there?'

'None, yet I'm sure it was murder. In the first place Sir Harry was not a port man. If he had decided to go off in a blaze of glory, he would have brought up his best claret and emptied the bottle. He was always contemptuous of port as a fortified wine.'

'Suicides may act oddly.'

'Moreover the port he was drinking was Sandeman

1884 and there is no bottle of that wine in his cellar.'

'It might have been the last bottle.'

Mr. Clerihew shook his head.

'That wine never came out of Sir Harry's cellar. He was a connoisseur and however distraught he was, he could not possibly think of drinking an old wine like that without decanting it carefully.'

'If I was going to commit suicide, I should be capable of anything.'

'At least he would not have shaken the whole bottle up deliberately as if it was medicine. You never saw wine in such a state. The crust was all broken to pieces and the wine full of sediment. It was simply undrinkable for any wine-lover. I am as certain as I can be that that bottle had made a far longer journey than from Sir Harry's cellar to his study.'

'What do you conclude from that?'

'I don't believe that Sir Harry took poison in the port at all. It was administered to him in something else without his knowing it. The Sandeman 1884 only appeared on the scene after he had been poisoned to make murder look like suicide—in fact it was mere camouflage.'

'How was it given then?'

They were out in the suburbs above the Seine and Ariadne had come to a standstill in a lonely lane near Louveciennes to give the pursuing car time to catch them up. Mr. Clerihew wagged his head with

pardonable pride at the ingenuity with which he had explained to his own satisfaction Sir Harry's death. He was just going to begin his story, when Ariadne stopped him with a question :

'By the way, have you a pistol handy ?'

'Yes, in my hip pocket.'

'That is all right. Erricone is a bad-tempered fellow and if he gets it into his head that we have been leading him about the place to make fun of him, he might use a gun himself.'

Mr. Clerihew put his pistol handy on the cushions between himself and Ariadne and began his tale.

'A good deal of what I am going to tell you is guesswork, but this is what I think may have happened. On the day of Sir Harry's death, he was alone in the house. It was Samuel's day off. That morning some one, I don't know, but I think he was a foreigner, thin with sandy hair and a crooked nose . . .'

'That sounds rather like one of our Bolshy friends, Gomez by name. He was one of the masked men with Erricone and Léon.'

'Possibly that was the man. Anyhow he called and discussed with Sir Harry the purchase of some fine claret and port, Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84. Sir Harry told me himself that these wines had been offered him. He would want to sample the wines, and the caller promised to bring round specimen bottles. Of course Sir Harry would not have attempted to taste them, until they had been rested.'

'Naturally.'

'After each meal, Sir Harry used to take a dose of Indigestion Mixture sold by the local chemist. He was a great believer in it and a bottle always stood on the mantelpiece. You know how hospitable he was. He was sure to offer a visitor a drink and probably went out to find a bottle of wine. While he was away, Gomez, if that was the man's name, pocketed the bottle of Indigestion Mixture and put in its place another bottle with the same label, containing poison. Then he took his drink and went away promising to return later in the day with the sample bottles.'

'I thought that Sir Harry died of some special poison that had been in his possession for years.'

'Well, Miss Dora Griffiths was a good deal about the house, helping Sir Harry with his literary work. I even ascertained that she had a latchkey. If that bottle of poison had disappeared some time before, no one would have missed it.'

'I never did like that young lady, but why should she kill the goose with the golden eggs ?'

'It is not so unreasonable as it looks. I must try and be fair to her, though she did once ruin a bottle of very fine claret with some horrible scent she was wearing. But let me finish my version of what happened. Sir Harry went out and had lunch at the local club, as he often did. When he came back, he swallowed his usual dose and—died. I hope painlessly.'

'Poor Sir Harry,' said Ariadne thoughtfully, 'he was very kind to me, though I'm afraid I never took him seriously.'

'Later in the afternoon your friend Gomez turned up again with the sample bottles. If for some reason or other Sir Harry had not taken the fatal dose, they would explain his call. No doubt he rang and when no one answered the bell, used Miss Dora's latchkey.'

'What a diabolically cold-blooded business.'

'Finding Sir Harry dead in the study, as he hoped, he carried out the rest of his duties without fear of interruption. He had brought with him at least three bottles, presumably in a bag. First there was the bottle of harmless Indigestion Mixture, which he had stolen from Sir Harry that morning, leaving the poison in its place. Then, there was the blue, red-labelled bottle in which Sir Harry had so foolishly kept that Eastern poison ready for the last emergency. And finally, there was a bottle of Sandeman 1884, a noble wine which ought never to have been mixed up with a sordid crime.'

'In your books,' said Ariadne, 'you often talk about great wines as if they were jewels. Has there ever been a famous jewel which has not been mixed up with crimes ? '

'I'm talking nonsense. Great wines seemed enormously important, until I met you again, Ariadne, but to-day I drank a Château Margaux 1899 in your company and it might have been the basest Algerian

for all I remember of it. . . . Whether or no Gomez brought a bottle of Lafite 1874 as well, I cannot say. Perhaps he did in case he found Sir Harry alive and waiting for the sample bottles. What he had to do was simple enough. He opened the Sandeman 1884 with Sir Harry's corkscrew. Probably his nerve was by this time a bit shaken. He needed a drink. So he took the first glass he came across, a tumbler, and helped himself liberally to the wine he had shaken up so cruelly on his way. He was evidently not particular.'

'Gomez never was particular.'

'He swigged down half a bottle of muddy port, stuff that Sir Harry would have refused to smell. There were dregs left in his tumbler and he poured on them a few drops of the neat poison which had come with him in the blue bottle, borrowed, I suspect, by Miss Dora. The poison was very powerful and there must have been a lot of it left when a lethal dose had been poured into the Indigestion Mixture. I wish I knew what had happened to the remains of it. Of course Gomez may have poured it down the sink. The whole empty house was at his disposal.'

Ariadne shivered. 'It must have seemed ghastly, but Gomez never had any imagination.'

'I'm afraid,' Mr. Clerihew went on, 'that our friend kept the rest of the poison for a future occasion. He may have emptied out the remains of the Indigestion Mixture and put the neat poison

in its place or he may have poured it in on top. In any case I have an uneasy presentiment that we have not heard the last of Sir Harry's Eastern poison.'

'I hate poison,' said Ariadne, 'it is so cowardly.'

'It was very neatly arranged,' said Mr. Clerihew. 'Gomez had only to leave Sir Harry's corpse with the bottle of port, the tumbler with the poisoned dregs and the blue poison bottle in front of it, and only a connoisseur of wine would suspect anything but suicide. It was the tumbler put me on the scent. In no circumstances would Sir Harry have drunk port out of a tumbler.'

'Gomez might have done it,' said Ariadne doubtfully, 'but he could never have thought it all out himself.'

'As I said, Miss Dora Griffiths had a latchkey. She knew Sir Harry's ways. I should not be surprised, if she was cleverer than she looks.'

'But why should she have murdered Sir Harry, when she could have married him, though perhaps one alternative was not much better than the other.'

'To begin with, she did not want to marry Sir Harry. She was in love with Jack Lancaster and is going to marry him. I fancy they were in Paris together at the time with an unimpeachable alibi. Anyhow she made a cunning use of this love affair to provide a motive for Sir Harry's suicide.'

'I saw in the papers that there was some letter or other.'

'Yes, I have very little doubt that the charming young lady wrote dear Sir Harry from her Paris hotel one of her usual affectionate letters, which he received on the morning of his death. She had also taken the precaution of sending Gomez a letter written on the same paper with the same date, informing poor dear Sir Harry that she loved him no longer. I forgot to mention one of Gomez's least pleasant jobs. He had to take Dora's love letters out of the dead Sir Harry's pocket, find the Paris envelope received that morning, take from it her affectionate epistle and put into it the note that broke off the engagement.'

'But surely Dora Griffiths would not have allowed an affair with the penniless Jack Lancaster to keep her from handling Sir Harry's money. And why should Gomez, a revolutionary, commit a murder that merely enriches the King.'

'They did not know that Sir Harry had made a new will. Only a day or two before, he had left practically everything he possessed to Dora Griffiths. She went with him to the solicitors. I fancy she knew Sir Harry's penchant for altering wills and therefore took immediate steps to anticipate a change of mind, but even so she was too late, thanks to you.'

'What had I to do with it ?'

'You allowed him to help you, though you wouldn't condescend to ask me, and he was afraid that he would get his throat cut. He reckoned that

they wouldn't touch him, if he left his money to the King, but he hadn't time to tell them what he'd done.'

'He wasn't in serious danger,' said Ariadne rather contemptuously, 'though he may have received a threatening letter or two. However, it was just as well he was frightened, since it brought his fortune to the King.'

She glanced at her wrist watch. 'Now it is just about time we got rid of our friend Erricone. I will drop you by the Arc de Triomphe and then get away as fast as the traffic police will allow me. He will take the easier course and follow you, if you walk down the Avenue des Champs Elysées and dodge about in the crowd a bit. Try and keep him busy for at least an hour.'

'What am I to do then ?'

'Present him with that parcel I gave you. There is something in it I want him to have. Be careful only to accost him in a crowded street where he will not dare use his gun. He is a perfect devil with a complete contempt for consequences.'

'What fun,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'I will present him with his parcel with the most courtly of bows. I don't want to boast, but now I have seen you, Ariadne, I'm more than a match for Erricone.'

Things worked out as Ariadne had hoped. Mr. Clerihew jumped out of the car and made a dash into the crowd. Ariadne timed her escape perfectly, shooting past a traffic policeman at the last moment

and leaving a traffic jam behind her to guard her retreat. Erricone had no choice but to give up the chase or follow Mr. Clerihew, who after his first plunge made matters easy for his shadow. The wine merchant did more walking than he had done for many a month and had time to admire the skill with which Erricone, handicapped by a car in crowded streets, kept him always in sight. The gangster was a stubborn fellow.

Two hours—Mr. Clerihew ran no risks where Ariadne was concerned—passed very slowly, as they mooned about the centre of Paris. At last Mr. Clerihew's ancestral watch showed that they had come to an end. Erricone, very ill at ease, was at that moment caught in a block in the Rue de la Paix and his car was against the pavement. Mr. Clerihew suddenly disengaged himself from the crowd and stepped towards the car.

Erricone's hand went to his hip pocket.

'No,' said Mr. Clerihew gently with his hand in his side pocket, 'I have you covered.'

Erricone's hand came smartly back empty and he burst into a torrent of foreign oaths.

'Dear, dear,' said Mr. Clerihew politely, removing his hat with his left hand, 'you don't understand. I have a parcel for you, Monsieur Erricone.'

His right hand came out of the pocket and threw into the car Ariadne's packet. With a quick movement, he slid away among the passers-by and retired up the Rue Daunou. He saw no more of Erricone.

Next morning early, he was amazed and alarmed, when a page brought him a peremptory message, asking him to come round at once to the Marquise de Camerano's flat, 23A Rue des Martyrs.

'Good God!' he exclaimed, 'I hope there is nothing wrong.'

He raced through his toilette and dashed off in a taxi.

'La Marquise de Camerano?' he said to the concierge in an enquiring tone.

The man looked at him curiously and replied with a strange malevolence: 'Third floor on the left.' As he passed through the glass door to the staircase, a man who had been standing in the courtyard lounged across to the vestibule in an elaborately careless manner and cut off all retreat to the street.

'From his boots,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'an *agent en bourgeois*. Oh! what can have happened.'

He rang at the flat, and the door was opened instantly by a large man with a black moustache and a villainous countenance. To judge from the noise of his feet on the parquet, he was shod by the same bootmaker as the man below.

The flat seemed full of men and Mr. Clerihew, his heart heavy with black foreboding, was hurried across the hall into a sitting-room, where he found himself faced not by Ariadne, but by a man, a complete stranger with two uniformed policemen

behind his chair. The man was square-headed with a long fair moustache and irascible blue eyes, and no one who knew Paris could mistake his style and quality. He was the typical *Commissaire de Police.*

'Who are you ?' asked the Commissaire fiercely.

'My name is Clerihew.'

The Commissaire's ferocity was doubled by the difficulty of committing this essentially English name to writing. The final 'w' in particular was to the French mind an unpardonable atrocity. Then Mr. Clerihew, a prey to intolerable suspense, had to spell out his Christian names and the place of his birth, which happened to be Wellingborough, more outrageous to write even than his surname, and to confess to his nationality and the date on which he was born.

He knew France well as every wine-lover must. Questions on his part would only lead to suspicion and the delay which he was mad to avoid. So he kept himself sternly in check. If it had not been for his anxiety, he would not have been unduly upset at the bullying brutality which every French *fonctionnaire* is wont to assume in dealing with the public. He did indeed try to interject a question as to what had happened, but it was absolutely ignored, until the official mind had been assured of his identity.

He was uncomfortably aware that there was a weakness in his case, which was bound to fill a French policeman with the blackest suspicion. It

was lucky that in his haste he had left his pistol in his bag at the hotel, but with it he had locked up his passport and a document or two which would have brought the Commissaire to his knees. As it was, he had no identity papers on him. From birth to death a Frenchman is never separated from his *livret militaire* or similar document which affirms that he is himself, and if he were to lose it, he would feel that he had lost his personality. The French official can only suspect the Englishman who expects people to take his word that he is John Smith of being a criminal or lunatic.

'Your papers of identity,' said the Commissaire savagely.

'I'm afraid that I have left my passport at the hotel.'

'You have left your passport at the hotel? This is very serious, indeed most suspicious. Why did you leave your passport at the hotel? You must come to the Commissariat at once and we will take your measurements and finger-prints.'

The Commissaire tapped his note-book with his pencil and glowered at Mr. Clerihew. Suddenly he shot at him: 'What have you done with the corpse?'

'What corpse? Whose corpse?' stammered Mr. Clerihew utterly bewildered, with terror in his heart.

Slowly and grimly the Commissaire repeated his words, adding: 'What have you done with the

corpse of that unhappy woman, the Marquise de Camerano, whom you assassinated last night ? '

'Ariadne murdered,' gasped Mr. Clerihew. The world span round him and he collapsed into a chair as if he had been poleaxed. For a moment he tried to grasp the meaning of the phrase and then suddenly there came a revulsion.

He sprang to his feet and stormed at the Commissaire.

'The Marquise has been murdered. Her murderers are free. The police are helping them to escape. A half-witted, a mad, a criminal Commissaire is wasting time, drivelling to a respectable Englishman who would give his life for her instead of chasing the assassins. Dunderhead, species of camel, cow . . .' Mr. Clerihew proceeded to call that Commissaire every rude name he had ever learned in French, almost foaming at the mouth, until that worthy sprang from his chair and uttered the fatal words : 'Outrages à un fonctionnaire dans l'exercice de ses fonctions.'

The two uniformed men rushed at Mr. Clerihew and tried to twist his arms. There are terrible penalties under the French code for insulting a policeman. He hacked one man hard on the shin and punched the other in the wind. The scene was set for a pretty rough and tumble, when there came a slamming of doors. A plain-clothes man hurried in and whispered something into the ear of the Commissaire who stood at attention and ignored

Mr. Clerihew. One policeman stopped rubbing his shin: the other straightened himself out with a groan. They both saluted as M. Achille Guiraud, Chef de la Sûreté, walked into the room.

'Tiens,' exclaimed Achille, taking the ruffled Mr. Clerihew's hands in his own, 'tiens, c'est toi. What in the devil's name are you doing in this galley? Are you trying to teach my men to box?'

The Commissaire turned pale when he heard the Grand Chief of the French C.I.D. address in the affectionate second person singular the foreign suspect without identification papers, whom he had browbeaten into assault. Achille and Mr. Clerihew had been comrades at the Sorbonne and kept up a close friendship. It would have been hard to find two friends more unlike in appearance and character: Achille, big, blustering, self-confident, prosaic and one of those rare Frenchmen who never touch wine or alcohol; Clerihew, slim, shy and romantic, loving wine for want of something better with the passion of an artist and connoisseur.

'Mon vieux,' stuttered Mr. Clerihew, 'is it, can it be true that Ariadne . . . the Marquise de Camerano, has been . . . murdered?'

Achille gazed at his friend. It needed no Sherlock Holmes to understand what Ariadne meant to Mr. Clerihew. The Chef de la Sûreté took him tenderly by the arm.

'My friend,' he said softly, 'the Marquise has

disappeared and I'm afraid that there is only too much evidence of foul play.'

Achille's tone was all too definite. He was convinced that Ariadne was dead, but Mr. Clerihew snatched at the ray of hope in the word 'disappeared.'

'If she has disappeared, you can't be certain. What evidence is there?'

'Come and see,' said Achille.

He took Mr. Clerihew out into the hall and threw open the door of the dining-room. The next few minutes were the worst in Mr. Clerihew's life. The room had been the scene of a terrible struggle. Some attempt seemed to have been made to restore it to order. The table with a shattered leg was imperfectly propped up by a chair, plates, dishes and glasses were broken and on the tablecloth were reddish-brown stains that were not wine. A large reddish-brown patch on one of the rugs made Mr. Clerihew shut his eyes and shudder.

He turned hastily from the rug and his eye was caught by a bottle on the sideboard, a bottle of champagne, with some wine still in it. An expression of surprise flashed across his white face.

'Champagne, Perrier Jouet 1911, that is very strange.'

'Yes,' said Achille, 'the Marquise—her husband went to England yesterday—was entertaining visitors and entertaining them very well. It was not till the end of supper that they attacked her.'

'The end of supper,' repeated Mr. Clerihew, his mind far away.

He sniffed at the bottle without touching it.

'My God, can it be? It is too good to be true, too lucky a chance.'

He inspected the cork which was lying beside the bottle, smelt the broken glasses which still contained a few drops of wine—'Evidently the same wine,' he muttered—and fell back into the only unbroken chair.

With his head on his hands, he groaned, 'What a relief! O Achille, why did you frighten me so?'

Achille glared at his friend in stupefaction and asked him what he meant. Mr. Clerihew raised his head. The blood had returned to his cheeks.

'Let me think, let me think. Surely I can't be wrong. No, it must be so. You're sure that nothing happened, until after they had started supper.'

'That's obvious,' said the puzzled Frenchman, 'most of the plates and glasses that were broken in the struggle had been used.'

Mr. Clerihew got up and opened a side cupboard in the buffet. It contained a few bottles of claret and another bottle of Perrier Jouet '11, all unopened.

'That settles it,' he said half to himself, 'I must be right. Thank God! Thank God! But oh! Ariadne, you might have warned me!'

His manner had completely changed.

'Old man,' he said to Achille, 'before we try and find out what really did happen, you had better make

my peace with that fool Commissaire and see if I can salve the wounds of those two policemen who annoyed me. Presumably they know something about the case and I want to hear all they know. You know you came in the nick of time. The Commissaire was on the point of arresting me on a charge of murdering the Marquise de Camerano who has been one of my best friends ever since I can remember, to say nothing of insulting a *fonctionnaire* in the exercise of his functions, assault and battery and a few other crimes.'

The Commissaire heard Mr. Clerihew's last sentence. The Chef de la Sûreté, still bewildered, chimed in with his friend's change of mood and chuckled with delight. The unhappy Commissaire blushed and stuttered.

'Monsieur Cleriheffe,' he said, 'quite misunderstood me. Of course a friend of the Chef de la Sûreté could not be suspected of such a crime. I was only interrogating him to learn what he knew about the Marquise's disappearance and unluckily he had no identity papers with him. So perhaps I was a little stern. Indeed we had a slight difference of opinion and my men rather resented it.'

'No need for apologies,' said Mr. Clerihew, who was too elated at the removal of despair from his mind, to bear any one malice, 'I lost my temper and said things I should not have said. I can only beg your pardon.'

A relieved Commissaire shook Mr. Clerihew's hand.

'Mon petit,' said Achille, 'you are young and, if you want to get on, you had better keep in mind Talleyrand's order, "et surtout pas de zèle." An excess of zeal brings people into trouble. A policeman is wise to suspect the most unlikely persons, but he is even wiser to keep his suspicions to himself.'

He turned to Mr. Clerihew and asked him how he came to be there.

'I was rung up this morning and asked to come to the Marquise's flat at once.'

'We found a note from Mr. Clerihew among the Marquise's papers and telephoned to his hotel.'

'Well, my friend,' said Achille, 'I cannot make you out. You saw something in that dining-room, which convinced you that the Marquise is alive. You have been a different man ever since. I should very much like to know what it was; for I warn you that the evidence that she has been made away with is to my mind conclusive.'

'You tell me first what you think happened.'

'As no doubt you know, your beautiful friend, the Marquise, is a Lusitanian exile and mixed up in a conspiracy against the existing Republic. The present rulers of Lusitania are a gang of scoundrels and they are not particular as to the agents they use. Among other criminals of varying nationality, whom they have in their pay, is a certain gangster and Camorrist known as Erricone with a long list of crimes to his credit both in Europe and America. I am convinced that he murdered the Marquise.'

Achille's earnestness frightened Mr. Clerihew again. Could it possibly be that he was wrong ? Could he have misinterpreted the evidence of the champagne ? In a way it seemed flimsy and slight, yet his mind could draw only one conclusion from it.

Achille went on. ' I have come here to reconstitute the crime. All the scientific apparatus of criminal enquiry has been set at work. The room of the crime has been photographed from different angles, so that the exact position of every object is fixed and measured on the prints. The research of the digital impressions, finger-prints, as you say, has not given a great result, but I'm sorry to tell you that we do know exactly how the lady was killed and what was done with her body. Don't buoy yourself up with false hopes.'

' I still don't believe you,' said Mr. Clerihew obstinately.

' I have given orders that everything should be put back as far as possible where it was before the crime. It shall all be enacted before you, exactly as it happened.'

' I believe you so little that, if you will let me, I will play the supposed victim's part. I should like to do so, as it will give me an opportunity of testing my own impressions.'

' All right,' said Guiraud, who was at heart a bit of a baby and liked play-acting, ' you shall be the Marquise, I'll be Erricone the murderer. We were amazingly lucky to discover the crime so soon. The

Marquise told her *femme de ménage* that she was going away last night after supper and would not want her again for a week. She was to lay supper for three and the Marquise said that she herself would look after the washing up. She was a grande dame without false pride. Happily the servant forgot her spectacles and came back for them this morning.'

The Commissaire now appeared and reported that all was ready for the reconstitution.

'You must know then,' said Achille, 'that a little before ten o'clock last evening, the concierge opened the house door for the Marquise.'

'I suppose that it was shut for the night.'

'Yes, he opened it from his lodge, heard the Marquise call out her name and caught a glimpse of her, as she went to the staircase. Now put yourself in the Marquise's place. Start on the landing. You let yourself into the hall and turn up the light in the dining-room.'

Mr. Clerihew obediently went into the dining-room.

'You find supper set out for three, as you ordered. Then you go to the sideboard and take out a bottle of champagne in readiness for your guests.'

Once again Mr. Clerihew studied the bottle and inspected the cork. An idea struck him.

'Wait a minute,' he said, 'before we go on with the reconstitution of the crime. I gave the Marquise yesterday a half bottle of very remarkable cognac.'

'What an extraordinary present to give a lady.'

'I want to know what has happened to it. Have you opened this corner cupboard? It seems to be locked.'

'No,' said Achille, 'but we will have it open in a moment, if you like, though nothing in it can have any bearing on the case.'

An *agent* with a bundle of keys soon opened the cupboard and in it was a half bottle labelled 'Grande Fine Champagne 1830,' which Mr. Clerihew recognized at once. It was about half full and he looked at it with intense interest.

'Achille,' he said, 'do you see that it is only half full? That is immensely important.'

'I don't see why. What on earth can that have to do with the murder?'

Mr. Clerihew stood lost in thought, tapping with his fingers on the sideboard.

'Yes,' he said to himself, 'it all fits in perfectly.'

With a smile of relief, he turned to Achille: 'I have had so many shocks to-day that I feel justified in taking just a drop of the wonderful brandy I myself gave to the Marquise. Then you can go on with your romance.'

'Romance,' snorted Achille indignantly, waving away the very thought of a liqueur, 'this is the truth that is stranger than romance, a truth guaranteed by science. With cameras, microscopes and countless delicate scientific tests, we can reconstruct the past with unerring accuracy and the

criminal is beginning to discover that he cannot escape us.'

'There are still a lot of undetected crimes to judge from the papers.'

Achille ignored the irreverent interruption.

'The science of detection has made gigantic strides since the days of Sherlock Holmes. It has reached the category of mathematical certainty.'

'Have it your own way,' said Mr. Clerihew cheerfully, as he rolled a sip of brandy round his tongue, 'continue your scientific romance.'

'Romance, pshaw! A few minutes after the Marquise had gone upstairs to her flat, some one rang and asked for her. The concierge had a good sight of the man under the lamp and from his description I am sure that it was Erricone. It is very odd that she should have invited a man of that type to supper, but conspirators do odd things.'

'I suppose you think she might have been trying to buy him off.'

'The purpose is immaterial. Now I must let you into a secret of which unhappily the Marquise knew nothing. Another man, presumably the second guest she was expecting, was already hidden in her flat when she returned. Bear that in mind. Now I take the part of the man who asked for the Marquise and walked boldly up past the concierge.'

Suiting his action to his words, Achille went out and rang the flat bell. Mr. Clerihew admitted him and showed him into the dining-room.

'After some polite conversation,' said Achille, 'we decide not to wait for the second guest and sit down to our meal, you at the top of the table in front of that screen and I at your side. You pour out some of that wine.'

Mr. Clerihew poured out a few drops of the champagne with a curious expression on his face.

'Achille, is there nothing that strikes you as odd?'

The Chef de la Sûreté was far too engrossed in the drama that was drawing to its climax to reply.

'We eat cold meat and salad,' he went on, 'and some *foie gras*. Suddenly something happens. Your suspicions are aroused. You spring from your chair. I draw my knife and . . .'

Achille was playing his part with the utmost realism. He was brandishing in front of Mr. Clerihew's doubtful gaze an alarming sheath knife. Mr. Clerihew stood up and pushed him backwards, half-laughing. His laughter changed to a jump of genuine alarm, when he heard a movement behind him and was startled by a pistol shot almost in his ear.

'What the devil . . .' he shouted, as he turned to find behind him a grinning *agent* who had appeared from behind the screen with an automatic in his hand, thoroughly enjoying the joke.

'There,' said Achille triumphantly, 'you have the missing guest who was all the time concealed behind the screen. Now you can see the beauty of science in criminal investigation. We know that he was

hidden behind the screen and waited a long time. As a matter of fact his boots had badly worn india-rubber heels. He fired once through a hole in the screen, as you can see from the slight powder blackening and the cartridge case he left on the floor. He missed. We have found the bullet in the bookcase. He sprang out, knocking over the screen, and took part in the struggle. Probably he could not shoot again for fear of hitting his accomplice. The Marquise must have put up a good fight.'

'Did they really need two armed men, one of them in ambush, to overcome a single woman ?'

'Perhaps Erricone kept his friend out of the way, because he wanted to make love to the Marquise and try and surprise some secret. He is a great man with the ladies. They were certainly after a ruby called the Luck of Lusitania.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' said Mr. Clerihew crossly. He could not stomach the notion of the villainous Erricone making love to Ariadne.

'That's only guesswork, of course. Anyhow the Marquise was no ordinary woman. They say she does not know what fear is. In the revolution, she drove a whole mob of drunken rioters out of the palace at the pistol's point. Erricone and men of his kidney are always cowards at heart. They took no chances. Between them they stabbed her. There is more blood about the place than any bullet is likely to have caused.'

Mr. Clerihew had recovered from the surprise attack on his rear and seemed singularly unimpressed.

'Very interesting, I'm sure,' he said drily, 'now will you tell me this ? Can your scientific investigation concoct any theory which would allow for the murder of the Marquise without assuming that she gave the champagne to her guest or guests or drank it herself.'

'Of course, she gave it her guest and presumably drank it herself. The proof is there before you.'

'Good. Now how do you account for the disappearance of about half that bottle of Grande Fine Champagne ? It is far more than the Marquise could have drunk herself in the time, and she can hardly have given it to her guest, since it was locked up in the cupboard. Besides I can see no trace of it in any glass and it has a bouquet that even you could not miss.'

'Clerihew, you are mad about drinks. What does it matter about the cognac ? I have told you how the crime was committed. What more do you want ?'

'Well, I should like you to have explained to me the very mysterious circumstances of the champagne and brandy, but as you won't, perhaps you will tell me what the assassins did with the body.'

'That is easy,' said Achille, leading Mr. Clerihew to the landing outside the flat.

'The apartment opposite was taken some weeks ago by an Italian named Giacomo Pacarelli, who

brought with him his own furniture. He lived there with a woman named Lucrezia whom you may have heard of under the name of Leonora, the serpentine dancer. She had been dancing at the Casino de Paris.'

'Oho!' said Mr. Clerihew, 'Leonora; the plot thickens.'

'Three days ago Pacarelli told the concierge that he was going to store his furniture, as he was called back to Italy. A mysterious man was Pacarelli and the lithe Leonora was scarcely less enigmatical. He was the Marquise's missing guest, hidden behind the screen, and, I strongly suspect, one of Erricone's gang.'

'I wonder if you are anywhere near right.'

'He only needed a duplicate latchkey to get into the Marquise's flat when she was out. This morning very early before the servant had returned, a removal van called and Pacarelli assisted by some friends—he had paid up his rent—moved all his furniture, including a very big and heavy chest.'

Mr. Clerihew nodded with an air of agreement and Achille pushed open the door of the flat opposite. It was completely empty except for a quantity of litter and a morose policeman who saluted when they came in. In the sitting-room near the window was a large dark stain on the parquet floor.

'That,' said Achille grimly, 'is where they laid down the body, while they prepared the chest. Oh! they shall not escape, those assassins! Be

sure that we shall hunt them down and avenge that brave and lovely lady, your friend. I, Achille Guiraud, have said it. They will try to escape from France. They dare not fly to Italy. The Fascist police have a welcome ready for Erricone and his gang. We are watching all the other frontiers. They will never get through. Nous les aurons.'

'It is likely enough that you will arrest these men, but I do not see how you can avenge the Marquise's death, because I'm sure she is still alive.'

'Mon cher ami, what do you mean? You may have sentimental reasons for refusing to believe—forgive me if I intrude on the secrets of your heart—but the facts are plain. Have I not told you how she was murdered as accurately as if I had been there?'

'Achille,' said Mr. Clerihew unexpectedly, 'do you consider that I am a judge of wine?'

'You certainly have that reputation, and what the good of it is I have never been able to understand.'

'If I had had any doubts as to its practical utility, the events of to-day would have scattered them.'

Mr. Clerihew grew even more Socratic. 'Do you also consider that I am a judge of a judge of wine?'

Achille looked mystified.

'I mean, do you think that I should know if a friend of mine were really a connoisseur?'

'I should certainly suppose so. No one has ever suspected you, Clerihew, of being a fool.'

'Well, if your two assumptions are right, I'm sure that the Marquise has not been murdered.'

And not a word more would Mr. Clerihew say.

Yet he passed a night of sleepless agony. He had been so sure when he was arguing with Achille, but, alone and in the dark, he was besieged with doubt. The proofs to which he clung so desperately were flimsy. There might be some flaw in his reasoning. Some curious coincidence might upset his argument. Was it possible after all that Ariadne was dead? So he went on, until the dawn rose on Paris and he got up only to worry his brain until it became numbed and dead.

He was in the hall when the first post arrived. With a groan of relief, he clutched a letter addressed to him in the harum-scarum hand he had known so well. He had felt that it was little more than a forlorn hope that Ariadne, seeing from the papers that she had been murdered, would give sign of life knowing how anxious he would be.

'My dear Will,' she wrote, 'I had no idea that things would turn out as they have. If I had known, I would have warned you. As it is, it suits me very well to be dead for a time, so please tell no one that you have heard from Ariadne.'

About a week later, Mr. Clerihew called on the Chef de la Sûreté at his office in the Quai des Orfèvres.

'My dear Clerihew, I thought you must have gone back to England. It is terrible that there

is no news of the Marquise, though I knew that was beyond hope.'

'Ah, yes,' said Mr. Clerihew as if the matter had slipped his memory, 'I have been down in Cognac doing a little business and thought I would call in on my way back to England. How are you getting along with that Erricone case?'

'Not too well,' Achille admitted, 'Erricone and his mate Pacarelli have vanished. They must be lying low. There has not been a sign of them on the frontiers. There was a report that a man resembling Pacarelli with a woman had crossed the Italian border, but neither he nor Erricone nor Leonora for that matter would have ventured there.'

'How about the body?'

'The only definite thing we have discovered is the remains of the lorry. They set fire to it in a lonely part of the forest of Fontainebleau, using an incredible quantity of petrol, for nothing at all remained that could be identified. That, I fear, is the end of the beautiful and romantic Marquise.'

'Ah,' said Mr. Clerihew with astounding gaiety, 'I left in the waiting-room a friend of mine who would like to meet you.'

He went out and returned with a lady whose appearance almost made Achille's eyes start out of his head.

'Achille, may I introduce you to the Marquise de Camerano? . . . Yes, the authentic Marquise who

was murdered in her flat and whose body was burned to ashes in the forest of Fontainebleau.'

It is kinder to Achille to draw a veil over the next few minutes. However he soon pulled himself together and said, gazing with admiration at Ariadne's beauty :

'Madame la Marquise, never in my life have I been so thankful to be wrong. How well I understand the grief of my poor friend Clerihew, when I so unfortunately led him into error, though he was only deceived for a few minutes. I admit that I should like to know what there was in the wine and the brandy to prove to him that you were alive. Or was that all camouflage ? Was he simply convinced that no villain in the world could have the heart to murder so beautiful a lady ? '

'Make no mistake about that,' said Ariadne smiling, 'I know of quite a number of people who would be delighted to murder the Marquise de Camerano, if they had the chance.'

'Ariadne,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'you had better tell your story first.'

'There is not very much to say. After lunching with Mr. Clerihew who was kind enough to draw Erricone off my trail, I went back to my flat and, among other things, filled my travelling flask from the bottle of cognac he had given me, leaving what was left in a locked cupboard. Every drop of it was precious and I knew that strangers would be using my flat.'

'Strangers?' asked Achille with some surprise in his voice.

'Well, acquaintances. I took as much brandy with me as I could conveniently carry, partly because it was so good and partly because there are occasions in an adventurous life such as even a woman may lead, when a glass of good cognac is beyond value. Then I took a car that had been lent me and drove off to the south-west, taking precautions to see that I was not followed.'

'But,' said Achille, 'did not you return to your flat that evening and have supper there?'

'Monsieur Guiraud,' said Ariadne, turning on him those large blue eyes which had brought so many men to her feet, 'there are things of which you might prefer to be ignorant. Great issues concerning international politics are bound up in this affair. If you like, I will tell you the whole truth, but it may be inconvenient for you to remember it.'

'Madame la Marquise, I have a well-trained and diplomatic memory.'

'Mr. Clerihew thinks that it will do no harm to let you into the whole secret. As you know, when my husband and I came to Paris, we had the Communist agents close on our heels. They thought that we had something they wanted.'

'The Luck of Lusitania.'

'Nothing can be concealed,' said Ariadne with a touch of irony, 'from the Chef de la Sûreté, though perhaps I had better assure him that he will not

find the missing ruby on me or anywhere in Paris.'

'Except it would seem the continued existence of a most charming lady who, he was convinced, was dead.'

'After we had been a day or two in Paris, an Italian named Pacarelli called on us. He was living in a flat on the same landing with a lady who I believe was his sister. She danced under the stage name of Leonora and was known to both me and my husband. Though they pretended to be revolutionaries, they were really keeping an eye on the enemies of the Fascist régime.'

'Fascist secret service, no doubt,' said Achille, 'the place swarms with them.'

'Anyhow Pacarelli said that they were particularly anxious to have an interview with Erricone. They had taken their flat for that purpose knowing that he was shadowing us. He told us that he would scare him back to America. We asked nothing better than to get rid of Erricone and his Lusitanian friend as well, if they liked.'

'Why, Madame la Marquise, didn't you come and see me? I would have made short work of Monsieur Erricone.'

'Because, Monsieur Guiraud, you would probably have run us both out of France for fear of international complications, and it suited us for the moment to stay in Paris. Thinking things over, I believe that there must have been something personal

in the Pacarellis' hatred for Erricone. They did not want him arrested, because they were afraid he would be clever enough to escape the guillotine.'

'He wouldn't have, if I had once laid hands on him.'

'We had no idea that they meant to kill him and were delighted at their offer. The four of us worked out a plot. The Pacarellis took no interest in his companion, and my husband to whose person he was attached, undertook to take him off on a wild goose chase. As for Erricone, I had only to give him the slip for a short time. Mr. Clerihew very kindly arranged that for me and also delivered to him a parcel which contained, not what he hoped, but a note from me.'

'Good heavens,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'I had no idea that I was giving him a *billet-doux*—if I had known . . .'

'Don't be silly. It was not exactly a *billet-doux*. You know he had the reputation of being inordinately conceited where women were concerned.'

'You talk of Erricone in the past tense,' said Achille.

'Wait,' said Ariadne, 'and you will understand. I invited him to come and have supper with me. If I had known the fate that awaited him, I shouldn't have done it, though, knowing what a murderous brute he was, I cannct feel much compunction.'

'He deserved,' said Achille, 'the most painful and lingering death that could be devised.'

'I said that my husband was away and that I should be alone except for a woman friend. I may have dropped a hint that I was fascinated by his appearance and reputation for dare-devilry. The postscript was more to the point. It suggested that we were ready to buy him off, as we had come into money. Sir Harry Holman's will had been in all the papers. Erricone was an Italian with no interest in Lusitanian politics and did not care who was his paymaster.'

'I can see,' said Achille bowing, 'that your invitation would have tempted a saint.'

Ariadne frowned.

'When I left Mr. Clerihew, I knew that he would keep Erricone off my trail and deliver my packet or die in the attempt.'

'Thank you, Ariadne.'

'To tell you the truth, I thought that Erricone was in more danger from your gun than you from his. Anyhow I met Leonora in a café where we exchanged hats and cloaks. She was about my height, and though she was as dark as I am fair, she could quite well pass for me at night in my motoring get-up. It was essential that the concierge should think that I had come home, if Erricone enquired whether I was in.'

Achille swore a great oath. 'Then it was Leonora who went back to your flat that evening.'

'Yes, I gave her my key and she was joined by Pacarelli from the flat opposite. They sat down and waited a minute or two for Erricone. Pacarelli wrote me a letter to an address I had given him, as soon as he was safe in Italy, and told me exactly what happened.'

'And you, Madame la Marquise, were never there at all. How blind I was!'

'Pacarelli began by thanking me for the excellent supper I had provided. I felt that I owed them that at least, if they rid me of Erricone who was getting on my nerves. From the way he wrote, I should say that the sauce of revenge—it must have been revenge—would have made them enjoy anything.'

Ariadne broke off and turned to Mr. Clerihew with a smile.

'I must say though, Will, that as a student of your works, I was a little hurt by Pacarelli saying that he did not think much of my champagne. As you know I don't care for the wine myself, but I had put out a bottle of the Marchese's best champagne, Perrier Jouet 1911. These Italians never have any real appreciation of wine. I suppose it wasn't sweet enough. Asti Spumante was more in their line.'

Ariadne smiled knowingly at Mr. Clerihew, who to her surprise began to chuckle.

'So Pacarelli did not think much of your champagne. How very amusing! You owe him an apology, I think.'

'What do you mean ?'

'Never mind. Go on with your story. I'll tell you later.'

'After about ten minutes,' Ariadne continued, 'there came a ring at the bell and Leonora let in Erricone. Pacarelli, whose face was, I believe, known to Erricone, and who could hardly pass himself off as me, stationed himself behind the screen in the dining-room. Leonora, as soon as she had got Erricone into the hall, told him that I had been detained, but had telephoned that I was on my way and that they were to begin without me.'

'I wonder he did not smell a rat.'

'Apparently he didn't, for they sat down and began supper. Pacarelli and Leonora wanted to play with him before they finished him off. In the middle of supper, Leonora gave the show away. Erricone whipped out a knife and sprang at her. Pacarelli shot at him from behind the screen and missed. Leonora, who was much braver than she pretended to be at Antonelli's dinner-party, dodged Erricone's knife and stabbed him in the shoulder. Pacarelli could not fire again for fear of hitting Leonora, so he joined in with his knife and they had a rough and tumble in which, Pacarelli says, Erricone carelessly pressed his carotid artery against the point of one of their knives. He apologizes for the horrible mess made in the flat. They packed up the body in a big case and sent it off in a

furniture van in the charge of some trusty friends who were to burn it, van and all, in some convenient spot.'

'Madame la Marquise,' said Achille sternly, 'this is indeed a serious confession. Do you realize that you are liable to arrest as an accessory before the fact? You are partially responsible for a murder and wholly responsible for misleading the police.'

For an instant Ariadne was taken aback. She turned to Mr. Clerihew, saying, 'What did I tell you?'

'Don't worry about old Achille,' said Mr. Clerihew cheerfully, 'he won't arrest you and find himself in a horrible mess of international complications. It would cost him his job. Erricone is dead and no one is better pleased than the Chef de la Sûreté, though he is a bit crestfallen at the failure of his marvellous scientific methods of detection. Moreover he is eaten up with curiosity. He wants to know how I was sure that you were alive all the time, and I shan't tell him, if he makes any fuss.'

'Well,' said Achille, smiling broadly, 'in the circumstances, we will suspend your arrest on condition that Clerihew makes a clean breast of it. Has he told you yet, Madame la Marquise?'

'No, we have only just met and had other things to talk of'—the Chef de la Sûreté covered a smile with his hand and Ariadne blushed and

Mr. Clerihew coughed—'I can't think how he knew.'

'The champagne was corked, so I knew that Ariadne was alive.'

'Oh, I see,' said Ariadne. Achille gazed at the wine merchant with a blank face.

'For the benefit of the wretched Achille, who is actually proud of knowing nothing about wine, though he won't be proud after I've finished with him, I will give a little lecture. Certain corks—no one knows why—infect a wine with a peculiarly foul funguslike odour and taste. We say that the wine is corked, the French that "le vin sent le bouchon". It happens equally to the best and worst wines in the world, and there is only one thing to do with corked wine—to pour it down the sink. Now that bottle of Perrier Jouet which Ariadne put out for supper was distinctly corked, as she would have discovered, if she had opened it.'

'Evidently,' said Ariadne, 'Pacarelli noticed it. As you said, I owe him an apology.'

'No doubt. A sniff at the bottle and the cork told me that your champagne was worse corked than that bottle of Chablis you very rightly made me send away at Armenonville. That had shown me what a delicate palate you had. I was sure that you would not have drunk a wine in that condition, though it is true that it did not reek to heaven like some corked wines I have known. I was even more certain that a hostess like you would not have allowed any guest

of yours to touch it. You would have opened the other bottle that was standing ready in the side-board cupboard. I was sure that you had never been at that supper at all.'

'I noticed,' said Achille rather sheepishly, 'that that wine did not smell very nice, but then I don't like the smell of any wine.'

'Ass,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'my belief, Ariadne, that you were all right and had disappeared of your own accord, was confirmed when I saw that you had emptied nearly half the Grande Fine Champagne bottle. It was far more than you could possibly have drunk in the time, but just about enough to fill a small travelling flask.'

'Clerihew,' said Achille in his frank good-humoured way, 'you have convinced me of a thing that I could never have believed. The Chef de la Sûreté can no longer afford to know nothing about wine and henceforward you are appointed my official adviser in criminal vinology.'

There was, however, a hint of officialdom in the tone in which he said farewell to Ariadne.

'Madame la Marquise, good-bye. There are certain forms that have to be observed, and you would do me a favour, if you and the Marquis could arrange to leave this country in a day or two. It would be very awkward for the Chef de la Sûreté, if the story you have just told us found its way into the papers.'

Ariadne laughed. 'I was waiting for that. I

know my *fonctionnaire*. Monsieur Guiraud, you have been very good-natured and we will do everything in our power to show our gratitude. We are in point of fact leaving Paris for Switzerland to-morrow morning.'

CHAPTER V

MOUTON 1868

MR. CLERIHEW was back in London. Once again his life seemed bounded by that circle of monotonous routine, in which he had lived and moved for so many years. More than one of his customers would have been in danger of a heart attack, if they had guessed the thoughts which were surging in the shy little wine merchant's brain, as he discussed with them the merits of a hock or claret or exchanged banalities about the weather and the political situation.

Since Ariadne had reappeared, everything seemed so terrifically important. The adventures which in the past he had gone far afield to seek were knocking at his door. At any moment the summons to risk and derring-do might break into the tranquillity of the little shop. Since Ariadne had called him to her and he had answered her call, life had taken on a new rhythm, a rhythm of hope and high expectation.

After her fashion, Ariadne had disappeared, leaving no address. She might be plotting near the Lusitanian frontier or even spreading propaganda through Lusitania with a price upon her head. Mr.

Clerihew had confidence that her courage and quick wits would carry her through all perils, and, whenever he grew over-anxious, consoled himself with the thought that she had at last promised to call him to her side, when she needed his devotion.

'It's about time I heard from Ariadne again,' he said to himself for the hundredth time, as he sampled a collection of Burgundies at the tasting slab. No doubt it was a relief to know that brute Erricone was no longer at her heels, but if his death meant that she had no more need of her old friend, then Mr. Clerihew could almost find it in his heart to regret the gangster's disappearance.

The door opened and in walked Major-General Sir Manby Tallboys, one of Mr. Clerihew's pet abominations. He was loath to pay his bills and grumbled at every wine he bought with an exasperating ignorance. He was a big man with an enormous white moustache turning yellow in parts and choleric eye.

'Clerihew,' he began, 'that last dozen of port you sent was a perfect disgrace. It is quite undrinkable. Don't they make any decent wine nowadays?'

'Dear, dear, General, I'm sorry to hear that. Let me just see what port we sent you.'

Mr. Clerihew consulted a huge ledger.

'It is the same port that you have had for several orders, the finest wood port in London, but I always

doubted whether it would suit your taste. It's a connoisseur's wine.'

'Good God, man, do you mean to imply that I don't know a good port when I taste it.'

'De gustibus, General, de gustibus; you know what Horace said.'

The General didn't nor was the wine merchant quite sure, but the tone sounded conciliatory and Sir Manby grunted.

'I believe,' Mr. Clerihew went on with a touch of irony in his voice, 'that I know exactly the wine that you will like.'

He rang a bell and a cellarman appeared.

'Bring up a bottle from Bin 379.'

The cellarman turned to go and Mr. Clerihew called after him:

'And a bottle from Bin 378.'

The cellarman gazed at his employer in surprise and opened his mouth to speak, but under Mr. Clerihew's stony gaze thought better of it, shut his mouth and said nothing. When the bottles were brought, Mr. Clerihew poured out the wines for the General to taste. He himself held the glasses to the light and smelt them.

'I can't help thinking,' he said suavely, 'that this is the type of port that will appeal to you.'

The General took up a glass and tasted the wine.

'You're right, Clerihew,' he said, 'that is much more the kind of wine I want. A little light, perhaps, but the old style.'

'Try the other, General. I'm sure you will like that even better.'

Again Sir Manby tasted and smacked his lips.

'Ah! that's a really good port, far better than the muck you have been sending me. I shan't be ashamed to offer that to my friends. Send me a couple of dozen and take back those other damned bottles.'

At the door the General paused.

'By the way, Clerihew, what are you going to charge me? At least double what I paid for the other wine, I suppose.'

'Oh! dear me, no,' said the wine merchant sweetly, 'the port you have ordered is less than half the price. It is the nearest approach to cooking port that I allow to enter my cellars.'

The door closed and the General was left biting his moustache on the pavement. He hesitated, then turned on his heel.

'I suppose I should have lost a customer,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'if I had told him that he had been tasting two bottles of the same identical cooking port, though they happened to come out of different bins, and proved that he was unworthy of good wine by preferring one to the other. It would have been worth it, though. Steady, steady, Will Clerihew, my boy, you must pay more attention to business.'

That afternoon Ariadne gave sign of life in the shape of a telegram bidding him ring her up at an

hotel in Berne at six o'clock that evening on most urgent business.

'Why does she talk of urgency,' he thought, 'as if I would miss the chance of speaking to her for anything in the world.'

Until the hour, time passed on leaden feet and he could not keep his mind from fussing and worrying as to that telephone call. It would be too terrible if there was a hitch and he missed her. At last he heard Ariadne's voice as clear as if she was speaking from the next room. He wanted to express his delight in some pretty speech, but she would have none of that. Her first words amazed him.

'Will, I want you to buy me some wine, some old claret.'

Mr. Clerihew was sadly disappointed. He wanted adventures, not orders from Ariadne.

'Everything in my cellars is at your disposal.'

'No, no, it is a special wine. I want to buy all Lord Lexington's Mouton Rothschild 1868.'

'I have a little Mouton '68 in my private cellar.'

'No, no,' said Ariadne's voice imperiously, 'please do exactly what I ask you. It is fearfully important, but you must not ask me why. Write to Lord Lexington at once and tell him that you have a customer who would like to purchase his Mouton Rothschild '68, expense no object.'

Mr. Clerihew's mind was in a whirl. Ariadne was indeed setting him a problem.

'Listen, Ariadne, you must be reasonable. I'll do

everything in my power, but I can't achieve the impossible. No doubt Mouton '68 is a good wine, but there are others just as good or better. . . .'

'Don't be tiresome, Will, just do what I tell you. It is more urgent than I can say.'

'In the first place I don't even know that Lord Lexington has any Mouton '68.'

'Well, I know he has.'

'If he has, we probably sold it to him. Let me look it up.'

Mr. Clerihew dashed across to a big ledger. It was one of his prides that he could find in his books any customer's order within fifty years without a minute's delay.

'Yes,' he said on the telephone, 'we sold him ten dozen nearly twenty years ago. I should doubt if there is any of it left now.'

'Oh, yes, there is. I am sure of that. I must buy every bottle he has and I don't care what we pay for it. What would be a fair ordinary price?'

'One hundred and eighty shillings the dozen would be a fair price for the full bottles, but there are sure to be a good many ullages.'

'That doesn't matter. Offer him five or ten pounds a bottle, if necessary, provided he sells the lot.'

'But that's crazy, Ariadne. The greatest claret in the world isn't worth ten pounds a bottle, and the ullaged bottles are worthless.'

He could almost hear her stamp her foot, as she

replied impatiently: 'Please do what I ask and don't argue.'

He changed his line of argument.

'I doubt if Lord Lexington will sell at any price. He is an old man and drinks nothing himself, and I tried some months ago to persuade him to sell me his cellar. It will be quite wasted on his heir who is a whisky- cocktail-drinking young fool. He absolutely refused—said that he had been collecting rare wines all his life and meant to keep his collection until he died.'

'Will, you must persuade him somehow. You are so clever. I'm sure you can do it. It is more important than you can imagine and every minute counts. Write to him this very moment and go over and see him yourself to-morrow. He lives in East Anglia, doesn't he? As you love me, Will, do as I ask you. It is a matter of life and death.'

'Six minutes,' said the operator, cutting them off.

Mr. Clerihew was left glaring at the telephone receiver, muttering to himself: 'Of all the unreasonable and hopeless propositions. . . . If it wasn't Ariadne, I should say she was mad. . . . Why on earth this sudden mania for Mouton 1868?'

However, Ariadne's word was law. He sat down and wrote as tactful a letter as he could to Lord Lexington, saying that he had a customer who was so anxious for the Mouton '68 that he would leave his lordship to name his own price. He really could

not bring himself to offer anything so ridiculous as five or ten pounds a bottle irrespective of ullages. He added that he would be in the district next day and would venture to call at Lexington Towers.

Next morning, as he was preparing for his journey, he was rung up and given a message that Lord Lexington would like to see him as soon as possible.

'Funny,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'but it sounds promising. Perhaps his lordship is in greater need of money than I imagined.'

A tall thin butler with a whiskery, cadaverous face opened the door to him.

'His lordship will see you at once,' he said. 'He is very much upset, I'm afraid. We had a burglary last night and a lot of damage has been done.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear it,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he surrendered his hat and coat and followed the butler to Lord Lexington's study.

Lord Lexington, a pale-faced old man with silver hair and an impediment in his speech, which from time to time cut short his words and made him open his mouth and gasp like a fish out of water, was standing with his back to the fire, a crutch-handled stick in his hand.

'Clerihew,' he said, 'you can have that cellar of mine, if . . .' He gasped and made faces, until the rest of the sentence came with a rush, 'you'll pay a decent price.'

Mr. Clerihew, overjoyed, could hardly believe in his good fortune.

'I shall be pleased to offer the most generous terms.'

'It is not that I want the money, though every one is confoundedly hard up nowadays, but I'm . . .' Another gasp. 'not going to keep priceless wines for thieves to drink. What the police are doing, I don't know, but . . . the house was broken into last night.'

An ice-cold feeling of irrational misgiving crept into Mr. Clerihew's heart. He did not know what he was afraid of, but he was afraid of something.

'Your butler told me that there had been a burglary. I hope that they did not get away with much of value and that you are fully insured.'

'Insured, of course, I'm insured, but what is the use of insurance . . . when they wreck your cellar.'

At these words Mr. Clerihew gasped almost as if he was imitating his lordship. His prophetic soul quaked with apprehension.

'Money can't buy the wines they have spoilt. I don't care much about the silver . . . that can be replaced, but I'll take no further risks with my wines. You'd better go down to the cellar and see what damage they have done. That ass, Simmonds the butler, is speechless . . . with fright.'

Lord Lexington rang for the butler and Mr. Clerihew went down to the cellar with him and Inspector Dugan of the local police.

'Heartbreaking, heartbreaking,' he exclaimed, holding up his hands in pathetic horror, when he saw the devastation of that model cellar.

The Inspector watched with unsympathetic amusement the grief with which the irreparable loss of good wine filled the wine merchant's bosom. He was like Inspector Park: beer was his drink.

'The burglars,' he remarked in a matter-of-fact way, 'must have belonged to a flash gang. They went straight to his lordship's best wine. Regular connysoors they were.'

Mr. Clerihew was a prey to an unreasoning anxiety, which could have been set right by a single question, but he could not bring himself to ask it. He was content to gain time by talking to the policeman.

'Connoisseurs,' said Mr. Clerihew contemptuously, with a mild correction of the Inspector's pronunciation, 'so you think they were connoisseurs.'

After another glance at the distressing condition of that model cellar, he shook his head in determined negation.

'I do not think they were connoisseurs; in fact I'm sure they weren't. They weren't even wine-lovers.'

The Inspector smiled. 'That is a matter for you to judge. It does not concern me whether they were connoisseurs or not. It is my business to catch them.'

The scene was enough to make a true wine-lover weep. Wine bottles, not a few broken, were lying

strewn about the floor with corks tossed in all directions. Mr. Clerihew picked up a cork. It was an ancient cork, sodden with wine and broken, but the inscription was just legible.

He gave a little cry. His worst fears were fulfilled.

'Mouton '68,' he exclaimed. 'Brane Mouton as it was called, though the Rothschilds had already bought the *cru*.'

'They seem to have had a fancy for the Mouton '68,' said Simmonds, 'they went through the whole bin and opened every bottle.'

He pointed to an array of bottles standing on the butler's table. There were nineteen of them, all uncorked. Two had been emptied, sacrilegiously tossed down the thieves' throats by means of a tumbler and a tin cup that stood beside them; the rest were still full almost to the neck.

'All that's Mouton '68,' said the butler.

Mr. Clerihew pressed his hands to his forehead.

'This is more than a coincidence,' he said to himself, 'whatever does it mean? If only Ariadne had been a little more explicit, I might understand its meaning.'

He stopped and peered at the bottles.

'Scarcely an ullage among them! They must have had wonderful corks! What a loss! What a loss! And so pointless!'

'I must leave you and Simmonds,' said the Inspector, 'to cry over spilt wine. There is nothing here of any use to me. I have tested for finger-

prints, but they were wearing rubber gloves and there is not a trace.'

After the Inspector had gone, Mr. Clerihew prowled round the cellar, carefully avoiding the broken glass and the puddles of wine. At last he turned to Simmonds and said :

' This is very odd. The Inspector seems to find it quite natural, but I cannot understand it at all. Why did these strange burglars concentrate all their attention on the Mouton 1868 ? Can you explain ? '

' They took a good many bottles out of the other bins,' said Simmonds, ' but certainly the only bin they cleared is that of the Mouton.'

' I see from that label that the bin is over there in the far corner and the last they would naturally come to. They had lots of champagne ready to hand and, supposing that by some strange chance they preferred claret—what are those magnums there ? '

Simmonds bent down and peered at the dusty label.

' Château Lafite 1864,' he read.

' They were far easier to find and an even nobler wine quite apart from the magnums. It puzzles me. What do you make of it, Simmonds ? '

' It seems to me, sir, that they must have had a special fancy for that wine. You know what gentlemen are sometimes. They will have a thing they fancy, whether it is good or not. I was in service once with a nobleman who never really cared for any wine

except the cheapest cooking sherry, very nasty it was, sir, but he had to have it. The burglars were very deliberate about all they did. They took the trouble to find the cellar-book in my pantry where it is always kept and brought it down here.'

Mr. Clerihew paid little heed to the drivellings of the butler. Wrestling with a problem that seemed insoluble, he mooned about the cellar looking for a sign. Lord Lexington's model cellar was generously lighted by electricity and in his peregrinations the wine merchant noticed a dusty coat hanging on a door. The sleeve was crumpled and clumsily tucked in, and, being a tidy man, he gave it a tug to make it fall right without thinking what he was doing. The coat fell off the peg and, picking it up, he spread it out a little. Something caught his eye. With both hands, he held it up by the collar and stared at it for a full minute.

'I'm afraid I have made your coat dusty,' he said at last to Simmonds who was beginning to have doubts as to the wine merchant's sanity.

'It does not matter at all, sir. It isn't my coat. It belonged to my predecessor. He was knocked over by a motor-car and taken to hospital, very bad he was. He was there for two months and his lordship kept the place open for him. I was only here on sufferance, as you might say, sir. But when he came out, he didn't trouble to come back; he just disappeared. His lordship was very grieved at his

ungratefulness ; a foreigner he was, sir, called himself Henri Dupont. He left that coat hanging on that peg and there it has been ever since.'

Very slowly Mr. Clerihew put back on its peg a nondescript grey coat with an outside ticket pocket on the wrong side.

He drew a deep breath and asked himself a question for which he could find no immediate reply.

'What the devil does that mean ? '

Meantime, while one side of his brain was battling to piece the bits of the puzzle together, he went on talking to Simmonds, as though his whole attention was concentrated in that cellar.

'You said something about a cellar-book that the burglars had brought down here.'

'There it is, sir, under that bottle on the table, open just as they left it.'

Mr. Clerihew gingerly moved the bottle and looked at the book underneath. He read the entry :

Bin 39. Château Mouton Rothschild 1868, bought of Clerihew,

10 dozen.

There followed a record of the dates and occasions on which sundry bottles were consumed. The entries were in several hands. Above the last entry, a red line had been drawn with a note appended, 'One dozen bottles missing.'

'That is where I begin,' said the butler pointing to the line, 'as I told you, my predecessor disappeared. I am afraid he was not very strict in his ways and I

had to report to his lordship when I took over that there was a lot of wine missing.'

The one entry under the red line recorded the dispatch of two dozen bottles to A. M. Heathcote, Esq., of Chiswick Hall, leaving as calculation showed nineteen unhappy bottles for the ruthless burglars.

'So far as I can see,' said Mr. Clerihew, still talking as if he had to gain time for the consideration of the main problem, 'the burglars only drew the corks from the Mouton.'

'That's right, sir. I think they moved a lot of other bottles, I'm sure I don't know why, but they put most of them back into their bins except for a few they broke by mistake.'

'Do you believe, Simmonds, that any true wine-lover would have chosen to drink a great claret out of that tin mug or that tumbler. Fine glass makes such a difference and there were some beautiful glasses in your pantry that they might have brought down here with the cellar-book. No connoisseur would have wantonly drawn the corks of nineteen bottles of Mouton 1868 that he could not possibly drink. Yet if one wine was the same to them as another, why did they confine their vandalism to a single claret ? '

Simmonds was showing signs of restlessness and Mr. Clerihew suggested that he should return to his duties. He himself would carry out a hasty survey of the cellar, as Lord Lexington had suggested. The butler departed. Mr. Clerihew had learned from

experience that the mind often deals better with difficult problems, when consciousness is not concerned with them at all, but occupied with something totally different. So he turned with a will to the congenial task of checking the wines in the bins with the aid of the cellar-book. With an ever-watchful eye for ullages, he smacked his lips over the glorious vintages he knew so well, Lafite 1864, Margaux 1871, Latour 1875, in bottles and also in magnums, those double bottles which extend a great wine's longevity.

It was not till he had formed a pretty accurate idea of the value of the cellar that he paused and allowed his mind to concentrate on the problem of what Ariadne really wanted. One thing at least was clear. He had stumbled on the hiding place of Léon Clément the gunman and false revolutionary. It was easy enough to see how he had come there. Sir Harry had spoken of a letter recommending the ex-King's major-domo for a butler's place. He had sent on that letter to Lord Lexington. Ariadne had warned Léon, alias Henri Dupont, about his tell-tale coat, and he had left it in the cellar where it was never likely to be noticed. So far all was plain. But Mr. Clerihew did not know what to make of the fellow's disappearance, nor did he see how to connect it with Ariadne's insane passion for Mouton '68.

Suddenly an idea struck him. He left the bins and began to collect the corks which the burglars had left scattered about the place. It was not an easy

task; for the corks were ancient and, though they had done their duty nobly, had broken up under the corkscrew. They could only be pieced together and identified with patience. As soon as Mr. Clerihew had made a cork more or less complete, he set it beside one of the bottles of Mouton '68. He seemed to be playing a foolish game scarcely compatible with the dignity of a respectable and prosperous wine merchant. When at last he had proved that there was one cork for each bottle, he showed peculiar satisfaction and indulged in some odd capers. At that moment, Simmonds came down to call him for lunch and thought that he was behaving very strangely.

'It must be that,' he was crying, while he danced with delight at his own acuteness, 'it must be that. And every bottle has its cork.'

Seeing the butler's superior expression, he added pointlessly: 'They are beautiful corks, you know, all branded at the château, and there is not a cork without its bottle or a bottle without its cork.'

'Lunch,' said Simmonds in his most expressionless and official tone, 'will be ready in a few minutes.'

In the study, before lunch was announced, Mr. Clerihew told his lordship that from a casual inspection he valued the cellar at a considerable sum. Very little damage had been done except to the Mouton Rothschild '68.

'It is a pity,' said the wine merchant, 'as that is

just the wine for which my client would have gladly paid an exceptionally high price.'

'It is a curious coincidence, isn't it?'

Mr. Clerihew agreed with mental reservations and went on to make an off-hand enquiry about Simmonds' predecessor.

'A fellow named Dupont, a foreigner who had been a butler at the Court of Lusitania. He came to me with a recommendation from poor . . . Sir Harry Holman. An old friend of Sir Harry's, the Marchesa di Camerano, spoke very well of him and he certainly knew a lot about wine . . . but he proved a disappointment.'

Lord Lexington had gasped rather less than usual in imparting this information, and Mr. Clerihew spoke with sympathy of the difficulty of finding trustworthy servants in these degenerate days.

'The fellow was knocked down by a motor-car and . . . taken to hospital. At considerable . . . inconvenience to myself I kept his place open for a couple of months. You can imagine my disgust when he never came . . . back at all. After he was released from hospital, he simply disappeared . . . most ungrateful.'

'Most ungrateful,' echoed Mr. Clerihew.

'I'm afraid he was not strictly honest. Simmonds found gaps in the cellar-book . . . but that can't be helped now. Ah! there's young Richard Moseley. He used to be at the Manor House, but like most people nowadays . . . he has been unlucky and has to

sell everything up. He has a sale on at the end of the week and is here to fix up things with the auctioneers, so I asked him to lunch.'

It was noticeable that Lord Lexington's impediment of speech improved before meal times. He had always been fond of his food as well as of the drink now forbidden to him, and when he was hungry the prospect of a meal and the danger of delay made his words come more regularly.

Mr. Clerihew was absent-minded throughout lunch and sat silent for the most part, though from time to time he was drawn into the conversation by Mr. Moseley, a young man who seemed remarkably cheerful despite his pecuniary misfortunes and inclined to pull the wine merchant's leg about the commodity he sold.

'I think,' said Mr. Moseley with a twinkle in his eye, 'that a lot of nonsense is talked about wine.'

'You're a Philistine,' said Lord Lexington, 'and I believe you would rather be drinking a whisky . . . and soda than this very notable burgundy which Mr. Clerihew knows well, while I, poor devil, am reduced to . . . smelling it and drinking Vichy.'

'Not quite that, but a lot of people pride themselves on a wine palate which is just imagination. I have an uncle, Sir Arthur Clavering, who is supposed to be a great connoisseur.'

'He has a fine cellar,' said Mr. Clerihew.

'He won't drink anything but claret, and, when

he came to see me a month or so ago, I found to my horror that I hadn't a bottle of claret left in the cellar.'

'You should have sent round to me,' said Lord Lexington, 'I should have been delighted to let you have . . . a bottle or two of good claret.'

'Oh! I couldn't worry you. I just sent round to the local grocer and asked him to send me two bottles of his best claret; St. Julien they were, at 3s. 6d. a bottle. If the old man had seen the labels, he would have had a fit, but I decanted them nicely and told him that I had found two stray bottles in a bin and that they must be very old. He fell for it all right, said he had hardly ever tasted finer wine and mopped up both bottles almost by himself.'

'Even Homer nods sometimes,' said Mr. Clerihew.

'He was so pleased with that wine that I sent round to the grocer to ask if he had any more. He had ten more bottles and let me have them at the same price. I thought it would be an economy when the old gentleman came round again. I didn't think then that things would turn out as badly as they have. As it is, I suppose they'll be sold with the few dozen of port, which are all that is left of my father's cellar.'

'No use for you, Mr. Clerihew,' said Lord Lexington laughing, 'I know your palate. You wouldn't be taken in like Moseley's uncle.'

After lunch, Mr. Clerihew expressed his intention

of returning to town and leaving the complete inspection of the cellar until next week.

'To tell the truth,' he said, 'an idea has just struck me. I see from your cellar-book that you sent two dozen of the Mouton '68 to a Mr. Heathcote of Chiswick Hall. That's in Dorsetshire, isn't it?'

'Yes, I had a bet with him at the club that we should not have a majority of over a hundred at the last election.'

'Perhaps I could persuade him to part with it to the customer who has commissioned me to find him some Mouton '68 at any price.'

'You won't find that an easy job. He was frightfully pleased at winning the bet, as he hadn't had any pre-phylloxera claret for years. Besides, why not write to him? You are not going all that way yourself, are you, for a couple of dozen bottles?'

'I want to oblige my client if I possibly can and, as I'm very busy for the next few days, I should have to put it off till next week, unless I go to-day. There is a train I can just catch in town, which will bring me there after dinner. I shall stay the night at the hotel. It is so much easier to negotiate a bargain of that kind face to face than by letter or telephone.'

'I presume you know your own business best. Certainly I have never known a wine merchant display such devotion . . . to his customers. Really, Mr. Clerihew, if it was not a matter of wine which

no woman understands, I should suspect that . . . there was a woman in the case.'

Lord Lexington's jest came out with a rush after a long gaping pause, and Mr. Clerihew was a little confused, but he stuck to his purpose. Unfortunately the fates fought against him. There was an accident on the line and he arrived in London two hours late. The last train for Dorchester had gone. He fell back on the telephone and after some delay got on to Mr. Heathcote.

'My name is Clerihew, the wine merchant of Sun Dial Court.'

'I know you well by reputation. What can I do for you ?'

'I believe you have some claret, some Mouton Rothschild 1868, from Lord Lexington's cellar.'

'Yes, I won a couple of dozen from him on a bet.'

'I have a client who is exceedingly anxious to purchase some dozens of this wine. He is quite ready to pay a fancy price for it.'

'Well, he can't have any of mine. I want it myself. It is the only pre-phylloxera wine I have. As a matter of fact, I drank the first bottle to-night and it was perfect.'

'He would be ready to pay ten pounds a bottle.'

'Good heavens! is he mad? At that price I might part with a few bottles. I had no idea that any claret was worth so much.'

'If you will allow me, I will run down to-morrow morning and talk matters over with you.'

'Come and have lunch. I'll open a bottle of the famous claret, even if it is worth ten pounds a bottle. I should be proud to have the opinion of such an expert as yourself on it.'

Mr. Clerihew accepted. When he had hung up the receiver, he decided to leave nothing to chance. Nothing mattered but Ariadne's wishes. He had no doubt as to what was at stake and time was essential. The other side had been before him at Lord Lexington's. They must not anticipate him at Chiswick Hall. They had probably drawn the same conclusions from Lord Lexington's cellar-book as he had. He would take no risks and call on Mr. Heathcote first thing next morning. There should be no waiting till lunch. For Ariadne's sake a drive of a hundred and thirty miles through the dark was nothing. So Mr. Clerihew found himself at the Green Dragon in the early hours of the morning, received by a surly night porter who had been warned of his coming by telephone.

He breakfasted early, and as soon as decency would permit, drove up to the Hall. A big red-faced man of fifty was standing on the steps of the Georgian house and raving at a man-servant. It was evidently Mr. Heathcote in a bad temper. He turned round as Mr. Clerihew came up the steps and asked with scant courtesy:

'Who the deuce are you?'

'My name is Clerihew.'

'Oh! it's you, is it? You're early. I'm begin-

ning to suspect that you are responsible for my house being burgled last night.'

Mr. Clerihew was taken aback at this reception and at the word 'burgled' put out his hand to steady himself against the balustrade.

'Burgled,' he repeated in horror.

'Yes, and the devils got down into my cellar and ruined every bottle of the Mouton '68.'

'My God!' exclaimed Mr. Clerihew. He had let them get ahead of him. How could he ever face Ariadne?

'Except for that they didn't do much damage. They went off with a few silver spoons, but before they left, they drew the cork of every bottle of my best claret. It looks like spite.'

'Every bottle?' asked Mr. Clerihew, 'didn't they spare a single one?'

'Not one, and you offered me ten pounds a bottle. What's the matter with you? You look quite pleased about it.' Mr. Clerihew's expression had betrayed the ray of hope that had dawned in his heart at the news that not a bottle had escaped.

'It's a tragedy,' he said hastily, 'a tragedy and a most extraordinary thing. Do you know burglars broke into Lexington Towers only the night before last and wrecked his lordship's cellar? All his Mouton '68 has gone.'

'What an amazing coincidence! It must be the same gang. You had better tell the police sergeant about it. Here he is.'

The sergeant was impressed by the coincidence.

'They were certainly professional housebreakers,' he said, 'the job was done very neatly. It is funny that they should have this fancy for one special wine.'

'I wonder,' asked Mr. Clerihew, 'whether I might have a look at the cellar. It would interest me very much.'

'I have no objection, if the sergeant does not mind, but you cannot save that wine.'

'No, I'm afraid it can scarcely recover from the exposure to the air, but a bottle or two may be drinkable for lunch or even dinner. Sergeant, may I go down to the cellar?'

'Certainly, if you will not touch the bottles. There may be some finger-prints.'

Mr. Heathcote's cellar was smaller and more primitive than Lord Lexington's. It had a single electric light. A row of uncorked bottles stood on the floor along the wall with corks and bits of corks scattered everywhere.

'May I pick up the corks,' asked Mr. Clerihew of the sergeant.

'Certainly, if you like.'

The wine merchant began to collect the corks, piece them together and pile them in a corner.

'They are first-rate corks, though they have broken up rather badly.'

As he found each cork and pieced it together, he kept count. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one. The

main part of the twenty-second had rolled into a dark corner and was only discovered after a minute or two's search. Where was the twenty-third and last ? Mr. Clerihew groped here and there, counted all his corks again and eventually went down on hands and knees to rake under bins. His trousers and hands were covered with dirt. He seemed terribly excited about that missing cork, and the policeman began to think that he was rather mad.

'Surely, surely,' he said to himself, 'it could not have been the last bottle with the chances twenty-three to one against it.'

Suddenly he gave a whoop of triumph, such as no respectable wine merchant should ever utter.

'I've got it. Oh ! thank God.'

The missing cork was almost whole and had wedged itself into the covering of a drain in the corner.

Pardonably surprised at Mr. Clerihew's eccentric relief at the discovery of the three and twentieth cork, the policeman asked why the corks were so important.

'I am one of those odd people,' was the unconvincing reply, 'who cannot bear to leave a bit of work, however trivial, unfinished. It would have been positive pain to me to go out of this cellar, until I had collected every cork of that unhappy claret.'

The policeman raised his eyebrows and left it at that.

Mr. Heathcote who had recovered his equanimity with praiseworthy self-control begged Mr. Clerihew to stay to lunch.

'We may as well save all we can from the wreck. I take it that your client no longer wants to pay me ten pounds a bottle for my murdered wine.'

Mr. Clerihew was afraid that he wouldn't.

'Well, let's have an early lunch, if you want to get back to town, and drink as much of it as we can. Most of it must have been badly shaken up, but there ought to be a few good glasses.'

Even Mouton '68 could not persuade Mr. Clerihew to waste another hour. Ariadne's business was urgent and he must be about it. He had no clear idea as to what was to do except a compulsive notion that he must get back to London at once, and a few minutes after he had recovered the twenty-third cork, he was driving back in a reckless mood.

As he drove, he thought. The relief he had felt at the finding of the missing cork had given place to a mood of doubt. Had he entirely misinterpreted the inner meaning of Ariadne's commands? Could he be wrong? If she could not explain fully on the telephone, she might have written. Why at least had she not given him a telephone number or address where he could consult with her? Perhaps he would find a letter in London.

All Lord Lexington's Mouton '68 had been

accounted for and there was nothing to show why it was worth ten pounds a bottle to Ariadne. Yet he must be right ; for if he was wrong, what could be the meaning of these burglaries which had twice just anticipated him ? What a hopeless tangle it all was !

But was all the Mouton '68 accounted for ? Suddenly he remembered the dozen marked down in the cellar-book as missing. Did Ariadne count that dozen among those that she was ready to buy at ten pounds a bottle ? The solution must lie there. That dozen might still be at the bottom of some bin or hidden in some obscure corner of the cellar. If there was no news from Ariadne, he would go back at once to Lexington Towers and hunt high and low for that missing dozen.

There was news from Ariadne at Sun Dial Court, but her brief post-card was little help to Mr. Clerihew in his quandary, though the sight of her handwriting gave him fresh heart.

Called away. Leave purchase of wine entirely in your hands. Know you will not fail me. S. will be in town next week and will communicate.—A.

Tom and the chief clerk had looked curiously at the senior partner, when he returned with obvious signs of hurried travel and little sleep upon him, but he vouchsafed no explanation.

'Is the old man in love ?' Tom asked himself. 'He has not been the same since he and that lovely

woman he called Ariadne had their heart to heart talk. I hope he is not making a fool of himself.'

After reading the post-card again and again, Mr. Clerihew pounced upon the Almanach de Gotha—not for nothing was he purveyor of wine to all the noble houses of Europe—with a nervous violence such as he had rarely before shown in his sleepy shop. S. presumably referred to Ariadne's husband. She had never mentioned the fellow's Christian name; he had always been 'the Marchese' or 'my husband.' Yes, here he was, 'Sigismondo' with half a score more absurd Christian names to follow it. He would be in London next week and would communicate. Mr. Clerihew had not the slightest desire to communicate with Sigismondo. Anyhow there was nothing for it but to get back to Lexington Towers as soon as possible. He would not fail Ariadne.

There at any rate he had an advantage over the enemy. They could scarcely bring off a second burglary in the vague hope of stumbling across the missing dozen, even if they had noticed its existence. He wished they would try it, while he was in the house. Happily he had no need for an excuse for his return. He was expected and would have the free run of the cellar. Tom and the chief clerk exchanged glances when Mr. Clerihew dashed off again on a mysterious errand, but they were quite capable of looking after the shop without him.

The whole of the next day the wine merchant was

engaged in the inventory of Lord Lexington's cellar and worked late into the night, but not a trace of that missing dozen could he find. At last he went up to bed and put his pistol under his pillow, but there was no alarm, though he waked regularly every hour and once or twice patrolled the house to make sure that no peril threatened the cellar. Though he was really tired, he was as punctual as ever for breakfast. Lord Lexington did not come down for that meal. Simmonds was not to be engaged in conversation and complained that he had a headache and was afraid of a touch of the 'flu'. Certainly his hands were trembling when he handed the dishes and he looked very ill.

Mr. Clerihew felt that he could do no more without a little fresh air. It was the day of the Manor House sale and immediately after breakfast he looked in there casually, anxious to take his mind off a problem that he was beginning to regard as hopeless. He was fond of attending country sales, even when there was nothing that he wanted to buy. The sale had not begun and he prowled aimlessly about the almost empty rooms. The village policeman had put in an early appearance. A few dozen bottles of wine brought up from the cellar to the scullery attracted Mr. Clerihew's attention. There was some vintage port of moderate quality, a collection of miscellaneous unlabelled bottles and some bottles labelled 'St. Julien', which reminded Mr. Clerihew of Mr. Moseley's story.

'I suppose that's the claret he bought from the grocer for his uncle. Now I wonder if there is something really odd about it. Sir Arthur Clavering has a good reputation as a judge of wine. I have a good mind to taste it and see what it is like.'

He had a word with the auctioneer's clerk who did not conceal his surprise that any one, a famous wine merchant above all, should wish to taste that disreputable St. Julien, but gladly allowed Mr. Clerihew to take a bottle as a sample on the usual terms. It was too early for many people to be there and Mr. Clerihew retired to an empty upstairs room with the bottle, a wine-glass and the pocket corkscrew which never left him. It would never do for a wine merchant of his reputation to be seen tasting a bottle of claret with a grocer's label.

In guilty secrecy, he drew the cork and poured out a little wine. It was in better condition than he expected. Its colour certainly suggested an old wine. After swirling it round the glass with professional dexterity, he smelt it. An expression of amazement stole over his face.

'By Jove,' he said, 'no wonder Moseley's uncle was pleased. That is pre-phylloxera wine.'

He took a mouthful of the wine and rolled it over his tongue and palate. His eyes grew round with stupefaction. There are only two or three men in London who can name the growth and year of a great claret with any degree of certainty, and Mr. Clerihew was one of them.

'Mouton '68,' he ejaculated.

He began to doubt his judgement. Might he not be obsessed by the idea of that claret? He clutched the corkscrew and looked at the brand on the cork. There was no doubt about it. The label might be that most sinister of all grocers' labels, St. Julien: the cork was branded Brane Mouton 1868, the old name of Mouton Rothschild.

There was no chair in the room and Mr. Clerihew sat down on the window ledge with the corkscrew in his hand.

'The missing dozen,' he said to himself, 'it must be the remains of the missing dozen.'

Then it struck him that if only he had been a bit more lucky, he might have solved Ariadne's problem once and for all with a single bottle. How on earth those precious bottles came to be for sale at the Manor House under the false colours of a grocer's label was more than he could fathom for the moment, but there they were and he must have them at any cost. At the same time, he must arouse no suspicion in any one's mind. The enemy might be already on the trail. That seemed scarcely possible. He had only come across the wine by luck and his expert palate, but he had had proof of the astuteness of the other side.

So he drank that glass of 'St. Julien' with gleeful appreciation, not unmixed with humility. The back-wash of the wine when he had tilted back the bottle had set the sediment afloat and

what remained was muddy and undrinkable. Sadly he tossed the bottle with its contents into a thick shrubbery.

'What a sinful waste of good wine!'

He had decided that he needed an ally in the task he had undertaken and he arranged with the auctioneer to telephone from the house to London. The telephone was happily in a cupboard under the stairs well out of earshot of the rest of the house.

'Tom,' he said to his nephew in the tone of a general calling up his reserves, 'take my big racing car and drive hell for leather to Lexington. Put a pistol in your pocket and bring a hundred pounds in notes with you. I want your help.'

He heard Tom's whistle of surprise.

'Great Scott! uncle, what's the matter? You haven't suddenly turned gangster, have you? If you are kidnapping a beautiful lady, call me out of it, though otherwise I'm ready enough for a scrap, if it won't hurt the business.'

Mr. Clerihew cut short his irreverent nephew's persiflage.

'Don't be a fool, Tom. I'm not joking. This is dead serious, a matter of life and death. Not a word to any one, but remember every minute is precious. Mallard will look after the shop.'

Tom, who had a healthy respect for his uncle, realized that he was in no joking mood.

'All right, governor, you can rely on me. I'll be with you as fast as the car can carry me.'

It was, however, with some doubt as to the senior partner's sanity that he snatched a wad of notes from the safe, took a pistol from his uncle's drawer and, after slipping it into his pocket, dashed off for the car with no more than a word to the astonished Mallard that he would be back next day.

Having telephoned, Mr. Clerihew went off to have another look at the nine precious bottles of claret that still remained. The scullery was a largish room, and he was quite glad to see that the auctioneer's clerk had established himself there out of the way with a pile of papers, a table and a chair. There was some one there to keep an eye on that wine in case of accidents. There were two strangers in the room. One of them, who had his back to Mr. Clerihew, was slim and well-dressed, and might have been taken for some neighbour who had dropped into the sale, while the other, small, shabby and sharp-featured, might have been some local dealer.

What struck Mr. Clerihew was that the smaller was doing to those bottles of grocer's claret exactly what he had come to do. The fellow was making his fingers outrageously dirty by rubbing them over the wax that sealed the corks. He appeared to be at his first bottle when Mr. Clerihew came back. The sight of the man's occupation gave Mr. Clerihew a severe shock. A worse shock followed when he saw the face of the other man. He was thin and sandy-haired with a crooked nose.

'Gomez for a ducat,' thought Mr. Clerihew, 'the fat's in the fire.'

Gomez, if it was Gomez, caught sight of Mr. Clerihew a second later and started violently. He nudged his companion hard with an elbow and Mr. Clerihew overheard a stage whisper with a strong foreign accent: 'Look out; that's Clerihew, the wine merchant.'

The smaller man—Mr. Clerihew nicknamed him Uriah, because he seemed so ''umble'—instantly removed his finger from the bottle top and became absorbed in a mincing machine. Mr. Clerihew began to talk about the weather to the auctioneer's clerk and after a short hesitation the two men sloped out. It was at least satisfactory to think that they were as horrified at his appearance as he at theirs.

He lounged over to the mincing machine and gradually transferred his attention to some bottles of port, which lay next to the 'St. Julien'. From time to time he cast furtive glances at the claret and once or twice his sleeve passed carelessly over the tops of the bottles, carrying away cobwebs and dust. Soon, however, he perceived that the slim man whom he now definitely called Gomez had found his way into a shrubbery outside the scullery and was looking through the window. At once he concentrated all his attention on the port and a minute later walked back to the auctioneer's clerk with a depreciating remark about the quality of the wine.

The clerk nodded and smiled, and Mr. Clerihew sauntered out. He went down the passage to the right, and as he turned into the garden had a glimpse of Gomez and Uriah hurrying in from the back regions. It was a nice garden and Mr. Clerihew swiftly made his way to the shrubbery outside the scullery window, lately vacated by Gomez. He chose a point of vantage in the middle of a tall laurel clump, which sheltered him fairly well from the garden behind and the scullery window in front.

Gomez and Uriah had returned to the scullery. Gomez was deep in conversation with the auctioneer's clerk. Uriah had resumed his occupation of dirtying his fingers on the tops of the St. Julien bottles. He had roughly cleaned the wax on half a dozen of them, when he seemed to lose all interest in the job.

'He has found it,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, 'thank God it is there.'

Once more the mincing machine fascinated Uriah. Leaning over it, he was seized with a fit of coughing. Gomez and the clerk grew more and more engrossed in their conversation, until the latter got up from his chair and the two went out together. Perhaps a drink had been suggested.

Uriah was alone in the scullery, which had little attraction for the average buyer. At once he became all activity and furtive attention. Mr. Clerihew put his hand to the pistol in his hip pocket and prepared for hasty action, if occasion arose. But Uriah was

not the man to take unnecessary risks and his caution may have been confirmed by the policeman suddenly popping his head round the door and withdrawing it slowly after a portentous stare. His footsteps echoed heavily away down the passage.

This apparition of the majesty of the law had startled Uriah, but he wasted no time. His first proceedings mystified Mr. Clerihew, though he soon realized their purpose. There was a tap and sink in one corner. Uriah turned on the tap and wetted a grubby handkerchief. Then he went back to the piles of wine bottles. The Mouton 1868 camouflaged with St. Julien labels, which interested Mr. Clerihew, was Lot 597. Lot 599 next door to it consisted of a collection of odd bottles, mostly ullages with illegible labels or no labels at all. Uriah picked out a bottle from the lower tier of Lot 597, held it up to the light for a second and with his wet handkerchief removed as much of the label as was possible in his haste. Very carefully he dumped it in the bottom row of Lot 599 and replaced it in Lot 597 with a claret bottle chosen haphazard from the other lot. Exchange was evidently no robbery. Then he slipped away as quickly as he could.

'Good,' said Mr. Clerihew from behind his laurel bush, 'they are not likely to take any further precautions. It is just as well they recognized me. They are afraid that I have spotted the Mouton '68 under the St. Julien label—they have probably discovered from the clerk that I have sampled it—

but they cannot possibly guess that it is not the wine I'm after. They are just frightened that I shall buy the wine over their heads.'

None the less he hung about in the proximity of the scullery all morning. He seemed to have forgotten that his time was valuable and that the purpose of his visit was to complete the inventory of Lord Lexington's cellar. He did not even go back to Lexington Towers for lunch, but sent a note by a boy with a vague excuse. There was not a sign of Gomez or Uriah.

The sale had begun and was suspended for an hour at lunch time. Mr. Clerihew wandered into the scullery again at a time when it was empty and was busy for a few minutes among the wine bottles, but there was no one to note his activities. This duty accomplished, he spent half an hour outside the Manor House Gate, waiting for the arrival of his nephew.

The sale had just begun again, though neither Gomez nor Uriah had returned, when the big Mercedes shot smoothly up with Tom at the wheel. Mr. Clerihew jumped in and they drove once round the Manor House grounds, while he explained to Tom so much of the situation, as it was desirable that he should know.

'There is danger ahead, Tom. We have to deal with one of the gunmen who held us up at Antonelli's party. He is here with another man, a shady second-hand dealer or fence, I should say.'

'Why not call in the police and have him arrested? Surely that would be simple enough.'

'It can't be done, Tom. We must handle him ourselves. There are big political interests at stake, which make it impossible to call in the police.'

Tom shook his head doubtfully at the head of the house of Clerihew.

'All right, governor,' he said grudgingly, 'I suppose you know best.'

'What you have to do is to bid for Lot 597, nine bottles of St. Julien claret. You are to buy it at any cost; you understand me, *at any cost.*'

Tom began to have the most serious misgivings as to the senior partner's soundness of mind, but thought it better to humour him.

'What do you mean by "at any cost"? You don't propose, I presume, that I should bid the hundred pounds I have brought with me for nine miserable bottles of inferior wine.'

'I mean that you should, if necessary, bid one thousand, five thousand, ten thousand, the whole credit of the house of Clerihew for those nine bottles. Mind you, it won't be necessary, but you must understand that we must have those bottles quite literally at any cost.'

Tom pulled up and stared at his uncle. He could detect no sign of insanity, only a cold, white-faced earnestness. There was nothing for it but to promise obedience and hope for the best. It was too

late in the day to begin crossing the senior partner's will.

'All right, I'll buy those bottles, only I should like to know why.'

'As soon as you have bought them, you will go and sit beside Lot 597 with your hand on your pistol and allow no one to touch a bottle on any pretext. Remember that Gomez the gunman I have recognized—I'll point him out to you—will shoot without the slightest compunction.'

'But why should he shoot ?'

'There is one bottle of that St. Julien claret, which we both particularly want. He wants it so badly that his friend secretly moved it to another lot. I saw him do it. With equal secrecy, I moved it back to the lot to which it really belongs. If he finds out my little manœuvre in time, he is sure to turn nasty.'

'What I can't think is why you don't call in the police and have him locked up. However you must have it your own way. I'll see no one touches those bottles, once we have bought them, though I do wish you would make it a bit clearer why this gunman should want to shoot me.'

'You must leave that to me, my boy.'

Then Tom asked a question which took Mr. Clerihew's breath. He had no idea that his nephew was so observant.

'I think you might tell me this, uncle. Are we doing all this for the sake of that wonderful woman

who came to Sun Dial Court and had a heart to heart talk with you? Ariadne, I heard you call her. I remember she was at Antonelli's party. Because if we are, I'd go through fire and water to please her just for a smile.'

Mr. Clerihew hesitated and then in a burst of confidence confessed.

'As a matter of fact, Tom, I do want that bottle for her.'

'Then, governor, by God, she shall have it, if I have any say in the matter.'

The two talked no more and went into the Manor House, leaving the car in a convenient spot near the front door. Mr. Clerihew led Tom through various rooms, indicating almost imperceptibly Lot 597 in the scullery. Gomez and Uriah had returned and were duly pointed out to Tom. Then Mr. Clerihew showed his nephew the ambush in the laurel clump and bid him station himself there for half an hour and keep an eye on Lot 597 through the window.

'If there is any more hanky-panky work, do nothing, but sit tight, until I come back. I want to have a look at the village. The wine won't be up for sale till half-past four or later.'

Mr. Clerihew strolled off up the village, until he came to the one and only grocer. With a flash of enlightenment, he read the name of Simmonds above the door.

'What a fool I have been,' he exclaimed, 'that explains everything.'

He realized then that the whole problem had turned round a point which he had never even considered, the honesty of Léon Clément. Ariadne had gone bail for his loyalty ; yet he had accepted without an internal protest the butler's assertion that his predecessor had stolen Lord Lexington's wines. Of course Simmonds himself had been the thief and had thrown the blame on the man who had disappeared so mysteriously, kidnapped probably or murdered. He had disposed of the wine for a consideration to the grocer who was no doubt some kind of relation. That was what had happened to the missing dozen of Mouton '68. The grocer had camouflaged that priceless wine with St. Julien labels and sold it at 3s. 6d. the bottle to Mr. Moseley. What a blind fool he had been not to think of all this before !

He went into the shop and found a girl behind the counter. The purchase of chocolate, a delicacy which he heartily detested, served as a gambit to a little gossip. He enquired casually whether the young lady serving him was a Miss Simmonds. She replied in the affirmative.

'Then surely you will be a relation of Mr. Simmonds, the butler at the Towers.'

'Yes,' she said with some hesitation, 'he is a cousin of father's.'

'Susan,' roared a deep and angry voice from behind the shop, 'come 'ere. Didn't I tell you, you wasn't to gossip.'

A man with a square and very hairy face and a club foot stumped in behind the counter.

'And what do you want ?' he said rudely.

Mr. Clerihew was politeness itself. 'It is only that Mr. Simmonds, the butler at the Towers, told me that you had some good wine . . .'

At the word 'wine', the grocer burst into a fury.

''E didn't tell you nothing of the kind, you bloody liar. You're another of 'em, are you ? Well, you can just tell 'im what sent you that it ain't no good any longer to come threatening me and Frank and blustering about what 'e'll do. If 'e comes again, 'e'll get a thick ear. Frank 'ave made a clean breast of it and told 'is lordship all about the wine, and 'is lordship says 'e won't take no proceedings. Tell 'im to stick that in 'is pipe and smoke it, 'im with the crooked nose, the furriner.'

'I gather,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'that Frank is your cousin the butler.'

'You knows that as well as I do,' said the grocer, 'and the quicker you gets out of my shop, the better.'

'So sorry I can't stay,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he retired, leaving his slab of chocolate on the counter and letting the door slam behind him with an angry tinkling of a spring bell.

He was overcome by the cleverness of the enemy and his own slowness. They had been before him all the time. While he had been playing blind man's buff in the cellar, Gomez and Co. had guessed at

once who was responsible for the missing dozen and bullied the collusive butler and grocer into confessing that the former had stolen the wine and thrown the blame on his predecessor, and that the latter had sold it to the Manor House with a St. Julien label. What were the chances that they would get ahead of him yet in the last lap ?

In considerable anxiety, he trotted back to the Manor House. Tom was still ensconced in his laurel clump and reported that all was well. Gomez and Uriah had kept away from the scullery and no one had been near Lot 597. The auctioneer was putting up Lot 449 and Mr. Clerihew saw that he would have ample time to run over to the Towers and make his excuses to Lord Lexington. Leaving Tom still on sentry-go, he drove up to the big house and found his lordship propped on his stick in the porch, taking the air.

'Is the whole world going mad ?' asked his lordship with pardonable exasperation, 'you come all this way to look over my cellar and before you have half-finished . . . disappear for the whole day. You come back with an enormous car . . . which I suppose you have stolen. You hadn't it . . . last night anyhow.'

Lord Lexington's struggle with the impediment in his speech became alarming and he gaped desperately for a whole minute.

'That fellow Simmonds has gone off his head too.

Came and confessed that he had . . . been stealing my wine, not the foreign chap at all. He had some cock and bull story that some one was . . . threatening him with the police. I told him to pack up and go . . . prosecuting him wouldn't bring back my wine. I shall never have another butler, so the sooner you . . . finish off that cellar of mine, the better.'

Mr. Clerihew's excuses were far from coherent. He pleaded extreme haste and rushed off to pack his bag, while his lordship was still gaping in the middle of a question.

He was back at the Manor House with twenty lots to spare. Tom came out of his hiding-place and kept a watch on the scullery door, but no one went in. Mr. Clerihew, who was really very tired, found a seat in a corner of the drawing-room where the auction was going on and dropped into a half doze. Half awake and half asleep, he pondered over the crowd that surrounded him. There were people, well-dressed with a touch of country dowdiness, neighbours who had dropped in to see the breaking-up of a home which they had known and visited. There were farmers, shopkeepers from the village and yokels with their families, shy spectators rather than buyers, though ready to purchase anything, however ugly and useless, if it went cheap enough. Little knots of dealers, men and women with Jewish noses and avaricious hands, gathered in corners and talked business in undertones broken by loud laughter.

There was no shyness about them, no sentiment. They passed a great part of their lives in other people's derelict homes, and felt no compunction at making merry like a victorious army in a private house which had been a few days before its master's castle.

How dull and unlovely they all looked, thought Mr. Clerihew sleepily. Romance, the pulse of adventure were not for such as they. Yet did any of them look duller, less romantic, more prosaically respectable than the retiring little wine merchant who sat there half asleep with a pistol in his pocket in the midst of a wild adventure? At middle age he had come to an experience which had made life a golden miracle, his meeting with Ariadne. Such an experience might have fallen or might fall to the lot of the dullest-looking person there. Behind the shabbiest exteriors, men and women were all wrestling with the problems of life and death, the bravest of brave adventures.

He was awakened from his reverie by the auctioneer's nasal voice, announcing Lot 597, nine bottles of St. Julien claret. Tom was standing at the other side of the room in readiness to bid, as if he had no connexion with Mr. Clerihew. Gomez and Uriah had seats under the auctioneer's nose.

At first no one seemed to take any interest in that fatal claret which had given Mr. Clerihew so many toilsome days and sleepless nights. One half-

hearted bid from a beer-drinking yeoman in a corner suggested that it might be worth nine shillings. With praiseworthy self-control, Tom allowed the auctioneer's eye to roam around the room, before he raised the bidding to ten shillings. Mr. Clerihew's heart was beating far faster than it had at Antonelli's party, just before he shot out the light and tackled the redoubtable Erricone. Here there was no immediate prospect of violent action to relieve his emotions. Neither Gomez nor Uriah seemed to take the smallest interest in Lot 597, but they might come to life at any moment, if they had spotted his manœuvre. Desultory bidding went on for a few minutes. A man with a grog blossom on his nose offered a pound, some one else a guinea, and Tom who was growing bored with shilling rises, when he had a hundred pounds in his pocket, snapped out twenty-five shillings. It seemed to Mr. Clerihew that the auctioneer's appeals for a higher bid took hours and hours, but at long last Lot 597 was knocked down to Tom for twenty-five shillings.

Tom went out at once to keep armed guard over his purchase in the scullery. Mr. Clerihew had a moment of giddiness, but he was himself again by the time the auctioneer had reached Lot 599, fifteen miscellaneous bottles, mostly ullaged. No one seemed anxious to offer a home to those unhappy bottles, until after a long pause, Uriah offered ten shillings. Mr. Clerihew was feeling

in merry mood and maliciously inclined. He waited till the last moment and raised the bid to one pound.

His interference caused consternation in the enemy camp. Gomez and Uriah put their heads together in a whispered council of war, and the former looked back several times in the wine merchant's direction.

'Thirty shillings,' said Uriah.

'Two pounds,' replied Mr. Clerihew.

There followed a duel which mystified the auctioneer. Sometimes Gomez, sometimes Uriah, scowling fiercely, would raise Mr. Clerihew's bid, and he with a broad grin on his face would cap it, until fifteen nameless and valueless bottles were going to the wine merchant for the absurd price of ten pounds. Gomez, who made no attempt to hide his anger and perplexity, went up to ten guineas. With a chuckle Mr. Clerihew let it go and Lot 599 was knocked down for ten guineas.

Mr. Clerihew and Tom entered into formal possession of Lot 597 almost at the same time as Gomez and Uriah took over Lot 599. The wine merchant looked over the bottles and re-arranged them.

'It's all right,' he said, nodding to Tom, 'take those four bottles out to the car first. I'll cover the rear.'

Tom took the indicated bottles carefully between his fingers, and Mr. Clerihew walked sideways behind

him with one hand in his side pocket and an eye to the rear. Gomez and Uriah were too busy picking out a bottle from Lot 599 to notice his tactics. Tom stowed away the bottles under the front seat with delicate care. His uncle sat down at the wheel, started up the motor and turned to face the Manor House door squarely with his hand still under his coat.

'We have got the only bottle that really matters,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'it might be wiser to leave them the others, though it goes against the grain, as in spite of the labels, four of them are really Mouton 1868.'

'Mouton '68,' shouted Tom, 'I'm not going to leave four bottles of that behind. I'll save them, if I die for it.'

He dashed up the steps and his uncle called after him:

'Be careful. Remember that Gomez will not hesitate to shoot, if he has discovered the trick we have played upon him.'

In less than a minute Tom was back, carrying the bottles and laughing heartily.

'They found out just as I went out of the door. They have started a glorious row with the auctioneer, swearing that some one has tampered with Lot 599.'

'So I did,' said Mr. Clerihew, letting in the clutch, 'but only after they had tampered with Lot 597. It was smart of them to discover so quickly, but they

are smart ; there's no mistake about that. There is not so much difference as one might expect between the new sealing wax on the bottle I wanted and the original wax on the other bottles, and that bottle of perfectly good Mouton '68 I left them in its stead—I hated letting such scoundrels have even a single bottle of such wine—looked exactly like it when I had finished rubbing at the label with my handkerchief.'

The car had gathered speed and was doing sixty along the main road.

'I haven't an idea what you are talking about,' said Tom.

'All the better for you, my boy,' said Mr. Clerihew suddenly taking two corners at an alarming speed. 'It is enough for you to know that we have a gang of criminals after us. If they catch us, we shall have to fight for it, but I don't mean them to catch us. We have got to drive for our lives. . . .'

'And for Ariadne ?' asked Tom with a malicious smile.

Mr. Clerihew seemed not to hear, but he did drive. Tom felt rather as if they had been threading the Maze of Hampton Court by the time they brought up at a small inn in a tiny village in the loneliest part of Essex.

'We are safe here, I think,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'but all the same I take no risks.'

They drank beer at dinner and in front of them,

swathed in brown paper, lay the mysterious bottle of Mouton '68. The nondescript ullaged bottle which Uriah had left them as a memory of Lot 599 was after one contemptuous sniff presented to the landlord.

That night Mr. Clerihew slept with his pistol on his bed-table and a very hard and lumpy bottle of claret under his pillow.

CHAPTER VI

ST. JULIEN

PUNCTUALLY to the minute next morning, Mr. Clerihew walked into his shop, just after the shutters had been taken down, exactly as if he had come up by his usual suburban train. It seemed a mere accident that he had arrived in the big Mercedes. He was looking rather pale and tired, but there was a smile of triumph on his face. In his hands he bore a bottle wrapped in brown paper with the same air of self-satisfaction as a child carrying down its first prize from the headmaster's table. He held the ace of trumps, the Luck of Lusitania, which Léon had so ingeniously concealed in the cork of a bottle of Lord Lexington's Château Mouton Rothschild 1868. It was ready to be played when Ariadne gave the word. Ariadne would be pleased and nothing else mattered.

Tom, the junior partner, brought up the rear with a touch of the swagger of the Tenth Legion which was neither elated by victory nor cast down by defeat. He had a pistol in his pocket and was ready to fight to the death for the parcel which his uncle carried. He had not the vaguest idea why it was so precious, but like many another young man

he had fallen in love with Ariadne at first sight and his uncle had admitted that Ariadne had inspired the rape of the bottle. His romantic passion had little hope even of kissing her hand.

> Car c'est chose divine
> D'aimer, lorsqu'on devine
> Rêve, invente, imagine,
>   A peine.

Tom's opinion of the senior partner had gone up by leaps and bounds, since Ariadne had talked to him, 'as Solomon talked to a butterfly or a man may talk to his friend.' It had reached the point of admiration, after watching his unwearying vigilance over a vulgar bottle which seemed to have attained the significance of the Holy Grail. He knew that his uncle had been whirled from pillar to post and had passed sleepless nights in the quest. Yet he had driven as if he had been inspired either by heaven or hell, had been up and about before any one in the inn had opened an eye and come back methodically to his shop as if wild adventures and forlorn hopes were a part of a wine merchant's normal routine.

Mallard, the chief clerk, stepped forward to meet them, chirping about some important order which had come in the previous day after Mr. Tom's departure. Mr. Clerihew waved him away. Putting his priceless parcel under one arm, he glanced at his letters. The inspection lasted less than a minute. Not an envelope was addressed in that harum-scarum

hand which could open the gates of Paradise. It was possible that one of those letters might mean that the Marchese, that Sigismondo, was communicating, but Mr. Clerihew was damned if he would take orders from Ariadne's aristocratic husband without Ariadne's express orders.

'Have the bottles brought in from the car,' he said briefly to Tom.

Seven bottles were borne in by a cellarman who, regardless of their grocer's labels, treated them with that maternal solicitude which the House of Clerihew required from its employees in their dealings with any wine.

Then Mr. Clerihew gave his chief clerk the shock of his life.

'Mallard,' he said, 'go out to some grocer's and buy me the cheapest bottle of St. Julien you can find. Take a shilling or two from the petty cash.'

The chief clerk gasped. For some unexplained reason, some of the most execrable wine sold in England masquerades under the St. Julien label, and cheap grocer's St. Julien was likely to be such stuff as had never crossed the threshold of Clerihew's in all the centuries of its existence. However he knew his master well enough to obey without question and came back with a bottle which he put down on the stone tasting slab with every sign of disgust.

'It cost three and three,' he said tersely.

Mr. Clerihew retired into the inner room. Under one arm he carried the bottle for which he had been ready to pledge the whole credit of his firm, under the other the three and threepenny St. Julien. Tom followed with the dignity of a bodyguard and a boy brought a collection of corks, a corkscrew, a sponge and hot water. The precautions which Mr. Clerihew had devised were complicated and needed delicate manipulation.

At last he came out with a bottle which to judge from the label had been bought at the Manor House sale, and a handbag. The bottle, with its torn and disgraceful label, he set carefully on the upper shelf of the big safe which was the home of the Clerihew ledgers and slammed the door. Then he said a word to Tom and the two went out together with the handbag to the car which was still waiting. Half an hour later they returned and Mr. Clerihew settled down to go seriously through his correspondence.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Clerihew looked at the outside of his letters for quite a long time. He was engaged in a meditation which should have been an internal conflict. It ought to have been highly disturbing to a respectable wine merchant's conscience to know that he was in possession of stolen property. Yet Mr. Clerihew gloried in that knowledge. Legally the Luck of Lusitania belonged beyond all question to Antonelli. It was a terrible thing that a model citizen should make light of the law. None the less,

Mr. Clerihew accepted Ariadne's point of view as if it had been graven on the tables of stone. The ruby morally belonged to the ex-King of Lusitania. It would be immoral to hand it over to a violinist who would either throw it into the sea or else be driven out of his senses by the trouble it would bring him.

And what of the ancient House of Clerihew, the business that had been handed down as a sacred trust from father to son for centuries ? It had been almost a religion to Mr. Clerihew, until Ariadne came back into his life. Now he would have sold Australian burgundy or even British sherry in Sun Dial Court without a murmur, if she had desired it. He might be arrested as a receiver of stolen goods or whatever the charge might be, and the House of Clerihew would be shaken to its foundations, perhaps irretrievably ruined. Well, if it was, the business was made for him, not he for the business. It might be a bit rough on the junior partner, but Tom must just take the rough with the smooth. He had had an easy time of it, stepping into a ready-made job and a ready-made income. With youth on his side, he could survive the cataclysm of the House of Clerihew. Probably it would do him a lot of good.

So Mr. Clerihew argued over his letters with his sluggish conscience and it is regrettable that the lazy creature scarcely troubled to point out to him the error of his ways. Conscience was banished by a

smile that broadened into laughter when he came across a letter marked 'Private and Confidential.'

SIR,—We beg to warn you against further interference in matters which do not concern you. It is unbecoming that a merchant of your reputation should be a receiver of stolen goods. The possession of this property, you will find, entails serious inconveniences. You will therefore be well-advised to hand it over to its rightful owners without delay. We need not dwell on the unpleasant consequences of a refusal. Our representative will call on you at any time that you may appoint to relieve you of your responsibility. An appeal to the police would be prejudicial only to yourself, as he is outside their jurisdiction. We will ring you up at three o'clock this afternoon to make the necessary arrangements.

This singular epistle was signed with an illegible scrawl.

'The scoundrels don't let the grass grow under their feet,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he chuckled over the solemn wording of the letter, 'anyhow I'll give them a run for their money.'

Antonelli happened to be among the earliest visitors at Sun Dial Court that morning. His latest craze was a passion for vodka and the object of his whirlwind visit was a demand for certain rare and expensive forms of that potent spirit, known in Paris as 'Toutes les Fleurs' and 'Le Bison'. 'Every Flower' and 'The Bison' had been much sought after before the war by the vodka connoisseur and had disappeared from the world with the revolution.

Mr. Clerihew, who loathed such fiery, heady drinks, snorted with contempt.

'I don't sell methylated spirit and never shall, no matter what it is called. There is no such thing as a vodka fit to be drunk by a civilized man.'

Antonelli taunted the wine merchant with lamentable ignorance, danced about the shop gesticulating and repeated again and again his conviction that only those forgotten spirits called 'Toutes les Fleurs' and 'Le Bison' could satisfy the passionate yearning for vodka that devoured him.

With a malicious smile that twitched the corners of his mouth, Mr. Clerihew said to the violinist:

'Now I have just bought something really good, a few bottles of Château Mouton Rothschild 1868. I had great difficulty in securing them. You really ought to have *one* bottle, but I'll never let a man who raves about vodka have it.'

Mr. Clerihew threw a slight emphasis on the 'one bottle'.

'What's the use of one bottle of claret to me? I wouldn't take it as a gift.'

'Thou hast spoken.'

'If you won't find me that vodka, I shall go elsewhere.'

Antonelli bounced out of the shop in quest of 'Toutes les Fleurs' and 'Le Bison'.

Just before lunch, an unexpected visitor came in in the person of Jack Lancaster. He brought a

verbal invitation to his wedding with Dora Griffiths and an order for champagne for the occasion. The sight of him brought back to Mr. Clerihew's mind the thought of the man with the crooked nose, who had bought a bottle of Sir Harry's Indigestion Mixture and whose description tallied so closely with that of Gomez. He was convinced that Lancaster, Dora and that man had been associated in Sir Harry's murder.

'Lancaster has come from Gomez to spy out the land,' was Mr. Clerihew's first thought.

The wine merchant made Mr. Lancaster welcome with exceptional heartiness and even expressed pleasure at the order for champagne, though his business mind was wondering what the chances were that it would never be paid for. Miss Dora's ten thousand would not go far, especially if she and her fiancé were in the hands of Gomez and his friends who would bleed them white without a scruple.

Mr. Lancaster was exceedingly friendly.

'I was saying to Dora yesterday that I had not seen you since Antonelli's party and had never had a chance of thanking you for the wonderfully good turn you did us all, when you tackled the gunman. I was hoping you would come and have lunch with me, before we are married. You'll be able to act chaperone to Dora. We are rather old-fashioned in our respect for the conventions.'

Mr. Clerihew raised his eyebrows a little at this strange assertion.

'A long time ago, Sir Harry made me a present of some wine. It was in the days before we quarrelled. It has occurred to us that in these hard times we had better sell it and make what we can out of it. There is some fine sherry, some Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84.'

The mention of the last wine sent a cold shudder through Mr. Clerihew. Again he saw Sir Harry lying dead in his chair with an expression of horror and amazement on his face. For a moment he marvelled at Lancaster's impudence in speaking of it, until he remembered that not a word had been said in public as to the wine in which Sir Harry was supposed to have taken the poison. Sir Harry had never given him either Lafite '74 or Sandeman '84. They were wines he was thinking of buying just before he died. Once again they had been mentioned together and still Mr. Clerihew could not remember why they were associated in his mind. All this flashed through his brain in an instant.

'Noble wines,' he said quietly, 'but everything depends on their condition.'

'It doesn't seem much good keeping them any longer, as I really cannot afford to drink wine. Besides I don't want to tempt those burglars who seem to specialize in stealing fine wines. I see you were up at Lord Lexington's after the burglary there.'

'Who told you that?' asked Mr. Clerihew sharply.

'It was in one of the papers. You were mentioned as having bought all the wines the burglars had left. You will have to look out yourself that they do not break into your cellars.'

The answer came pat enough, but Mr. Clerihew was not quite satisfied. Lancaster was not a good actor, and there had been a hint in his tone that his words meant more than they said. Mr. Clerihew made a sign to his nephew and called him aside.

'I want to try an experiment on that fellow Lancaster. I'm going to open the safe in front of him. My back will be turned and I shan't be able to study his face without giving the trick away. Watch him closely; just notice if he shows any particular surprise at what he sees inside.'

Mr. Clerihew's conversation gradually led his customer near the safe. He was talking of Lafite '74 and its reputation in the early 'nineties.

'To show you what people thought of it, I'll find a contemporary letter in one of our letter books. It is in the safe.'

Still talking garrulously, Mr. Clerihew bent down and with a key attached to a chain opened the safe door. Mr. Lancaster, bored and anxious to escape, had a sudden vision of a bottle with a grocer's St. Julien label, smudged and mutilated, standing all by itself on the upper shelf; the lower

shelf was filled with ancient ledgers and letter books.

Mr. Lancaster had begun a sentence, but the words were cut short in his mouth. He gulped twice and stepped sharply back. Mr. Clerihew had no need to ask Tom whether Mr. Lancaster had seen something to surprise him. With a quick movement of vexation, Mr. Clerihew slammed the safe door, as a man may cover a love letter he is writing, when he feels that some one is looking over his shoulder.

'Oh, I forgot, the letter won't be there.'

Mr. Lancaster recovered himself and said in a fairly even voice: 'I see you keep a bottle of wine in the safe. Whatever is it? It must be something very precious.'

'Only a curiosity,' said Mr. Clerihew mildly, 'only a curiosity.'

He switched back to the question of the wedding champagne and soon said good-bye to his customer, whose last words repeated the invitation to lunch.

'You really must come and taste those wines. I'll fix it up with Dora.'

'Sandeman '84,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'is a temptation that I cannot resist.'

The promised telephone call came punctually at three o'clock.

'I take it,' said a peremptory voice with more than a suspicion of a foreign accent, 'that you have received our letter. What are you doing about it? You had better make up your mind at once.'

Mr. Clerihew hated being ordered about by any one except Ariadne, but on this occasion he was surprisingly meek.

'You, I suppose, are the person who is under the impression that certain property he claims has come into my hands.'

'Put it that way, if you like.'

'My shop closes at six o'clock. If at a quarter past six this evening, your representative pushes against the door in the side passage, he will find that it is open. There will be no one in the shop and the safe will be unlocked. If your representative can find in the safe anything that he would like apart from the ledgers, he is welcome to take it. It does contain on the top shelf a bottle of wine labelled St. Julien.'

'Do you guarantee that he will have a fair deal? As I have told you, our representative has no reason to fear the police, but complications would arise, if they were called in.'

'I guarantee nothing except that the police will not be there. I may as well warn you that, if your representative carries his enquiries any further than the safe, his blood will be on his own head. I shall be in a position to see without being seen and shall have a pistol handy. As you know, I'm not a bad shot.'

Mr. Clerihew's correspondent seemed to be considering the situation.

'I suppose that will do,' he said at last, 'you give

me your word of honour that there is no police trap.'

'I give you my word of honour.'

'Our man will come in at a quarter past six, take what he wants and go away without being interfered with.'

'I certainly shall not interfere with him.'

'Remember that if we don't get what we want, your life is not worth a day's purchase.'

'That's as may be. Threatened men live long. You won't find me so easy to poison as Sir Harry.'

Mr. Clerihew heard the man at the other end of the wire gasp and sputter.

'What the devil do you mean ?'

'Oh, nothing. I have no proof—yet, but don't forget that in this country murderers are hung. Anyhow I shall expect your representative at a quarter past six to-night.'

Mr. Clerihew hung up the receiver.

'I couldn't resist it,' he said to himself, 'but that thrust was a bit risky. If it scares them off, it will spoil everything.'

About an hour later, Mr. Clerihew's shop received an unexpected honour. Before the revolution, the Lusitanian Ministry in London, taking its cue from the Lusitanian Court where Ariadne had once reigned supreme, had always bought its wine at Sun Dial Court. The representatives of the Lusitanian Republic had naturally broken away from

such an aristocratic tradition and, if they bought wine—Mr. Clerihew suspected that they kept up their hearts on absinthe and rectified spirit—it was not from the House of Clerihew.

The senior partner paid little attention when an obvious foreigner came in. Tom could deal with a man who wore a too new and ill-fitting frock coat, baggy trousers and a top hat of uncouth shape. After the customer had done his business, paid and gone his way, Tom stopped at his uncle's table and remarked: 'We are going up in the world. Even the Bolshies cannot do without us. That was the first attaché of the Lusitanian Ministry.'

'My word,' said Mr. Clerihew with a twinkle in his eye, 'he didn't ask for Mouton '68 or St. Julien, did he?'

'No,' said Tom stolidly, 'he didn't want claret. He ordered a case of champagne and I made him pay on the nail for it.'

'Good,' grunted Mr. Clerihew, thinking to himself that he would not be altogether surprised if they saw something more of the first attaché of the Lusitanian Ministry that evening.

At six o'clock, according to his habit, he supervised the closing of his shop. The clerks and cellarmen departed, leaving Tom and the senior partner alone in the building. Mr. Clerihew spent a minute or two switching lights on and off, until he had arranged the *mise-en-scène* to his satisfaction. The safe with its door open was the centre of a circle of

light. Any one coming in through the side door which was unlocked would be given confidence by finding himself in the shadow: at the same time he would be able to see nothing of the dark passage between the shop and the inner room, where Mr. Clerihew and Tom were to be posted. The pistols had been restored to a drawer in the inner room and Mr. Clerihew took them out again.

'I do not anticipate any trouble,' he said, as he handed one of them to his nephew, 'but it is as well to be prepared.'

As he spoke, he heard a sound in the shop.

'Good heavens,' he exclaimed, 'they are before their time.'

With Tom behind him, he stepped swiftly and quietly down the passage towards the shop. He stopped short in the deepest shadow. Whoever it was could have wasted no time, after pushing open the side door; for he was already bending down by the safe and transferring a bottle from the upper shelf to a small handbag. He was little more than a bundle of motoring clothes. He was wearing a leather coat with a racing helmet and the lower part of his face was muffled in a scarf. He had come and gone like a ghost.

'By Jove,' said Mr. Clerihew, less to Tom than himself, 'that was sharp work. Our friends the enemy take no chances. To judge from their representative's manner, they were not telling the exact truth when they said he had nothing to fear

from the police. I couldn't catch a glimpse of his face, but there was something vaguely familiar about his gait. Who the deuce was it ?'

He leant against the door between the passage and the shop with his hands over his eyes, trying to remember who had that sideways movement of the shoulders when he walked. Suddenly he remembered and shivered with an ominous foreboding for which he could not account.

'Damn it all,' he said to Tom, 'I believe my plans have gone wrong. Blast the suspicious fool. If I'm right he has been hoist with his own petard. Don't move, but wait and see if we do not have a second visitor.'

He glanced at the clock. It was just after ten minutes past six and they waited silently, until the hand had passed the quarter. Two more minutes of silence and Mr. Clerihew was beginning to believe that he was wrong, when the side door opened. The man who came in boldly attempted no concealment. Without pausing a moment, he passed quickly from the shadow into the light and looked into the safe. Evidently what he didn't see there surprised him, but he retained his self-control and called out aloud, 'Mr. Clerihew,' looking towards the passage. Mr. Clerihew came out at once, keeping his hand on the pistol in his pocket. He had recognized the first attaché of the Lusitanian Ministry.

'Mr. Clerihew,' said the attaché quietly, 'I saw the lights were up in your shop and as I happened to

be passing, I called in to ask you to send me two dozen of that champagne instead of the dozen I ordered this afternoon.'

'Don't be alarmed,' said Mr. Clerihew reassuringly, 'there is no need to put yourself to any extra expense. I've kept my word. There are no police here. But you have arrived too late. Another messenger came a few minutes ago and went off with that bottle of St. Julien in which your friends take a special interest.'

'Excuse me, but I have no idea what you are talking about. I only called in about the champagne I ordered to-day.'

'Turn up the lights,' said Mr. Clerihew to Tom.

All the lights were switched on and the visitor could see that there was no one on the premises except Mr. Clerihew and his nephew.

'This is my nephew,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'and you can talk quite freely in front of him. You needn't be afraid of a trap. I have carried out my part of the bargain. As you have seen, the side door and the door of the safe were open. It is not my fault if you let other people get in before you. I give you my word of honour that a quarter of an hour ago there was a bottle labelled St. Julien in the upper shelf of that safe.'

The attaché was taking no risks.

'I have no idea what you are talking about.'

'All right,' said Mr. Clerihew crossly, 'if you are not interested, I'm sure I don't care. I take no

orders after my shop is closed ; so if you want an extra dozen of champagne or prefer to countermand what you have ordered, let me know in business hours.'

'You'll regret this, Mr. Clerihew,' murmured the attaché under his breath, so that Tom could not hear, as he went out.

'Don't mention it,' said Mr. Clerihew cheerfully, closing the door behind him and locking it.

'I say, governor,' said Tom, 'this is very exciting, but what is it all about ? Why do mysterious men sneak in here after closing hours and look in the safe for a bottle of three and threepenny St. Julien ? Are we adding bootlegging to robbery ? '

'I'm afraid, my lad, that my plans have gone wrong. A sense of humour and a love of the dramatic have led me astray. I ought to have told Mr. Gomez and his friends that they can whistle for the . . . for what they want. Instead I tried to play a practical joke on them. I dug a pit and I'm afraid that the wrong people have fallen into it. I have a notion that the man, muffled up like a villain of an Italian opera, who nipped in and stole a march on your friend the attaché, was no less a person than the hereditary Lord High Chamberlain of the King of Lusitania. I hope he will be pleased with what he has got. It is his own damned fault for not trusting me.'

'And who may he be ? ' asked Tom.

'That doesn't concern you. What does concern us is that we shall have to be careful, if we do not wish to die a sudden and violent death, until I have got into touch with the Bolshies again and told them just why neither knife, pistol nor poison will help them get what they want. There is one thing about it; they will have to use dynamite to force a way into our cellars.'

It was not until the next day that Mr. Clerihew learnt how badly his plans had gone astray. An evening paper announced that the body of a well-dressed man, stabbed to the heart, had been found in the Park and that the victim had been identified as the Marchese di Camerano, hereditary High Chamberlain of the Lusitanian Court. The police suspected a political assassination and were on the track of a gang of foreign criminals.

Mr. Clerihew turned pale.

'It's all my fault. My silly joke has killed Ariadne's husband, but how could I tell that he would not trust me to be loyal to her? How shall I ever face her? How will she take it?'

He hardly confessed even to himself that she had not professed any very deep love for her husband. She had said very little about him. For the life of him, Mr. Clerihew could not prevent his mind from playing with certain possibilities that might arise from Ariadne's freedom.

'A shopkeeper,' he said with a sigh, 'can never mean anything to a great lady. She will devote the

rest of her life to the King and, if I can help her, I shall be a happy man.'

That evening he was rung up by Ariadne and peremptorily summoned to a West End hotel. She received him in a private sitting-room. There were three deep clefts between her brows, and she was pale and haggard, but Mr. Clerihew thought as beautiful as ever.

'O Will,' she said, holding out her hands, 'I have just escaped from Lusitania and come back to this —to find Sigismondo murdered and all our plans wrecked.'

'Ariadne,' said Mr. Clerihew in horror, 'you have not been back to Lusitania with a price on your head.'

'I had to go,' said Ariadne wearily, 'and they nearly got me. If it hadn't been for me, they would have already started the counter-revolution without a hope of success, but I cannot be everywhere at once and now everything has been ruined.'

'Ariadne, it was all my fault. I can never forgive myself.'

'It was my fault really, Will. I ought to have known that I was asking you for the impossible.'

'It's not that at all. I tried to be too clever, and the Marchese never communicated with me. If only he had, I would have explained the whole thing to him and he would be alive now.'

'He didn't communicate with you?' said Ariadne in surprise, 'then what did he mean when . . .

Oh, I ought to have thought of that. He was frightfully suspicious of every one who was not nobly born. Poor Sigismondo, his whole life was ruined by his insane worship of birth—he of all people! the irony of it!'

Ariadne laughed bitterly and Mr. Clerihew felt that she was steering into waters too deep for him.

'He gave no sign of life; so I did what I thought best.'

'I always knew that it was not fair to mix you up in all this shady business of plotting, but you did insist, didn't you? A respectable merchant has no right to be entangled with stolen jewels and hare-brained conspiracies.'

'But that has nothing to do with it. I thoroughly enjoyed all that. It was only when I tried to be clever that things came to grief.'

'Tell me how it all happened. Remember I know nothing. I saw the police, but all they could tell me was that poor Sigismondo had been found early this morning dead in the Park. They seemed to have no idea who had murdered him, but I told them all right. I wanted them to arrest that gang of cut-throats at the Lusitanian Ministry, but they could only mumble about diplomatic immunity.'

'I'm afraid it is a long and complicated story.'

'You had better start at the beginning. First of all, did you buy Lord Lexington's claret?'

'At last, after a long chase, I got hold of the one bottle that mattered.'

'You got it! I was sure you would, but how then did the others cheat you?'

'Cheat me? They haven't cheated me. I cheated them. That's the trouble.'

'Now I understand. You discovered what was in the cork of the bottle and were going to give it back to Antonelli. I knew you wouldn't have lost it from fear. I couldn't expect you to keep stolen property even for me. But how did Gomez and his people get hold of it?'

Mr. Clerihew looked at Ariadne open-mouthed. He could not understand why she should be making excuses for him to herself.

'But what do you mean?' he began.

'Oh, you had better see this. It is a note from Sigismondo written last night, which I found here.'

DEAR VITTORIA,—I shall take the Luck to-night or die in the attempt. Don't trust Clerihew. He has failed us. S.

Mr. Clerihew read it through slowly.

'Had the Marchese some way of knowing what Gomez and his friends were doing?'

'Yes, he managed to buy one of them about a week ago. Of course when they finished off poor old Léon, we were left utterly in the dark, but he wrote to me a few days ago saying

that for the future we should know all their secrets.'

'That accounts for it. I'm terribly sorry about the Marchese, but it really was not altogether my fault.'

'Well, it is all over now. He is dead and I suppose by this time the Luck is well on its way to Lusitania. Farewell to all hope of a counter-revolution. Everything I have been fighting for is lost.'

'The Luck . . . on its way to Lusitania? . . .'

'They would never have killed the Marchese in London unless they were sure of the Luck, and they'll take it off to Lusitania at once.'

'But I've got the Luck. It is in my bank. You never thought, Ariadne, that I would give it up to anybody but you?'

At the tone of reproach in Mr. Clerihew's last words, Ariadne broke down. Somehow he had never in his life connected her with tears. She was worn out; she had barely escaped with her life from Lusitania and returned to find a tragedy.

Mr. Clerihew's mood of conditional repentance passed to utter humility.

'Ariadne dear, don't cry. For God's sake don't cry. You are breaking my heart.'

'Will, you darling,' she whispered in a tone that thrilled him into the seventh heaven.

Then with that swift change of mood which was her charm and privilege, she had mastered her emotion and spoke without a quaver in her voice.

'Sorry, Will. Just tell me exactly what has happened as clearly as you can. Mr. Park said on a memorable occasion that you had a clear brain.'

In a few words, Mr. Clerihew told his story, how in his lightheartedness at having bought for a mere song not only the Luck of Lusitania, but also some glorious claret, he thought that he would play a trick on the enemy. After extracting the ruby from the cork in which it had been hidden by Léon to make sure that it was there, he concealed it in another cork which he put back into the original bottle. For Gomez he had prepared a dummy bottle with a note where the ruby should have been, stating that the jewel was in the bank and would be handed over by the Manager to no one but Mr. Clerihew in person. In the event of his death, his executors would have to call for it at the bank personally and prove their identity. Then he had gone off to the bank with Tom and deposited the ruby there in its bottle. As ill luck would have it, the Marchese, informed of the arrangement with Gomez, had taken it seriously, gone off with the dummy bottle and paid for his mistake with his life.

'They must have followed him,' said Ariadne.

'Yes, they must have been watching the shop. If only I had known I would have pounced on the attaché and held him as a hostage.'

'It was fate and no one can fight against that.

If he had trusted you, Sigismondo would have been alive now. Some day I will tell you his story and you will see the strange irony of it all. . . . Will, I misjudged you and I'm sorry, yet in a way I'm disappointed that I was wrong. You see, I don't know how to express it . . . it is more important that you should be true to yourself than true to me.'

'But I was true to myself. It is only on the surface that I'm a solemn city merchant and a stickler for commercial morality. At heart I'm a reckless and unscrupulous adventurer.'

In the weeks that followed, Mr. Clerihew enjoyed such a period of felicity as surpassed his wildest dreams of bliss. Years before, he had counted among his customers Augustin Filon, the tutor of the Prince Imperial, whose loyalty to the lost cause of the Bonapartes not even blindness could shake. Filon had once said to him : 'Mon cher, you English with your stable constitution miss some of the best fun in life. There is nothing so amusing as conspiring against the Government in power.'

At the time, the wine merchant thought the remark rather absurdly French, but now he admitted its truth. He had never found in his quest of adventure anything so soul-satisfying as conspiring with Ariadne against the Communist Government of Lusitania. For the moment all was peace. The ace of trumps, the Luck of Lusitania, was lying in his bank, ready to resume its place in the crown of

the hereditary monarch, when Ariadne said the word. The King's prospects had been brightened by Sir Harry's fortune, which in Beaumont's good time had passed to the residuary legatee. The Lusitanian Communists in England were coy and cautious, fearful that a false step might bring home to them responsibility for the Marchese's murder.

The time seemed ripe for the counter-revolution ; yet the exiled Royalists were taking their time. The aged and paralysed President of the Lusitanian Republic was on the point of death and undoubtedly the reputation of his early novels, mainly based on the French of Pierre Louys, counted among the strongest points in the Republican position, all the more because he had been far too infirm to take any active part in public affairs since the King's exile. The King and his courtiers suggested to the headstrong Ariadne, not without alarm as to her reply, that they had better make no move, until the philanthropic President had carried his love of humanity to another world. They were really much more comfortable in England since the King had come in for Sir Harry's money. To their joy and amazement, the impetuous Ariadne who had been driving them with whips and scorpions into forlorn conspiracies and impossible adventures did not fly into a fury and call them names, but admitted that there might be advantages in delay.

Meantime it was essential to plan and prepare

for the future. Mr. Clerihew was definitely enlisted among the King's champions, though he refused rather brusquely an audience with His Majesty and a Lusitanian decoration. There was never a conspirator more ready to sit and plot with Ariadne than he, and the little back room at Sun Dial Court, with its caricatures of solemn British statesmen, became the headquarters of the counter-revolution. Two or three times a week, Tom was driven out to seek lunch at a restaurant, because his uncle and the Marchesa di Camerano required the dining-room to discuss the secrets of high politics. He accepted his exile with some philosophy, because the Marchesa was so signally gracious to him and, after all, it was better to have her as an aunt than no relation at all. Aunts and nephews had been known to kiss.

As a student of Lusitanian politics, Mr. Clerihew sat at Ariadne's feet. Ariadne, on her side, submitted her palate for wine to his instruction. The wine merchant had recently bought a typewriter, and it was characteristic of his shyness that his notes inviting her to lunch were usually typed. There was something impersonal about the typewriter. He had prepared for her complete education in wine such a programme as few connoisseurs have ever drunk their way through. He would write to Ariadne in the following style :

My dear Ariadne,—At our last lunch, we dealt with the early history of Lusitania and the characteristics of ancient Hocks and Tokays. I take it

that to-morrow you will carry me forward to a more recent date in Lusitanian politics. On my side I think that I ought to show you some of the clarets of the last century. I shall therefore decant a bottle of Lafite 1865 and Latour 1875, both fine examples of their respective years. I hope that you will find the comparison both interesting and instructive. It is important that the palate should be taught to distinguish between the wines of the great pre-phylloxera vintages from 1858 to 1878.—Your obedient servant WILL CLERIHEW

It was really terrible waste of rare wines. Ariadne would never drink more than two glasses at a meal, though she did her best to be conscientious in appreciating bouquet and aroma. Mr. Clerihew, as soon as she came, forgot all about his wine and its subtleties and listened and talked so attentively that he might just as well have been drinking grocer's claret. Tom, who had now been admitted into most of his uncle's secrets, had his doubts as to whether they really devoted much more time to the questions of Lusitania than to the study of their wines. They must, however, have occasionally discussed political problems, for one day Mr. Clerihew heard the sad story of the faithful Léon.

As the wine merchant already knew, Léon with the ruby in his pocket, had taken refuge at Lexington Towers as Lord Lexington's butler and ingeniously hidden the jewel in the cork of a bottle of claret in the most remote part of the cellar. Its hiding-place was known only to him, Ariadne and the Marchese.

All went well, until he had the misfortune to be knocked down by a motor-car, badly injured and taken to hospital. When well on the road to recovery, he was recognized by one of Gomez's agents and kidnapped the very day he left the hospital. He managed to send word of his capture to the Marchese, and Ariadne had telephoned to Mr. Clerihew her appeal for help in the purchase of the Mouton '68. Nothing more was ever heard of Léon. Ariadne was convinced that his captors had used torture to extort from him the hiding-place of the ruby and murdered him, when they found that they had been outwitted by Mr. Clerihew.

Mr. Clerihew was very sorry for poor Léon, but he was even more personally and painfully interested in the story of Ariadne's life in Lusitania, which he drew from her by degrees. She had been twenty-one and a mere child for her years when she met the Marchese at Genoa. There was very little sympathy between the girl and her parents. They had the disadvantage of being both rich and well-born and took it for granted that she could not possibly marry any one who was not richer and better born. Her friendship with Will Clerihew, the son of a neighbour, a mere merchant, who could not even claim to be 'County', they regarded as dangerous and undesirable and, when her high spirit began to interfere with their peace and comfort, they took her off to the Riviera for a season on the chance of finding a suitable husband.

'I never knew you really cared, Will,' said Ariadne, 'and perhaps it is just as well. I should probably have given you a rotten time.'

'In a way, dear, it was all my fault. I was so afraid that if I talked of love, I should spoil our friendship, which was everything in the world to me. Anyhow, you couldn't possibly have married a mere shopkeeper.'

'Oh,' said Ariadne, with no expression in her voice.

At San Remo, the Marchese, who had been attached for a time to the Italian army, made his appearance, looking rather like a Greek god or a disappointed Archangel, disguised in the beautiful pale blue cloak of an Italian cavalryman. His quarterings were beyond compare—he could sit covered in the presence of any royalty with perfect propriety—and his fortune expressed in Lusitanian currency was imposing. Golden hair and blue eyes were a highly prized rarity in Lusitania. Ariadne was singularly beautiful and her prospects expressed in Lusitanian currency were more than imposing. The inequality in birth caused the Marchese more than a little heart-searching, but finally he decided that a Camerano could afford to ennoble any one and made a formal application to her parents for her hand.

They rather prided themselves on a cosmopolitan acceptance of foreigners, based on a successful marriage of one of the family to a French viscount

born in England of an English mother and educated at Eton and Oxford. Weighing up the proposal, they decided that an advantage in birth might be held to counterbalance an inferiority in wealth, particularly in the case of a hereditary Lord High Chamberlain. They therefore gave formal permission to the Marchese to pay his court to their daughter. Knowing her well, they prepared the way for his advances by engaging her in a row royal which opened with parental admonitions as to her uselessness, ingratitude and misbehaviour. They worked her into such a temper that she was ready to take the first-comer who would rescue her from the bosom of her family. The Marchese, with his well-bred ease and courtly foreign manners, was distinctly attractive.

'So,' said Ariadne, 'I said "yes", but only on condition that he was only to call me Vittoria, never Ariadne.'

On a honeymoon, the Marchese was a delightful companion, and it was only when he took his bride back to his family castle that he developed his ideas as to the position of married women in general and his wife in particular.

'He explained at length,' she said, 'that his ancestors had been in the habit of killing their wives when they were annoyed with them. They were very proud of the family tradition and he intended to keep it up at any cost. There was a sword hanging on the wall, which had belonged to I don't know how

many Cameranos. He took it down and unsheathed it to show me what he said was his grandmother's blood on the blade.

'"It looks more like rust," I said as carelessly as I could, but I was really frightened.'

It was perhaps fortunate for the Marchese that he was in a world which Mr. Clerihew could not reach.

'Of course, I was quite determined that the Marchese should not trample on me, but for once I was wise enough to keep my temper and bide my time. They were a strange family, those Cameranos. One of them murdered his wife, because a commoner kissed her hand. Another was immensely proud, because his wife procured for him from the King the privilege of wearing his hat in the royal presence.'

'You are forgetting all about our wine,' said Mr. Clerihew, endeavouring to change the subject, 'this is really a remarkable example of Langoa 1870.'

Ariadne shook her head without reference to the claret.

'No, Will, we are not going to change the subject, until you know the worst of me. I wanted an ally. I met the King. He was a nice boy, weak and well-intentioned, rather younger than I was. He had spent a year at an English university and was bored to death with the Court. I saw that he had not a chance, unless he had some one to stiffen his back-bone.'

'I know all about that, Ariadne, please don't go on.'

'He was my way of escape. There is a saying among the people that the women of the Camerano family always earn for the men the privilege of wearing the horns in the King's presence. I kept up the tradition.'

'I wish you would stop, Ariadne. That's all over and done with.'

'No, you must hear the whole story. Don't think I'm repentant. In the same circumstances I should do again what I did then. I suppose I'm thoroughly wicked, a perfect devil.'

Mr. Clerihew looked into her eyes and smiled.

'One night when the King was paying court to me at a dance, I told him about the Marchese and his grandfather's sword.

'"Marchesa," he said, "be careful. You are not in England and your husband is dangerous. He is all wrapped up in the family tradition which forbids him to be jealous of me, but if you give him an excuse with any one else, he'll kill you like a dog and I shall be able to do nothing. He is indispensable to the monarchy. If he dies without a direct heir, his title and property go to the Conte di Rifredi, the sworn enemy of our House. If he used his grandfather's sword, you would have died of a fever and within the year he would be marrying again."

'"If I was your Majesty," I said, "I should soon

find means of keeping my Lord High Chamberlain within the law."

'He looked at me and laughed. "Vittoria,"—it was the first time he had called me by my Christian name—"I believe you would."

'Then he hesitated a moment and said: "There is a way. If you were kind, really kind, I might put that cold-blooded husband of yours absolutely into your power."'

'What a cad!' said Mr. Clerihew.

'I'm afraid his Lusitanian Majesty was not brought up with a strict code of honour and chivalry. Anyhow . . . I was kind.'

'Ariadne, must you tell me all this? I'd much rather not hear.'

'The King kept his word and gave me two presents; one was a small pistol as a counter to the grandfather's sword, and the other a dispatch box full of papers. I gave the dispatch box to Sir Harry Holman, who was my only link with England, and he sent it in the Foreign Office bag to a London bank with a letter saying that in the event of my death, it was to be sent to a certain address. Then I prepared to deal with the Marchese.'

'If only I had been there to deal with him for you,' said Mr. Clerihew with a set jaw.

'The King had been most gracious to the Marchese. As there were no orders or privileges left to confer upon him, His Majesty was pleased to create a new order with the Marchese as Grand Master. Yet I

had an idea that my husband was more jealous than the tradition of his family allowed, and he was certainly annoyed because I had taken steps to prevent him laying hands on all my money. Things came to a head one night at Rinaldi's, the famous café, after a gala performance at the opera.'

'I remember that night we met again you said something to the Marchese about Rinaldi's and it shut him up at once.'

'Rinaldi's was packed. The Marchese and I had been honoured by an invitation to sup with the King. As we went in, I saw a woman whom I had known on the Riviera sitting timidly with her husband in a corner. She was a cousin of the Marchese's and had been very popular at Court, but she had ostracized herself by marrying a singer. The Marchese, who had forbidden me to have any communication with her, cut her dead. I bowed and smiled. He scowled.

'The King, who thought it was democratic to sup openly in a public restaurant, had several guests and I was sitting on his right. When every one had sat down, I asked his permission to get up and speak to a friend. As ostentatiously as I could, I walked through the crowded café to my friend's table and talked to her. The Marchese stood it for a minute; then he too asked the King's leave and came after me. The King told me that, if he had known what was happening, he would have kept the Marchese

there, but his back was turned to the table where I was standing, and it was just as well. I guessed pretty well what would happen.'

'I don't believe you know what fear is.'

'I was frightened all right, though I had got the whip-hand of the Marchese. I did not look towards him until he spoke, and then I did something I hadn't reckoned on; I lost my temper. For the first and last time in his life he dared to call me by the name that I had forbidden him to use, because it was yours.

'"Ariadne," he whispered angrily.

'I spun round and slapped his face with all my might before he could say another word. It quite hurt my hand and made a noise which stopped conversation everywhere. I could see the marks of my fingers on his cheek for the rest of the evening. I'm afraid that my friend and her singer husband did not like the scene at all, but every one else in the café loved it. You see the Marchese was not popular and there were quite a number of young men who professed to admire me, because blondes are a rare exception in Lusitania.'

'You are a rare exception anywhere,' said Mr. Clerihew reverently.

'Then the King did a nice thing. While the Marchese was still rubbing his face, he came over to the table and, after talking a little to the singer and his wife as if nothing had happened, he offered me his arm and escorted me back to my place. I wish

you could have seen the Marchese, his face a ghastly grey, almost crying with rage. If ever there was a devil, it glared at me out of his eyes.'

Mr. Clerihew seemed to see that scene, as it was recorded in Ariadne's mind: the singer, afraid of consequences, yet facing events with an artist's contemptuous detachment, his wife cowering before the prejudices and conventions which she had affronted; the Marchese with a red patch on his white cheek and his angelic features diabolically distorted; the King, a young man with a fresh complexion, doglike brown eyes and a silky moustache, using the divinity that still hedged royalty in his kingdom, to calm the storm, and in the centre of the picture with a hundred eyes upon her, her eyes flashing and her bosom heaving, angry yet mistress of herself and her sense of humour, half-amused at her own daring and the vigour of her blow, Ariadne.

She laughed to herself at the memory of the scene.

'The King whispered to me that he would keep the Marchese on duty that night at the palace—as Lord High Chamberlain he would have had to accept the order as an honour—but I refused. I had to have things out with him at once. We drove home together without speaking a word. I could hardly keep from laughing when the Marchese from time to time put his hand up to his tingling cheek and hastily took it down again for fear that I should

see how it hurt. Yet I was almost sorry for him; he was so humiliated and there was worse in store for him; though of course, he was gloating all the time over the thought of his grandfather's sword and the rapture of driving it into my heart.'

If it was wicked for Clerihew to be glad that the Marchese was dead, he was wicked. He only regretted that death had not been more painful.

'The famous sword hung on the wall above the stairs and, as we passed, he took it down.

'"Don't be a fool, Sigismondo," I said, "when the King conferred on you the traditional privilege of your family, he gave me two presents and one of them is this little pistol which I am holding under my handkerchief inside my bag."

'I let him see the pistol. He looked into my eyes and saw that I was in earnest.

'"It's loaded," I said, "put back that sword at once."

'Very slowly he hung it up again, trembling all over.

'"Now you will come to my room and we will talk things over, once and for all."

'I made him go first for fear of a blow from behind, and when we were in my room I locked the door. I believe he thought I was going to shoot him, for he suddenly straightened himself and looked me boldly in the face. He was no coward.'

Ariadne sipped her claret and remarked on the delicacy of its bouquet.

'All the same I jeered at him. "Don't be frightened, Sigismondo," I said, "I'm not going to shoot you. There is something much worse than death in store for you. When the King honoured me by making me his mistress, he gave me not only a pistol, but also a blue morocco dispatch box full of papers, which once belonged to the woman you call your mother."

'He staggered back and I thought his eyes would start out of his head.

'"You are an impostor with all your talk of noble birth, just a humbug and you know it. You haven't a drop of noble blood in your veins. You are not a Camerano at all, just the son of an artist and a servant girl, who were very likely far better people than your supposed parents, but you cannot believe that."

'"Vittoria, I'll kill you for that."

'He came at me with hands outstretched to clutch my throat.

'"No, Sigismondo, you won't," I said, dodging behind a table and wondering whether I should have to use the pistol after all, "if I die, your secret will be published to the world. I have sent those papers to my bank in London and, when I die, they will be sent to a journalist friend of mine, who will make the most of the scandal of your birth, the changeling Marchese, the grandee of grandees who was the illegitimate son of a servant girl."

'The Marchese's spirit was broken. He was

always terrified of a scandal in the Press. However, I had not finished with him.

'"Then," I went on, "there is that cousin of yours, the Conte di Rifredi. After my friend has finished with your patents of nobility, he will send them to the Conte, the real Marchese di Camerano, and you know best what he will do with them. No, my friend, you are not going to kill me. On the contrary, you are going to look after my health more carefully than your own and, if you want your secret to be buried with you, you will arrange to die before me."

'Then I laid down my conditions for the future. Outwardly there would be no change in our lives, but henceforward we should be strangers to one another. I was the King's mistress and meant to be Queen of Lusitania in everything but name. He was the Lord High Chamberlain who would do exactly what he was told.'

Ariadne's story had made Mr. Clerihew wince again and again. She had spared neither his feelings nor her own, dwelling on her relations with the King insistently. Was she afraid that the wine merchant should think too well of her? Or was she warning him against hoping for the impossible?

'For a year or two,' she went on, 'I was for all practical purposes Queen of Lusitania. The King was as fond of me as he can be of any one—a *grande passion* is not for royalty—and I think I gave him good advice. We suppressed a good deal of corrup-

tion, made things rather fairer for the poor and introduced a little efficiency into the happy-go-lucky ways of the Lusitanian people. Perhaps I was wrong. Sometimes I think that they preferred corruption, injustice and inefficiency.'

'It is very hard to say what really makes people happy.'

'It is,' said Ariadne, 'but I think that on the whole the Lusitanians were happier while I was the King's counsellor. Of course the reaction came. I had all the vested interests against me and the King was very young. They brought up battalions of women and I was foolish enough to despise them. So it ended as all such arrangements end. I tried to drive him instead of coaxing him and lost my temper.'

'Did you smack his face?' asked Mr. Clerihew hopefully.

'Not quite that, but I made him very angry and let him fall into other people's hands. Within six months he had lost the throne, and now he and all his courtiers are on their knees to me, begging me to restore them to Lusitania. I wonder what the use of it all is.'

It was on the tip of Mr. Clerihew's tongue to say: 'Ariadne, it is no use at all. Lusitania is nothing to you and the King less. Conspiracies are all right to provide adventure, but we could have such a glorious adventure together, just by our two selves, without any kings or foreigners.'

Then he looked at Ariadne and was humbled. Her place was among kings and noblemen, not at the side of a dull shopkeeper. He held his tongue.

At that moment she looked at her wrist-watch and exclaimed: 'I must fly. I have already kept the King and the Privy Council waiting for half an hour, after preaching them sermons on punctuality without number. They will be provokingly virtuous, when I arrive an hour late.'

A week or two later, Ariadne came to Sun Dial Court in a mood which puzzled Mr. Clerihew. He was alone in the back room when she arrived and, as he took her hand, she leant towards him with a strange expression in her eyes. Her mouth was tantalizingly near.

'Will, you are an old dear,' she said softly.

Greatly daring he raised her hand to his lips, but as he kissed it, it was snatched angrily away. She stamped her foot and turned away to look out of the window.

'I'm sorry,' Mr. Clerihew stammered.

Ariadne's mood had changed after her swift fashion. She had slipped right away again out of reach into her ivory tower and spoke in that cold decisive tone of hers, which held a man at arm's length.

'The President is dead and Lusitania is upside down. No more peaceful lunches for me in Sun Dial Court. We must strike at once and within the month

the King must be back in his capital with the Luck in his crown.'

The prospect of immediate adventure called forth less enthusiasm from Mr. Clerihew than might have been expected.

'The Luck is ready for you whenever you need it, but don't say that this is to be our last lunch here.'

'What's the good, Will? We have got to part and I'm going to be terribly busy.'

'We are not going to part,' said Mr. Clerihew, with a decision he rarely showed to Ariadne, 'you don't think that I shall let you go to Lusitania alone. I'm not going to miss the fun of a revolution.'

'You can't come, Will. I forbid it. You shall not risk your life in a matter that does not concern you at all.'

'I'll obey you in nearly everything but that. I don't care what you say. When you go to Lusitania, I go too.'

'It is impossible, Will. There are reasons. . . . You can't come.'

'I can, it is possible, and I don't give a damn for any reasons. You simply can't stop me. I have made my arrangements and there is an aeroplane ready and waiting for me.'

'Will, please don't insist. I say you cannot come.'

'But I do insist, and nothing you can say will make any difference.'

'But can't you understand? The King. . . . I've promised to play the Queen again.'

'All right, dear, if you must, you must, but that is no reason why I should not come.'

'No, Will, you must stay in England for my sake. I could not bear to have you there.'

Mr. Clerihew shook his head very decidedly.

'You do understand why I'm going, don't you? I'm bound to go. Without me the King hasn't a chance of keeping his throne. It is my duty to help him. I ought to, oughtn't I? There is nothing else for me to do.'

'You know best what you must do, but there is one thing certain, that if you go back to Lusitania with the King or without him, I go too.'

For once the lunch in Sun Dial Court was not a success. The wines were not all they should have been, the saddle was almost tough and conversation flagged. Yet Mr. Clerihew pleaded so hard that they should have one more lunch together before the revolution that at last Ariadne gave way and promised.

CHAPTER VII

SANDEMAN '84 AGAIN

FROM Lusitania came rumours of rebellion. A stern censorship had been established and the only news that crossed the frontier was sensational and confused. The peasants in the mountains had risen and killed a score of Commissars, but the revolt had been crushed. In the capital, the priests had ventured out again into the streets, the mob had burnt and sacked Government offices and crowds had gathered clamouring for the Luck of Lusitania and the King.

A note from Ariadne warned Mr. Clerihew to be ready to take the Luck from the bank at a moment's notice. He had offered to buy from Antonelli all his rights in the jewel, but she would have none of that.

'Antonelli,' she wrote, 'was a traitor to his King when he bought the Luck and must take the consequences. We need every penny we can lay our hands on and, if you insist on helping us, we will accept a small loan—not a large loan, mind, nothing that you would really miss—for Lusitania is not a gilt-edged investment. It is really all you can do for us.'

She was in a whirl of preparations, but he was determined that she should keep her promise and have a farewell lunch in Sun Dial Court. He typed out his usual invitation, telling her that he had chosen for the occasion the rarest of all his wines. With scandalous recklessness, he was sacrificing on the altar of a hopeless love the very last magnum of Latour 1858 and the penultimate magnum of Lafite 1864. This criminal extravagance meant a lamentable waste of noble wine, for he and Ariadne between them would not drink a single magnum.

All morning, he waited in suspense, lest she should ring up and say that she was too busy. He heaved a sigh of relief when noon came without a message. She would have warned him early, before he set his hand to the delicate task of decanting. The priceless clarets were decanted and he tried to possess his soul in patience, until she came. One o'clock struck. A quarter of an hour, half an hour, passed, and still no Ariadne. She was erratic and sometimes late, but she had never been so late as this. What could have happened ? Mr. Clerihew became anxious and made up his mind to ring up her hotel. At that moment, a clerk came in with a telephone message that she was very sorry that she was unable to keep her appointment.

Gloom descended on Sun Dial Court. Tom had not gone out for his lunch ; for he was waiting to catch a glimpse of Ariadne, as she came in. Mr. Clerihew bade him find a friend and two of the three

men did justice to the wonderful magnums. Little pleasure did Mr. Clerihew find in them. After lunch, when Tom had gone back to his desk, the senior partner sat on in the dining-room, wrapped in melancholy thought. There was only one consolation, the prospect of action. He was determined that nothing should prevent him from playing his part in the revolution and really did not mind if he broke his neck in an aeroplane accident or was knocked on the head by some Lusitanian Bolshevik.

The clerk came in with a letter, saying that it had been brought by a messenger boy. 'From Ariadne,' thought Mr. Clerihew, as he snatched it. It was marked 'Urgent and Confidential.' The address and envelope recalled the letter from Gomez, demanding the Luck. He was seized with horrible misgivings.

The letter was short.

You may hold the ace of trumps, but we have caught the queen of hearts. Your golden Ariadne is in our hands and stays there, until you hand over what we want. Perhaps you may take a tenderer interest in her than her late lamented husband ever did. For her sake avoid delay and do exactly what you are told. Instead of Latour 1858 and Lafite 1864, she is on a diet of water without food and will continue to starve, until our demands are satisfied. You will not call in the police and force us to more expeditious methods than starvation. We will give you our orders over the telephone later in the afternoon.

Ariadne kidnapped ; Ariadne at the mercy of her enemies ; Ariadne starving. Mr. Clerihew collapsed. What did Lusitania or money or rubies matter ? They could have them all, if she went free. The thought of what might be happening to her at that moment drove him mad. They were welcome to the Luck of Lusitania, to his wines, to his fortune, to his life, if only he could be sure that they would release her. But would they ever release her ? She was their arch-enemy and it was as important for them to suppress her as to recover the Luck. How could he be sure that they would keep their word, if he surrendered the Luck ? They were desperate men who would stick at nothing. To call in the police would be to sign her death-warrant. He racked his brain for schemes to save her, but could find none.

There was just a bare possibility that they were bluffing. He rang up Ariadne's hotel, but learnt nothing except that as usual she had gone out about lunch time. She must have been kidnapped on her way to Sun Dial Court. Was such a thing possible in the heart of London ?

About four o'clock a telephone call stopped his restless pacing up and down the uneven floor of the shop.

'Mr. Clerihew,' said a voice with a foreign accent.

'Speaking.'

'Do you agree to exchange the ace of trumps for the queen of hearts ?'

' On conditions.'

' No, unconditionally. The queen of hearts is not very comfortable at present and, if you bargain, we shall have to make her more uncomfortable, very uncomfortable indeed, in ways which I will leave to your imagination. Remember it is almost as important to us to get rid of her as to hold the ace.'

Mr. Clerihew shuddered. The smooth voice with the foreign accent was gloating over thoughts of evil cruelty.

' I warn you,' he said, ' that if you touch a hair of her head, I will devote the rest of my life and every penny I possess to hunting you down.'

' We will take our chance of that, but I'm glad you feel about things like that.'

' You cannot expect me to hand over what you call the ace of trumps, until I have seen for myself that she is safe.'

' We most certainly do. Otherwise you will never see the queen of hearts again.'

' But you must give me some guarantee.'

' You will have to take my word for it. When we have what we want, we will let her go. She may be a little weak by to-morrow from starving, or shall we call it slimming ? but otherwise uninjured.'

' What you propose is preposterous,' said Mr. Clerihew as firmly as he could, ' I'll hand nothing over until I'm sure that your side of the bargain has been kept.'

'Oh, yes, you will. You cannot help yourself, so stop trying to bargain. This is what you will do. You will take the ace out of the bank to-morrow and bring it with you on the four o'clock train from Victoria to Paris. On the journey some one will come to you and ask for the ace of trumps. You will hand it over to him, when he has given you the address where you can find the queen of hearts.'

'I'm damned if I will,' said Mr. Clerihew stoutly.

'That is unfortunate for the lady. So far she is only slightly inconvenienced by a trivial privation, but if you are obstinate, we shall begin to apply at once a little torture, physical and otherwise, with gradually increasing intensity.'

'You brute!' exclaimed Mr. Clerihew, despite himself.

'It is no use being rude. For the last time to-day I give you the chance of accepting our offer. It is "yes" or "no". If you say "no", you condemn the lady to a most unpleasant night and I'll tell you all about it to-morrow. We have no reason to love her, as you know, but she is good-looking enough to provide a lot of amusement. Is it "yes" or "no"?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Clerihew with a groan, 'but I warn you . . .'

The man at the other end hung up the receiver.

Mr. Clerihew was utterly broken with the sense of his own helplessness. He left the telephone

with eyes turned despairingly on the ground and walked unseeing into a man who had just come into the shop, the last man in London he wanted to see at such a moment, the exuberant Antonelli.

'Prithee, why so sad, fond lover? Prithee, why so pale?'

The violinist caught the wine merchant by both his arms and would not let him go.

'Aha! my prince of wine-lovers, absent-minded, lost in meditation, woebegone. There is more love here than love of wine. The little god shoots his arrows into the most unlikely targets.'

'Don't be a fool,' said Mr. Clerihew, disengaging himself roughly, 'I'm not in a mood for joking.'

Antonelli was quite unmoved.

'Then you ought to be, after lunching with the lady of your heart. Surely you cannot have quarrelled over those wines—let me see, what were they? —Lafite 1874 and Sandeman 1884.'

Mr. Clerihew put his hand on the back of a chair to steady himself and gasped out: 'What on earth do you mean? Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84?'

Antonelli was too pleased with his own perspicacity to notice the paralysing effect of his remark on Mr. Clerihew.

'I was surprised at you, a claret man, giving her port. Anyhow it is no use trying to hide things from Antonelli. Your taste is exemplary. Even

Antonelli is jealous. The beautiful Marchesa would spare no time from her plots to lunch with him.'

'For God's sake, man, explain. What do you know about Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84 ?'

'We have our private sources of information. A little bird whispered that you bring out for the Marchesa such wines as you do not offer even to your best customers. We know that this very day you set before her such a lunch as only you and I can give.'

Mr. Clerihew seized the violinist by the shoulders and shook him.

'Here, steady, you are hurting me. Let go or I'll tell you nothing. I never thought you were as strong as that.'

Antonelli broke loose and began to skip round the wine merchant.

'Confess, you cunning old scoundrel, confess. Then perhaps I'll tell you what I know and how I know it.'

'Antonelli, this is much more important than you know. I'll confess anything you like. But tell me at once how you know Ari . . . the Marchesa was to lunch with me to-day and why you mentioned those particular wines.'

'You have given yourself away this time,' chirped Antonelli gleefully, 'Ari . . . the Marchesa, that tells a story. Oh, I knew that you were making the running with the beautiful widow.'

'What do you know about those wines?' cried Mr. Clerihew in agony.

'Well, I was hurrying through the lounge of the Super-Splendide Hotel rather late for a luncheon appointment, when whom should I see coming out of a lift but the Marchesa di Camerano. She had a note in her hand and was laughing. You know how she laughs, with her eyes and her mouth and all her slim body.'

'Yes, yes, I know, but do get on.'

'She waved the note at me and cried: "Antonelli, behold the only woman in the world whom a connoisseur ever tempted out to lunch by the offer of rare wines. Mr. Clerihew is educating my palate and to-day he is going to give me Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84."'

'You are sure she mentioned those wines.'

'Of course I am. She read them off your note. I saw it was typewritten. Take my advice and write to your lady love in your own hand. Typing is so cold and businesslike.'

'What happened then?' asked Mr. Clerihew fiercely.

'Why nothing,' said Antonelli, 'she dashed away with that falcon-like swiftness of hers, calling out that you had sent a car specially for her and she must not keep it waiting.'

'My God!' said Mr. Clerihew.

He pushed Antonelli into Tom's hands and with some vague excuse fled to the back room. Here at

least was a clue, the clue of those sinister wines, Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84. It was clear what had happened. Ariadne had been decoyed by a forged letter into a motor-car in which she had probably been chloroformed. Gomez and his friends had got hold of one of the wine merchant's earlier invitations. There would have been little difficulty about that, as she was so erratic and left all her letters about the place. They had concocted a similar note and —why had they suggested Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84 as the wines? Because they knew of them as wines that might be offered by a connoisseur. Later they had intercepted the actual invitation—Gomez knew of the Latour '58 and the Lafite '64 he had decanted for Ariadne—and put in its stead the forgery with the promise of a car. Luckily they had prepared their letter beforehand and so put in the tell-tale wines. Strangely enough in his despair, Mr. Clerihew's pain was increased by self-reproach that he had never thought of sending a car for Ariadne and left her to take a taxi.

At that moment Tom broke in on his meditations. He had seen ever since lunch that the senior partner was in a state of anxiety and had made one or two cautious advances in the hope that he might be of help. At first he had supposed that Mr. Clerihew was upset merely because the woman he loved had failed to keep an appointment, but as the afternoon wore on, he realized that there was more at stake than a lover's quarrel.

'Look here, governor,' he said shyly, 'is there anything seriously wrong? Can't I help in some way?'

'Two brains are better than one,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'and you are a loyal chap and fond of Ariadne. I'm at my wits' end. This is what has happened.'

He told the story and his junior partner's fury and exclamations did his heart good.

'There is one thing certain,' said Tom, 'Jack Lancaster is in this. You always believed that he was concerned in Sir Harry Holman's death with that little beast, Dora Griffiths. Sir Harry spoke to you of buying Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84, just before he died, and after his death there was a bottle of the Sandeman on the table. Lancaster says he wants you to taste those same two wines. What's the betting he has kidnapped the Marchesa?'

'I'm sure he is connected with her disappearance, but what can I do? If only I could remember why those two wines were connected in my brain, before Sir Harry said anything about them.'

'I have just had an idea about that, uncle. Do you remember years ago when I first came into the business, there was a big robbery in Mayfair. When Lord Stanway was away and his town house shut up, the thieves calmly came with furniture vans and ransacked the whole house, carting away the furniture and all the wine in the cellar. I have an idea that the police sent us a circular warning us

that some of these stolen wines might be offered to us privately. I'm not sure that Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84 were not among the wines mentioned.'

'By Jove, Tom, I believe you are right.'

Mr. Clerihew sprang up and threw open a cupboard door. He took out a pile of old papers and ran through them hastily. At the very bottom he found a crumpled document.

'Here you are. List of Wines stolen from Lord Stanway's Cellars . . . Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84 . . . we provided them . . . practically the only wines of outstanding value except some fine old sherry.'

'Evidently Lancaster was in that too. I suppose he thinks it is safe now to get rid of his share of the booty. Why not have him arrested at once ?'

'I simply dare not call in the police. These Lusitanian devils seem to know everything I do, and as soon as they knew Lancaster was arrested they would . . . Besides, you cannot arrest a man for having Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84 in his cellar.'

Mr. Clerihew paused, as a clerk came in.

'Mr. Lancaster would like to see Mr. Clerihew.'

Tom looked at his uncle and whistled.

'What a coincidence,' he exclaimed.

'Don't you believe it,' said Mr. Clerihew excitedly, 'coincidences don't happen like that. There is

something behind it and I have a brain-wave that explains it. I bet you he asks me to lunch with him to-morrow, before I go to Paris.'

Tom could ask no further questions, as his uncle was already on his way into the shop to meet Mr. Lancaster. Dora's fiancé, very spruce and hearty, was affability itself.

'Mr. Clerihew,' he said, 'I have dropped in to ask you whether you can lunch with me and Dora to-morrow. We have taken a new house and are just furnishing it. She would love to show it you. Then there are those wines you promised me an opinion on.'

'I am afraid,' answered Mr. Clerihew casually, 'that I can hardly manage it to-morrow, as I have to go to Paris by the afternoon train.'

'Nothing could be better,' said Mr. Lancaster, 'our house is just behind Victoria, and you will have plenty of time to do justice to the wines before you have to leave for the four o'clock train.'

'I have a great deal to do before I leave,' said Mr. Clerihew doubtfully, 'let me see, what were the wines you wanted me to taste?'

'Lafite '74 and Sandeman '84. My cousin Sir Harry Holman gave me them years ago.'

'Oh yes, I remember now. Remarkable wines indeed. I believe we once sold a good many dozens of both of them to Lord Stanway. Unfortunately they were stolen. It is quite a coincidence, isn't it?'

Mr. Lancaster started and looked hard at Mr. Clerihew.

'I don't see why. I hope you are not suggesting that poor Sir Harry stole them from Lord Stanway.'

'Of course not. I only meant that it was rather curious that that particular port and claret should turn up again together. I must say I should like to taste them, but I really don't think I ought to-morrow with that Paris journey before me.'

Mr. Lancaster became even more pressing in his invitation, pointing out that Mr. Clerihew could bring his luggage with him and start off comfortably to catch his train.

'I could not think of lumbering up your house with my luggage—not that it is much, just a suit-case. I'll leave it in the cloakroom before I come.'

'You mustn't do that, Mr. Clerihew. You will only have a nuisance with cloakroom tickets and porters. There is plenty of room in the hall for your suit-case.'

'Does he really imagine,' thought Mr. Clerihew, whose mind was made up, 'that I should leave the Luck in my suit-case in a station cloakroom, when Ariadne's life depends on it?'

Aloud he said: 'It is most kind of you. I cannot refuse so charming an invitation.'

'Capital,' said Lancaster heartily, 'you must not expect much, as we have no servants, just a plain

cold lunch, but that will be all the better for the wine.'

Mr. Lancaster went away and Mr. Clerihew spoke long and earnestly with his nephew. When he had finished, Tom looked at the senior partner with undisguised admiration.

'Governor,' he said simply, 'you are a brave man. I would take your place, if I could, but you wouldn't let me and I know I haven't your nose and palate. I can promise you this, that if anything goes wrong, I will carry out your instructions to the letter.'

'That's all right, my lad. I should not be much of a connoisseur, if I was afraid to stake my life on my nose and palate. If I fail, Ariadne's life depends on you.'

Next morning Mr. Clerihew was very busy, but punctually at half-past one he drove up to a detached house behind Victoria. It was the relic of a past age, left with a garden of its own, an island in a sea of less reputable buildings.

'It is big enough at any rate,' said Mr. Clerihew to himself, as he measured its three storeys with his eye.

Mr. Lancaster opened the door.

'I'm so glad,' he said, 'that you have brought your suit-case. It will save you so much trouble at the station.'

'I felt sure,' said Mr. Clerihew with a silly laugh, 'that you would be glad to see my suit-case.'

Lancaster looked a trifle taken aback.

'There is lots of room for it in the hall.'

As Mr. Clerihew took off his coat, he caught a glimpse of the dining-room sideboard with three cobwebbed bottles and beside them decanters glowing with red wine. Apparently Mr. Lancaster's digestion—or was it Dora's?—was not so good as his appearance suggested, for a bottle of Indigestion Mixture was standing on the corner of the mantelpiece.

'That,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'looks like the medicine Sir Harry Holman used to swear by. Do you find it as good as he did?'

Lancaster fell over a chair in the hall.

'Blast,' he said, rubbing his shin, 'what was it you said, Mr. Clerihew? Oh, the medicine on the mantelpiece. Yes, I believe it is the same as Sir Harry used to take. Dora has rather a weak digestion and finds it wonderful. But what eyes you have to notice it at that distance.'

In the drawing-room Mr. Clerihew was welcomed ecstatically by the gushing Miss Griffiths who offered him cocktails.

'They look very pretty, but I never take cocktails. One would ruin my palate for the day, and on such an occasion as this, with Lafite '74 awaiting us . . . I'm sorry . . . it is quite impossible.'

He accepted, however, a glass of dry sherry which he studied lovingly, swirling it round the glass and inhaling its bouquet with remarkable attention.

'An exceptionally fine wine,' said the wine merchant, 'with real bottle age.'

'It came from the same place as the Lafite and Sandeman.'

'What a charming house this is,' said Mr. Clerihew.

'Isn't it?' said Dora, 'we were so lucky to get the end of a lease. It is not properly furnished yet, but when we have all our own things in, it will be such a cosy home.'

'Very convenient and I should say just the right size. How many bedrooms have you?'

'Five, all nice airy rooms.'

'Perhaps it is a curious fad for an old bachelor, but I do enjoy looking over strange houses. Would it be too much to ask you to take me over the house? I'm sure it must be well worth seeing.'

Dora seemed a trifle disconcerted and exchanged glances with her fiancé.

'I couldn't possibly do that,' she said after a moment's hesitation, 'the house is still in a shocking state and I should be ashamed for you to see it. These downstairs rooms are the only habitable place at present.'

'But that is exactly what I enjoy. It is so jolly to anticipate the possibilities of a house when it is still in the raw, as it were. Do come and show me everything, Miss Griffiths.'

Mr. Clerihew moved towards the door.

'No, Mr. Clerihew, I simply cannot, at any rate not before lunch. It would spoil your appetite and palate. Perhaps . . . after lunch . . . if you ask me very nicely. Now do come in and eat. It is only a picnic meal, but when we come back from the honeymoon, I will show you what a good cook I am.'

Mr. Clerihew was singularly sensitive that day to the merest nuance of tone and seemed to detect something sinister in the sound of those innocent words 'after lunch'. He was in point of fact extremely frightened, more frightened than he had ever been in his life. Often before he had gone deliberately into danger, but then only his own life was at stake. Now he feared that Ariadne's life depended on his.

So far things had gone as well as he could have hoped. The Indigestion Mixture was on the whole reassuring. He had expected to see it. Dora's very definite refusal to let him go upstairs was on the right side. She could not have done otherwise, if there was a captive above.

As they went into the dining-room, his hand passed carelessly over the corner of the mantelpiece and dropped a small pin taken from his buttonhole in close proximity to the bottle of Indigestion Mixture, so that it was liable to be displaced if the bottle was moved.

'Mr. Clerihew,' said Dora as she sat down, 'I have never told you how splendid I thought you at

Antonelli's that terrible night. If it hadn't been for you . . .'

She blushed coyly at the thought of the gunman's threat and left the sentence unfinished

'But tell me, how was it you had the good luck to be armed? Do you always carry a pistol?'

'I'm afraid it is an old and foolish habit of mine. No doubt psychologists would attribute it to a complex, but it came in very useful that night.'

'You are a wonderful shot, aren't you, Mr. Clerihew?'

'Not bad, I believe. I ought to be fairly good, as I have given up a lot of time to practising and I have a steady hand and a good eye.'

'I suppose you don't take a pistol with you when you go abroad? Isn't it too risky, if the customs find it at the frontier? For instance you are not taking a pistol to Paris with you to-day?'

'Oh, yes, I am,' said Mr. Clerihew emphatically, 'of course pistols are prohibited weapons in France, though many men carry them, but even if I were caught, I should escape serious trouble. Achille Guiraud, the Chef de la Sûreté, is an old friend of mine and I always carry with me a letter from him recommending me to the police. It is not a formal permit, but in France it is far better.'

'You don't say then that you have a pistol with you now. Do let me see it. I adore firearms. They are so romantic.'

'My dear young lady, I never play with firearms

and keep my weapons as secretly as you keep those Bluebeard chambers of yours upstairs.'

Dora started and bit her lip. Lancaster moved suddenly in his chair. Mr. Clerihew felt that he had scored a point, but his right hand dropped the knife and passed swiftly below the table at Lancaster's movement. It did not come up again, until his host had resumed his knife and fork.

'It is so easy to have an accident,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'one cannot be too careful.'

For a time conversation was rather stiff and restrained. Then Mr. Clerihew took a glass or two of claret and began to talk in his merriest vein. Nothing, however, could distract his attention from the wine. Every glass was held to the light and its colour and transparency closely considered. The perfume, the 'nose', as the wine merchant called it, was studied with loving earnestness, before a cautious sip was submitted to the judgement of the palate, as though his life depended on an accurate estimate of the wine.

It was, he declared, a noble wine in good condition, showing perhaps a few signs of old age, but still senatorially magnificent. So excellent was this claret that he did not notice—certainly he made no protest—that by far the greater part of two bottles was going into his glass, while his temperate host contented himself with pouring an occasional teaspoonful into his own glass and that of his fiancée.

Lancaster had strange ideas about the etiquette of the bottle, though no fault could be found with his decanting. Once he began to take all three glasses from the table to replenish them at the side near the bottle of Indigestion Mixture. Mr. Clerihew showed himself a stickler for the traditional formalities and rose from his chair in his insistence that the glasses should stay where they were with the decanter circulating round the table in the path of the sun.

'I congratulate you,' said Mr. Clerihew, warming up, 'on your wine glasses. They are the ideal tulip shape and big enough to give the wine room to develop its ethers.'

'I'm afraid that they will have to serve for the port as well. I have no proper port glasses. I hope you don't mind.'

'Not at all,' said Mr. Clerihew.

Now Mr. Clerihew was the most temperate of wine-lovers. He attributed his perfect health to the half bottle of good wine which he drank with every meal, and had never been known to exceed. Yet had there been an outside observer at that strange meal, he would have seen that Mr. Clerihew was taking without complaint at least three times his half bottle ration and might have concluded that this was the reason why his speech became more rapid and slightly less coherent, as the decanters emptied. Yet every glass was submitted to the same close expert scrutiny.

' 'Straordinarily beau'ful wine,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he drained the last drops of the claret.

'Before we start the port,' said Lancaster, 'will you come down and see the cellar, while Dora washes the glasses? I'll show you the Lafite and Sandeman down there and you will be able to see for yourself if there are many ullaged bottles. There is lots of time.'

'I s'pose there is,' said Mr. Clerihew thickly, as he rose rather unsteadily.

In the hall the wine merchant with his right hand in his pocket clasped Mr. Lancaster's right arm lovingly with his left hand. Lancaster would have given a great deal to know whether his guest was really as drunk as he seemed; for he displayed at times alarming phases of lucidity.

They bumped rather violently together.

'Whatsh you got in hip pockesh? Hurt my leg againsh it.'

'Silver tobacco box,' said Lancaster hastily, 'I always keep it there.'

When they reached the head of the cellar steps, nothing would persuade Mr. Clerihew to go first. Still with his right hand clasped on something in his pocket, he followed Lancaster down. On the bottom step he paused. Lancaster waved him in to come and see the bins, but he was not to be moved.

'Nic' lil' cellar; take ullagesh for granted.'

So speaking Mr. Clerihew went tottering up the

steps backward with a foolish grin on his face. When he reached the top, Dora was coming out of the dining-room and his legs became more unsteady than ever. He tried to prop himself against a small bookcase with some nicknacks and a telephone on its lower shelf. The shelves came over with a crash, telephone and all, scattering books and broken crockery at Dora's feet.

'Ver' sorry,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he lurched into the dining-room. Most ungallantly he left the wreckage to Dora who stooped down hurriedly to pick up the telephone.

The pin was no longer where it had been against the medicine bottle. Dora had filled the three glasses with the port, Sandeman '84. Mr. Clerihew was alone for a few seconds. He was standing by his chair, propped with both hands on the table, when Dora and Lancaster came in together.

'Mus' propose healthsh and happinessh. Mus' drink wedding toast, no heeltapsh.'

'That's it,' said Lancaster, 'no heeltaps. Drink it right down, Dora.'

Swaying a little, Mr. Clerihew clinked glasses after one or two false starts. An outside observer might have noticed with surprise that the drunken Mr. Clerihew's hand was singularly steady, while the glasses in the hands of Mr. Lancaster and his fiancée, dead sober as they were, were all of a tremble.

For the first time Mr. Clerihew scarcely troubled to smell his wine. He passed the glass casually

under his nose. For an instant there came to him a sickening fancy. Did he detect a whiff of that faint scent of trampled nettles for which he had been watching throughout the meal? Anyhow the die was cast. He raised his glass to his lips.

'Now all together.'

Mr. Clerihew tossed off his glass of Sandeman '84, Jack Lancaster followed his example and Dora, after gulping a mouthful, spilt half her glass over the table-cloth.

A strange expression passed over Jack Lancaster's face, he gasped and choked and fell with a crash half across his chair.

'Jack,' shrieked Dora, as Mr. Clerihew sprang on her with the savagery of a Roman raping a Sabine. He had brought out from his pocket a length of whipcord cunningly noosed, and before she knew what had happened, both her hands were neatly trussed. She screamed and bit deep into his hand like a trapped cat.

'Damn,' said Mr. Clerihew quietly, as he brought out more whipcord. In his youth he had made a study of seamen's knots and in a minute or two he had Dora Griffiths lashed up so tightly that she could scarcely move. A noose round her neck had brought her back into her chair kicking and half-strangled, and a napkin served as a gag to stifle her yells. Never before in his life had Mr. Clerihew been brutal to a woman, but he was relentless in the violence with which he tightened every knot until it cut into the

flesh. Ariadne's life was at stake and he would take no risks.

Rushing out into the hall, he opened the front door and whistled. Tom came running through the garden gate with a small bag in his hands.

'Thank God, uncle, you are all right.'

'Quick,' said Mr. Clerihew, as he pushed his nephew into the house, 'we mustn't waste a moment. They tried to poison me—the same poison as they used on Sir Harry—but I changed the glasses. Lancaster got it instead of me and I've tied up Dora Griffiths as tight as I could. They thought I should have the ruby on me and tried to steal a march on Gomez.'

Tom gazed with horror at the scene in the dining-room. Lancaster's body was lying lifeless across the chair and Dora was spun up in a cocoon of whipcord.

'See she doesn't die of suffocation,' said Mr. Clerihew, 'but don't let her loose on any account. She is a perfect little devil. See how she has bitten my hand. Give me the case-opener.'

Out of the bag Tom produced a heavy case-opener.

'I believe Ariadne is somewhere upstairs,' said Mr. Clerihew, seizing the tool, 'if she is not here, I must catch the Paris train at any cost and hand over the ruby. It is her only chance.'

'All right,' said Tom, 'I'll stand on guard while you look for Ariadne, and I hope to God you find her.'

Mr. Clerihew tore up the stairs like a tornado,

brandishing the case-opener. The first three bedrooms he tried were unlocked and empty. The fourth was locked. He put his shoulder against the door and pushed with all his might, but it did not yield. With a smash he drove the case-opener into the crack beside the lock and threw his weight on the lever. The door gave way with a rending of wood.

He fell forward into a dark room. He found the switch and turned on the light. The room was scantily furnished and in one corner was a camp bed. On it lay a human form swathed in rope with a cushion tied loosely across the face to act as a gag. Faint moans were coming from beneath the cushion.

Mr. Clerihew took a pride in the sharpness of his pocket-knife. With a slash, he cut the fastening of the cushion and bared Ariadne's face.

'Give me air,' she moaned, 'give me air. I cannot bear it any longer.'

Mr. Clerihew's knife was busy already. Hard as he worked, it seemed to him a life-time before he had released her body from the rope-web in which it was enveloped.

'Have they hurt you, dear? Have they hurt you?' he stammered, as he threw down his knife and pulled out a flask.

Ariadne could only groan, but she opened her lips to allow him to pour between them a teaspoonful of his finest cognac. Gradually colour came back to

her face, and suddenly she threw her arms round his neck, murmuring incoherently :

' Will, Will, never let any one take me from you again. Hold me close, darling. Oh Will, is it really you ? '

Never in his most daring flights of fancy had Mr. Clerihew ventured to dream that one day he would hold Ariadne in his arms. Yet there she was sobbing and clinging to him and turning up her tear-wet face to his timid kisses.

At that moment it was revealed to Mr. Clerihew that he knew what was good for Ariadne better than she knew herself, that her happiness and his were one. The days of his humble unquestioning obedience were over and he spoke with a new authority : ' Ariadne darling, no more plots and kings. You are mine and I am yours, and neither time nor space nor life nor death can alter that. Your adventures end in the dull respectability of a shopkeeper's wife.'

' Rather an adventurous shopkeeper,' said Ariadne.

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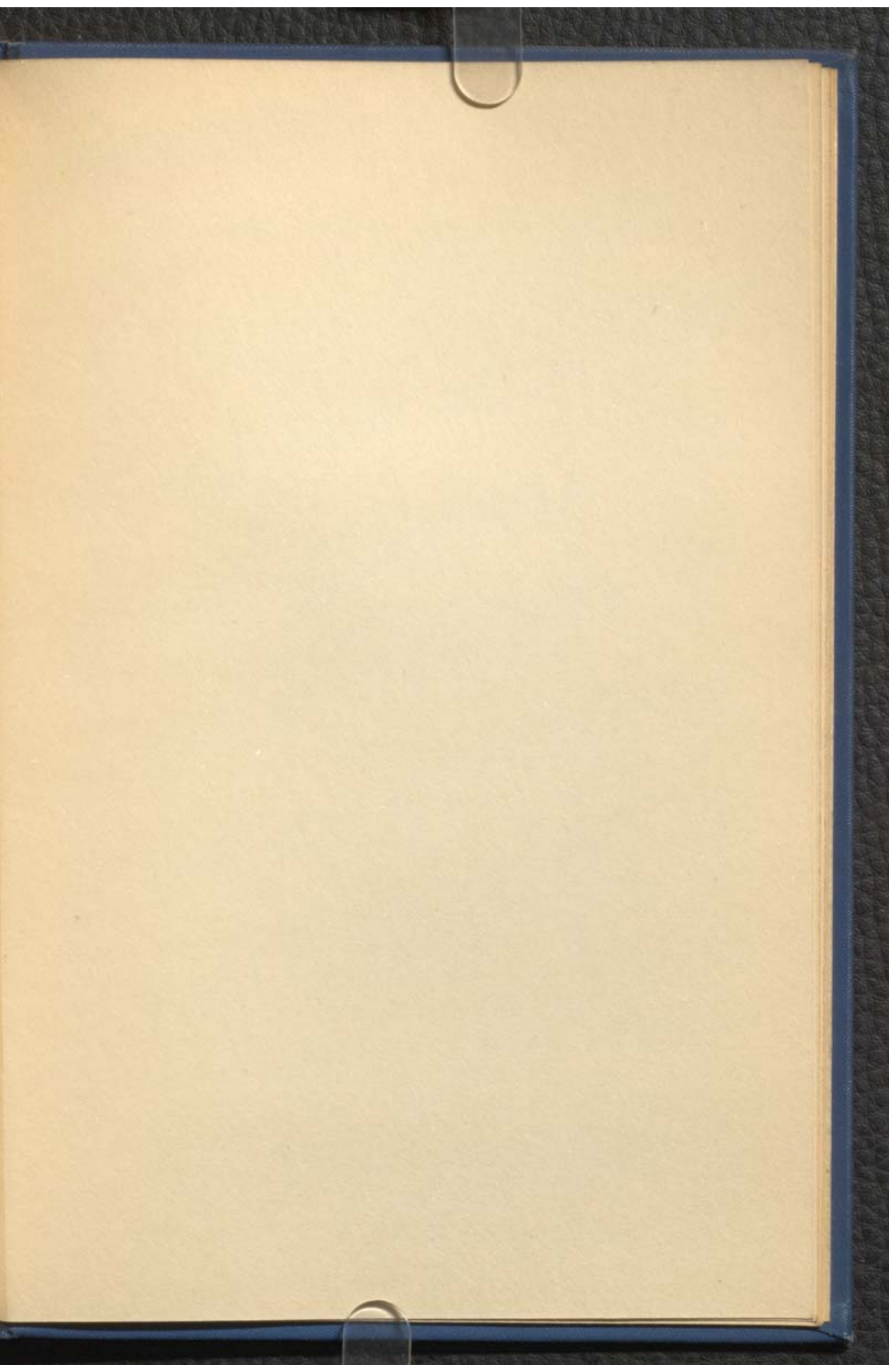

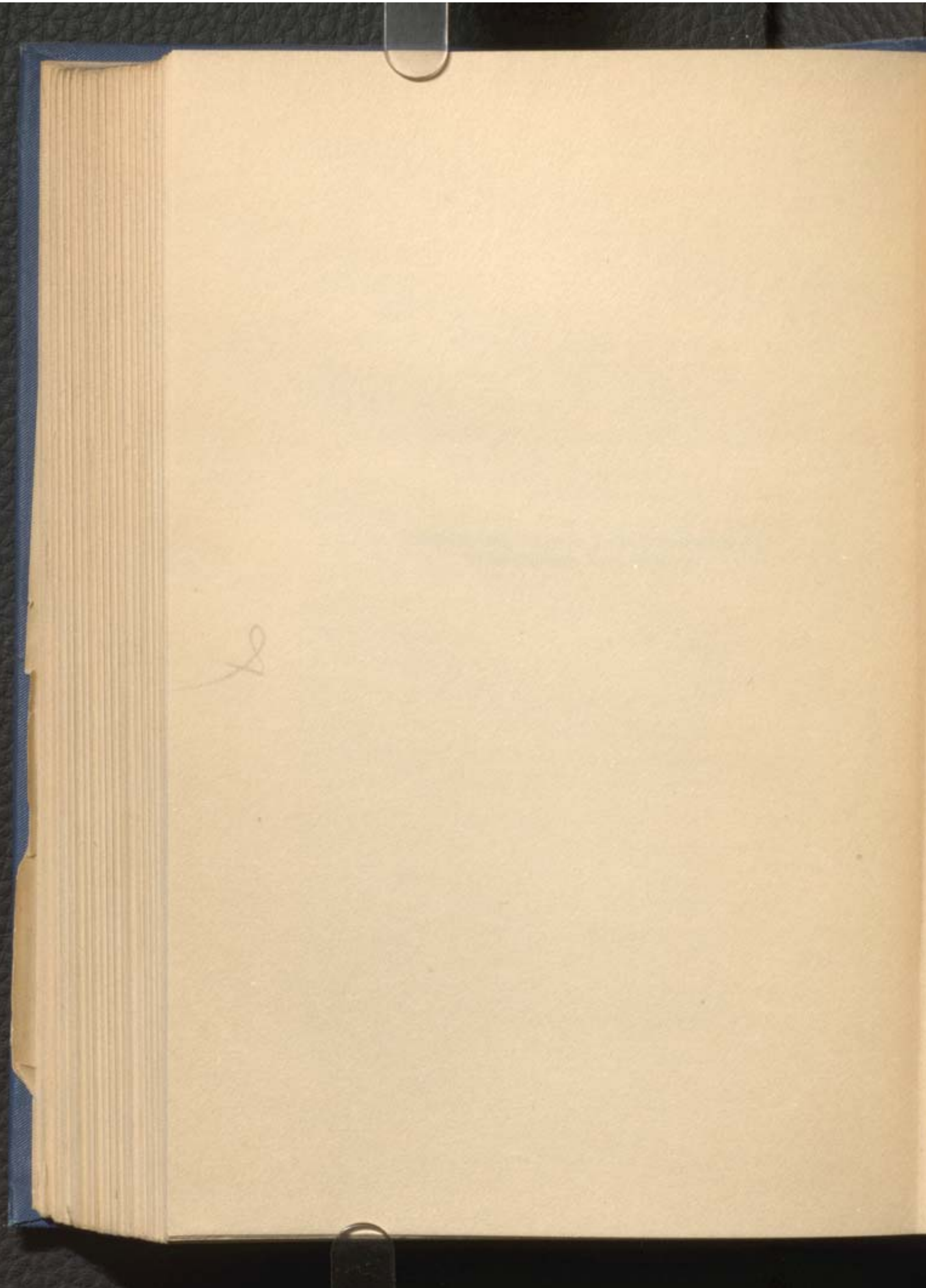

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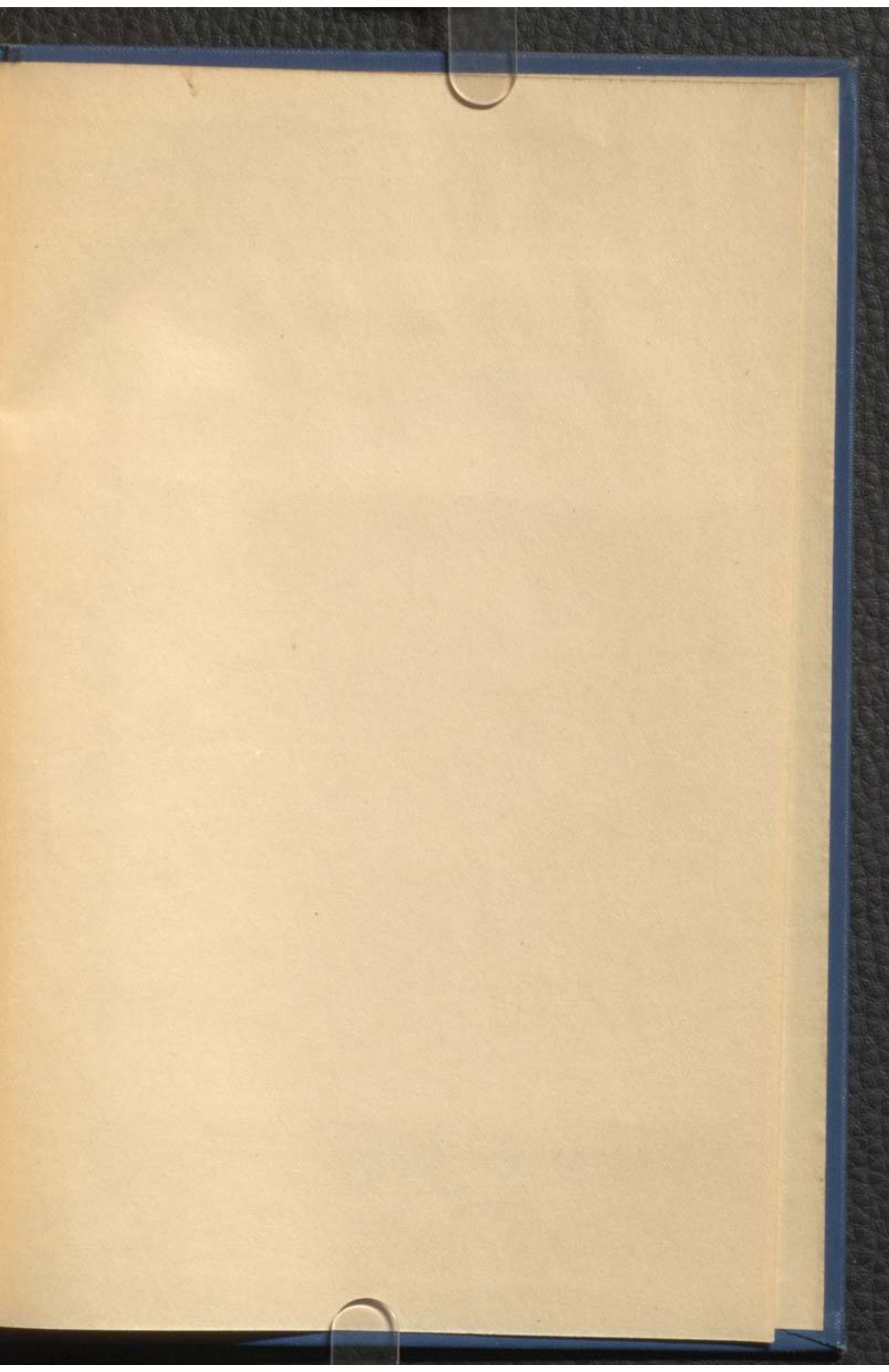

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