

## CHAPTER II

### THE MALHERB AMPHORA

UPON the death of Sir Nicholas Malherb, his second son, Maurice, found himself in possession of fifteen thousand pounds and the famous Malherb amphora, an heirloom of the family. By arrangement with the elder brother, Maurice took the amphora instead of its equivalent in cash, and thus the succeeding baronet was richer by twenty thousand pounds, which more fully answered his purposes than the ancient treasure.

Concerning this gem a word must be spoken. While slightly inferior to the Portland vase in size, its workmanship equalled that of the more famous curio, and it was esteemed by connoisseurs as much superior to the Auldjo vase, or another marvellous example of similar cameo glass, still the acquisition of Naples. In Maurice Malherb's amphora, a bygone vitrarius had immortalised his art. The opaque bubble of white glass was coated with cerulean blue, and upon this surface another film of white had been spread. With the gem engraver's tools these strata were sculptured into a most exquisite design of little Loves playing hide and seek amid the foliage of the acanthus. Herein genius had accomplished a masterpiece, and all men capable of appreciating it wished Maurice Malherb joy of the treasure. To desire the amphora in place of its value was characteristic of his fine taste and spirit, and also symbolic of his wayward disposition, since money had been of far greater service to him in his agricultural pursuits. Then a catastrophe overtook Malherb, for within a week of his father's death, the amphora disappeared. The bubble of glass vanished like a bubble of water. Upon the morning of a certain day Maurice had moved it from its place in a locked cabinet, displayed it to relations and put it back again; but, returning to this