

"But you do have to be French to recognize one," he would add with a laugh. The Dutchman shifted awkwardly in his seat, his glass poised midway between the table and his open lips. One by one the little white lights along the Seine were coming on, and from the first-floor windows you could see the brightly lit bateaux-mouches passing through the arches of the Pont du Carrousel. De Gruse leaned forwards, took another sip of wine, and dabbed his lips with the corner of his napkin. "No, I didn't taste it, though Pierre did assure me his wife had lent the wine an incomparable aroma." "A truly full-bodied Bordeaux," he said warmly, "a wine among wines." "Can you imagine," asked de Gruse, as the claret was poured, "that there are people who actually serve wines they know nothing about?" "This fellow," continued de Gruse as though the Dutchman had not spoken, "always gave you the story behind his wines. We were tasting, in his winery, and we came to a cask that made him frown. 'The wine in this cask,' he said, and there were tears in his eyes, 'is the best vintage in the world. But it started its life far from the country where it was grown.'" De Gruse paused to check that his guests were being served. Pierre stood, breathing heavily, as the screw of the press caught at her hair and dragged her in. She screamed, struggling to free herself. The guests shuddered visibly and de Gruse paused in his story. "Pierre fed the rest of the body into the press and tidied up. Then he went up to the house, had a bath, ate a meal, and went to bed. The next day, he told everyone Faniry had finally left him and gone back to Madagascar. No-one was surprised." De Gruse gazed impassively at the Englishman. Without another word, de Gruse picked up his glass and introduced his bulbous, winery nose. "I like to hunt around the vineyards. Take this place I used to visit in Bordeaux. I got to know the winegrower there personally. That's the way to know what you're drinking." De Gruse and his wife exchanged glances. At the age of twenty-one, Pierre – that was the name he gave the winegrower – had been sent by his father to spend some time with his uncle in Madagascar. Faniry's face blackened, and she threw herself at him with new accusations. "Come on, Charles, it's simple arithmetic. Nothing to do with race or colour. You must've had bags of experience of this sort of thing. What d'you say?" The four guests held their glasses to the light and studied their blood-red contents. The party moved on to a dish of game served with a more vigorous claret. "A matter of pedigree, Charles," said the other politician. She snatched a knife from the wall and lunged at him with it. She was in tears, but it took all his strength to keep the knife from his throat. Eventually he pushed her off, and she stumbled towards the winepress. Then she fainted, though whether from the pain or the fumes he was not sure. "Of course," he continued, "Sixty-five was a bad year for red Bordeaux." "How could I refuse? It isn't every day that one finds such a pedigree." After a moment he looked up with watery eyes. They all agreed that it was the best wine they had ever tasted. said one of the guests, a German politician. "Personally, before I uncork a bottle I like to know what's in it." He asked if I agreed with him that red Bordeaux was the best wine in the world. Then he made the strangest statement. said the Dutchman. "Darling," she sighed, "what shall we do?" "Don't be absurd. Go to bed! You're drunk. And take that paint off. It makes you look like a tart." But the women in France, the white women, they were the tarts, and he was welcome to them. The screw bit slowly into her shoulder and she screamed again. He looked away until a sickening sound told him it was over. He paused again. His guests sat motionless, their eyes turned towards him. Except for Pierre's. "But, surely," she said, "you didn't taste it?" "And you didn't, er, buy any?" The other guests looked around uneasily at each other. "But look here, Gruse," said

the general at last, "you don't mean to tell me we're drinking this damned woman now, d'you?" "Everyone knows that the best vintage should always come first." "Yes, General. Bags!" "Really?" "But how? How can anyone be sure?" "One of them was the most extraordinary story I ever heard. Of course, I agreed." "Well?" "Do tell them, mon cheri," she said. This is the story he told them. "But, darling, I'm going to have a baby." He had never cared for her. He cared only about sex. He was obsessed with it. And with white women. Then he raised his arm and switched the current off. "Well, I won't go into the details at table," he said. That was the extraordinary thing. There was a long silence. They did not understand. "Heaven forbid, General," he said slowly.