

The Butler – Roald Dahl

As soon as George Cleaver had made his first million, he and Mrs. Cleaver moved out of their small suburban villa into an elegant London house. They acquired a French chef called Monsieur Estragon and an English butler called Tibbs, both wildly expensive. With the help of these two experts, the Cleavers set out to climb the social ladder and began to give dinner parties several times a week on a lavish scale.

But these dinners never seemed quite to come off. There was no animation, no spark to set the conversation alight, no style at all. Yet the food was superb and the service faultless.

“What the heck’s wrong with our parties, Tibbs?” Mr. Cleaver said to the butler. “Why don’t nobody never loosen up and let themselves go?”

Tibbs inclined his head to one side and looked at the ceiling. “I hope, sir, you will not be offended if I offer a small suggestion.”

“What is it?”

“It’s the wine, sir.”

“What about the wine?”

“Well, sir, Monsieur Estragon serves superb food. Superb food should be accompanied by superb wine. But you serve them a cheap and very odious Spanish red.”

“Then why in heaven’s name didn’t you say so before, you twit?” cried Mr. Cleaver. “I’m not short of money. I’ll give them the best flipping wine in the world if that’s what they want! What is the best wine in the world?”

“Claret, sir,” the butler replied, “from the greatest châteaux in Bordeaux—Lafite, Latour, Haut-Brion, Margaux, Mouton-Rothschild and Cheval Blanc. And from only the very greatest vintage years, which are, in my opinion, 1906, 1914, 1929 and 1945. Cheval Blanc was also magnificent in 1895 and 1921, and Haut-Brion in 1906.”

“Buy them all!” said Mr. Cleaver. “Fill the flipping cellar from top to bottom!”

“I can try, sir,” the butler said. “But wines like these are extremely rare and cost a fortune.”

“I don’t give a hoot what they cost!” said Mr Cleaver. “Just go out and get them!”

That was easier said than done. Nowhere in England or in France could Tibbs find any wine from 1895, 1906, 1914 or 1921. But he did manage to get hold of some twenty-nines and forty-fives. The bills for these wines were astronomical. They were in fact so huge that even Mr. Cleaver began to sit up and take notice. And his interest quickly turned into outright enthusiasm when the butler suggested to him that a knowledge of wine was a very considerable social asset. Mr. Cleaver bought books on the subject and read them from cover to cover. He also learned a great deal from Tibbs himself, who taught him, among other things, just how wine should be properly tasted. “First, sir, you sniff it long and deep, with your nose right inside the top of the glass, like this. Then you take a mouthful and you open your lips a tiny bit and suck in air, letting the air bubble through the wine. Watch me do it. Then you roll it vigorously around your mouth. And finally you swallow it.”

In due course, Mr. Cleaver came to regard himself as an expert on wine, and inevitably he turned into a colossal bore. ‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he would announce at dinner, holding up his glass, ‘this is a Margaux ‘29! The greatest year of the century! Fantastic bouquet! Smells of cowslips! And notice especially the after taste and how the tiny trace of tannin gives it that glorious astringent quality! Terrific, ain’t it?’

The guests would nod and sip and mumble a few praises, but that was all.

“What’s the matter with the silly twerps?” Mr. Cleaver said to Tibbs after this had gone on for some time. “Don’t none of them appreciate a great wine?”

The butler laid his head to one side and gazed upward. “I think they would appreciate it, sir,” he said, “if they were able to taste it. But they can’t.”

“What the heck d’you mean, they can’t taste it?”

“I believe, sir, that you have instructed Monsieur Estragon to put liberal quantities of vinegar in the salad-dressing.”

“What’s wrong with that? I like vinegar.”

“Vinegar,” the butler said, “is the enemy of wine. It destroys the palate. The dressing should be made of pure olive oil and a little lemon juice. Nothing else.”

“Hogwash!” said Mr. Cleaver.

“As you wish, sir.”

“I’ll say it again, Tibbs. You’re talking hogwash. The vinegar don’t spoil my palate one bit.”

“You are very fortunate, sir,” the butler murmured, backing out of the room.

That night at dinner, the host began to mock his butler in front of the guests. “Mister Tibbs,” he said, “has been trying to tell me I can’t taste my wine if I put vinegar in the salad-dressing. Right, Tibbs?”

“Yes, sir,” Tibbs replied gravely.

“And I told him hogwash. Didn’t I, Tibbs?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This wine,” Mr. Cleaver went on, raising his glass, “tastes to me exactly like a Château Lafite ‘45, and what’s more it is a Château Lafite ‘45.”

Tibbs, the butler, stood very still and erect near the sideboard, his face pale. “If you’ll forgive me, sir,” he said, “that is not a Lafite ‘45.”

Mr Cleaver swung round in his chair and stared at the butler. “What the heck d’you mean,” he said. “There’s the empty bottles beside you to prove it!”

These great clarets, being old and full of sediment, were always decanted by Tibbs before dinner. They were served in cut-glass decanters, while the empty bottles, as is the custom, were placed on the sideboard. Right now, two empty bottles of Lafite ‘45 were standing on the sideboard for all to see.

“The wine you are drinking, sir,” the butler said quietly, “happens to be that cheap and rather odious Spanish red.”

Mr Cleaver looked at the wine in his glass, then at the butler.

The blood was coming to his face now, his skin was turning scarlet. “You’re lying, Tibbs!” he said.

“No sir, I’m not lying,” the butler said. “As a matter of fact, I have never served you any other wine but Spanish red since I’ve been here. It seemed to suit you very well.”

“I don’t believe him!” Mr Cleaver cried out to his guests. “The man’s gone mad.”

“Great wines,” the butler said, “should be treated with reverence. It is bad enough to destroy the palate with three or four cocktails before dinner, as you people do, but when you slosh vinegar over your food into the bargain, then you might just as well be drinking dishwater.”

Ten outraged faces around the table stared at the butler. He had caught them off balance. They were speechless.

“This,” the butler said, reaching out and touching one of the empty bottles lovingly with his fingers, “this is the last of the forty-fives. The twenty-nines have already been finished. But they were glorious wines. Monsieur Estragon and I enjoyed them immensely.”

The butler bowed and walked quite slowly from the room. He crossed the hall and went out of the front door of the house into the street where Monsieur Estragon was already loading their suitcases into the boot of the small car which they owned together.