

Taste

There were six of us at dinner that night at Mike Schofield's house in London: Mike and his wife and daughter, my wife and I, and a man called Richard Pratt.

Richard Pratt was famous for his love of food and wine. He was president of a small society known as the Epicures, and each month he sent privately to its members information about food and wines. He organized dinners where wonderful dishes and rare wines were served. He refused to smoke for fear of harming his ability to taste, and when discussing a wine, he had a strange habit of describing it as if it were a living being. 'A sensible wine,' he would say, 'rather shy but quite sensible.' Or, 'A good-humoured wine, kind and cheerful – slightly rude perhaps, but still good-natured.'

I had been to dinner at Mike's twice before when Richard Pratt was there, and on each occasion Mike and his wife had cooked a very special meal for the famous epicure. And this one, clearly, was to be no exception. The yellow roses on the dining table, the quantity of shining silver, the three wine glasses to each person and, above all, the faint smell of roasting meat from the kitchen brought on a strong desire for the immediate satisfaction of my hunger.

As we sat down, I remembered that on both Richard Pratt's last visits Mike had played a little betting game with him over the claret. He had asked him to name it and to guess its age. Pratt had replied that that should not be too difficult if it was one of the great years. Mike had then bet him a case of that same wine that he could not do it. Pratt had accepted, and had won both times. Tonight I felt sure that the little game would be played again, since Mike was quite ready to lose the bet to prove that his wine

was good enough to be recognized, and Pratt seemed to take pleasure in showing his knowledge.

The meal began with a plate of fish, fried in butter, and to go with it there was a Mosel wine. Mike got up and poured the wine himself, and when he sat down again, I could see that he was watching Richard Pratt. He had set the bottle in front of me so that I could read its name. It said, 'Geierslay Ohligsberg 1945'. He leaned over and whispered to me that Geierslay was a small village in the Mosel area, almost unknown outside Germany. He said that this wine we were drinking was something unusual, and that so little of this wine was produced that it was almost impossible for a stranger to get any of it. He had visited Geierslay personally the summer before in order to obtain the few bottles that they had allowed him to have.

'I doubt whether anyone else in the country has any of it at the moment,' he said.

I saw him look again at Richard Pratt. 'The great thing about Mosel,' he continued, raising his voice, 'is that it's the perfect wine to serve before a claret. A lot of people serve a Rhine wine instead, but that's because they don't know any better.'

Mike Schofield was a man who had become very rich very quickly and now also wanted to be considered someone who understood and enjoyed the good things in life.

'An attractive little wine, don't you think?' he added. He was still watching Richard Pratt. I could see him give a quick look down the table each time he dropped his head to take a mouthful of fish. I could almost feel him waiting for the moment when Pratt would drink his first drop, and look up from his glass with a smile of pleasure, perhaps even of surprise, and then there would be a discussion and Mike would tell him about the village of Geierslay.

But Richard Pratt did not taste his wine. He was too deep in conversation with Mike's eighteen-year-old daughter, Louise. He

was half turned towards her, smiling at her, telling her, as far as I could hear, some story about a cook in a Paris restaurant. As he spoke, he leaned closer and closer to her, and the poor girl leaned as far as she could away from him, smiling politely and looking not at his face but at the top button of his dinner jacket.

We finished our fish, and the servant came round and took away the plates. When she came to Pratt, she saw that he had not yet touched his food, so she waited, and Pratt noticed her. He quickly began to eat, pushing the pieces of fish into his mouth with rapid movements of his fork. Then, when he had finished, he reached for his glass, and in two short swallows he poured the wine down his throat and turned immediately to continue his conversation with Louise Schofield.

Mike saw it all. I was conscious of him sitting there, very still, looking at his guest. His round, cheerful face seemed to loosen slightly, but he controlled himself and said nothing.

Soon the servant came forward with the second course. This was a large joint of roast meat. She placed it on the table in front of Mike, who stood up and cut it very thinly, laying the pieces gently on the plates for her to take to the guests. When everyone had been served, he put down the knife and leaned forward with both hands on the edge of the table.

'Now,' he said, speaking to all of us but looking at Richard Pratt. 'Now for the claret. I must go and get it, if you'll excuse me.'

'Get it?' I said. 'Where is it?'

'In my study, already open; it's breathing.'

'Why the study?'

'It's the best place in the house for a wine to reach room temperature. Richard helped me to choose it last time he was here.'

At the sound of his name, Richard looked round.

'That's right, isn't it?' Mike said.

'Yes,' Pratt answered seriously. 'That's right.'

'On top of the green cupboard in my study,' Mike said. 'That's the place we chose. A good spot in a room with an even temperature. Excuse me now, will you, while I get it.'

The thought of another wine to play with had cheered him up, and he hurried out of the door. He returned a minute later more slowly, walking softly, holding in both hands a wine basket in which a dark bottle lay with the name out of sight, facing downwards. 'Now!' he cried as he came towards the table. 'What about this one, Richard? You'll never name this one!'

Richard Pratt turned slowly and looked up at Mike, then his eyes travelled down to the bottle in its small basket. He stuck out his wet lower lip, suddenly proud and ugly.

'You'll never get it,' Mike said. 'Not in a hundred years.'

'A claret?' Richard Pratt said, rather rudely.

'Of course.'

'I suppose, then, that not much of this particular claret is produced?'

'Perhaps it is, Richard. And perhaps it isn't.'

'But it's a good year? One of the great years?'

'Yes, I can promise that.'

'Then it shouldn't be too difficult,' Richard Pratt said, speaking slowly, looking extremely bored. But to me there was something strange about his way of speaking; between the eyes there was a shadow of something evil, and this gave me a faint sense of discomfort as I watched him.

'This one is really rather difficult,' Mike said. 'I won't force you to bet on this one.'

'Really. And why not?'

'Because it's difficult.'

'That's rather an insult to me, you know.'

'My dear man,' Mike said, 'I'll have a bet on it with pleasure, if that's what you wish.'

'It shouldn't be too hard to name it.'

'You mean you want to bet?'

'I'm perfectly ready to bet,' Richard Pratt said.

'All right, then, we'll bet the usual. A case of the wine itself.'

'You don't think I'll be able to name it, do you?'

'As a matter of fact, and with respect, I don't,' Mike said. He was trying to remain polite, but Pratt was making little attempt to hide his low opinion of the whole business. Strangely, though, his next question seemed to show a certain interest.

'Would you like to increase the bet?'

'No, Richard. A case is enough.'

'Would you like to bet fifty cases?'

'That would be silly.'

Mike stood very still behind his chair at the head of the table, carefully holding the bottle in its basket. There was a whiteness about his nose now and his mouth was shut very tightly.

Pratt was sitting back in his chair, looking up at Mike. His eyes were half closed, and a little smile touched the corners of his lips. And again I saw, or thought I saw, something very evil about the man's face.

'So you don't want to increase the bet?'

'As far as I'm concerned, I don't care,' Mike said. 'I'll bet you anything you like.'

The three women and I sat quietly, watching the two men. Mike's wife was becoming annoyed; I felt that at any moment she was going to interrupt. Our meat lay in front of us on our plates, slowly steaming.

'So you'll bet me anything I like?'

'That's what I told you. I'll bet you anything you like.'

'Even ten thousand pounds?'

'Certainly I will, if that's the way you want it.' Mike was more confident now. He knew quite well that he could afford any sum that Pratt mentioned.

'So you say that I can name the bet?' Pratt asked again.

'That's what I said.'

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

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

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

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

'All right, then,' Pratt said. 'I'll tell you what I want you to bet.'

'Tell me then,' Mike said. 'I don't care what it is. I'll bet.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I meant money.'

'You didn't *say* money.'

'That's what I meant.'

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

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

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

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

example. How about my house?'

'Which one?' Mike asked, joking now.

'The country one.'

'Why not the other one as well?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'He seems to think he can.'

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

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

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

quite a bit about this wine business, you know. Heavens, girl, I'm your father and you don't think I'd make you do – do something you didn't want to do, do you? I'm trying to make you some money.'

'Mike!' his wife said sharply. 'Stop it now, Mike, please!'

Again, he ignored her. 'If you will take this bet,' he said to his daughter, 'in ten minutes you'll be the owner of two large houses.'

'But I don't want two large houses, Daddy.'

'Then sell them. Sell them back to him immediately. I'll arrange all that for you. And then, just think of it, my dear, you'll be rich! You'll be independent for the rest of your life!'

'Oh, Daddy, I don't like it. I think it's silly.'

'So do I,' the mother said. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Michael, for even suggesting such a thing! Your own daughter, too!'

Mike did not look at her. 'Take it!' he said eagerly, looking hard at the girl. 'Take it, quickly! I promise you won't lose.'

'But I don't like it, Daddy.'

'Come on, girl. Take it!'

Mike was pushing her hard. He was leaning towards her, and fixing her with two bright, determined eyes, and it was not easy for his daughter to refuse him.

'But what if I lose?'

'I keep telling you, you can't lose.'

'Oh, Daddy, must I?'

'I'm making you a fortune. So come on now. What do you say, Louise? All right?'

For the last time, she paused. Then she gave a helpless little movement of the shoulders and said, 'Oh, all right, then. Just so long as you swear there's no danger of losing.'

'Good!' Mike cried. 'That's fine! Then it's a bet!'

'Yes,' Richard Pratt said, looking at the girl. 'It's a bet.'

Immediately, Mike picked up the wine and walked excitedly

round the table, filling up everybody's glasses. Now everybody was watching Richard Pratt, watching his face as he reached slowly for his glass with his right hand and lifted it to his nose. The man was about fifty years old and he did not have a pleasant face. Somehow, it was all mouth – mouth and lips – the full, wet lips of the professional epicure. The lower lip hung down in the centre, a permanently open taster's lip. Like a keyhole, I thought, watching it; his mouth is like a large wet keyhole.

Slowly he lifted the glass to his nose. The point of his nose entered the glass and moved over the surface of the wine. He moved the wine gently around in the glass to smell it better. He closed his eyes, and now the whole top half of his body, the head and neck and chest, seemed to become a kind of large sensitive smelling-machine.

Mike, I noticed, was sitting back in his chair, trying to appear unconcerned, but he was watching every movement. Mrs Schofield, the wife, sat upright at the other end of the table, looking straight ahead, her face tight with disapproval. The daughter, Louise, had moved her chair away a little and sideways, facing the epicure, and she, like her father, was watching closely.

For at least a minute, the smelling process continued; then, without opening his eyes or moving his head, Pratt lowered the glass to his mouth and poured in almost half the wine. He paused, his mouth full, getting the first taste. And now, without swallowing, he took in through his lips a thin breath of air which mixed with the wine in the mouth and passed on down into his lungs. He held his breath, blew it out through his nose, and finally began to roll the wine around under his tongue.

It was an impressive performance.

'Um,' he said, putting down the glass, moving a pink tongue over his lips. 'Um – yes. A very interesting little wine – gentle and graceful. We can start by saying what it is *not*. You will pardon me for doing this carefully, but there is much to lose. Usually I would

perhaps take a bit of a chance, but this time I must move carefully, must I not?' He looked up at Mike and he smiled, a thick-lipped, wet-lipped smile. Mike did not smile back.

'First, then, which area of Bordeaux does this wine come from? That's not too difficult to guess. It's far too light to be from either St Emilion or Graves. It's obviously a Médoc. There's no doubt about *that*. Now, from which part of Médoc does it come? That should not be too difficult to decide. Margaux? No, it cannot be Margaux. Pauillac? It cannot be Pauillac, either. It is too gentle for Pauillac. No, no, this is a very gentle wine. Unmistakably this is a St Julien.'

He leaned back in his chair and placed his fingers carefully together. I found myself waiting rather anxiously for him to go on. The girl, Louise, was lighting a cigarette. Pratt heard the match strike and he turned on her, suddenly very angry. 'Please!' he said. 'Please don't do that! It's a terrible habit, to smoke at table!'

She looked up at him, slowly and disrespectfully, still holding the burning match in one hand. She blew out the match, but continued to hold the unlighted cigarette in her fingers.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' Pratt said, 'but I simply cannot have smoking at table.'

She didn't look at him again.

'Now, let me see – where were we?' he said. 'Ah yes. This wine is from Bordeaux, from St Julien, in the area of Médoc. So far, so good. But now we come to the more difficult part – the name of the producer. For in St Julien there are so many, and as our host so rightly remarked, there is often not much difference between the wine of one and the wine of another. But we shall see.'

He picked up his glass and took another small drink.

'Yes,' he said, sucking his lips, 'I was right. Now I am sure of it. It's from a very good year – from a great year, in fact. That's better! Now we are closing in! Who are the wine producers in the area of St Julien?'

Again he paused. He took up his glass. Then I saw his tongue shoot out, pink and narrow, the end of it reaching into the wine. A horrible sight. When he lowered his glass, his eyes remained closed. Only his lips were moving, sliding over each other like two pieces of wet rubber.

'There it is again!' he cried. 'Something in the middle taste. Yes, yes, of course! Now I have it! The wine comes from around Beychevelle. I remember now. The Beychevelle area, and the river and the little port. Could it actually be Beychevelle itself? No, I don't think so. Not quite. But it is somewhere very close. Talbot? Could it be Talbot? Yes, it could. Wait one moment.'

He drank a little more wine, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed Mike Schofield and how he was leaning further and further forward over the table, his mouth slightly open, his small eyes fixed on Richard Pratt.

'No, I was wrong. It is not a Talbot. A Talbot comes forward to you just a little more quickly than this one; the fruit is nearer the surface. If it is a '34, which I believe it is, then it couldn't be a Talbot. Well, well, let me think. It is not a Beychevelle and it is not a Talbot, but – but it is so close to both of them, so close, that it must be from somewhere almost in between. Now, which could that be?'

He was silent, and we waited, watching his face. Everyone, even Mike's wife, was watching him now. I heard the servant put down the dish of vegetables on a table behind me, gently, so as not to break the silence.

'Ah!' he cried. 'I have it! Yes, I think I have it!'

For the last time, he drank some wine. Then, still holding the glass up near his mouth, he turned to Mike and he smiled, a slow, silky smile, and he said, 'You know what this is? This is the little Château Branaire-Ducru.'

Mike sat tight, not moving.

'And the year, 1934.'

We all looked at Mike, waiting for him to turn the bottle around in its basket.

'Is that your final answer?' Mike said.

'Yes, I think so.'

'Well, is it, or isn't it?'

'Yes, it is.'

'What was the name again?'

'Château Branaire-Ducru. Pretty little farm. Lovely old house. I know it quite well. I can't think why I didn't recognize it immediately.'

'Come on, Daddy,' the girl said. 'Turn the bottle round and let's have a look. I want my two houses.'

'Just a minute,' Mike said. 'Wait just a minute.' He was sitting very quiet, and his face was becoming pale, as though all the force was flowing slowly out of him.

'Michael!' his wife called out sharply from the other end of the table. 'What's the matter?'

'Keep out of this, Margaret, will you please.'

Richard Pratt was looking at Mike, smiling with his mouth, his eyes small and bright. Mike was not looking at anyone.

'Daddy!' the daughter cried. 'You don't mean to say he guessed it right!'

'Now, stop worrying, my dear,' Mike said. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

I think it was more to get away from his family than anything else that Mike then turned to Richard Pratt and said, 'I think you and I had better go into the next room and have a little talk.'

'I don't want a little talk,' Pratt said. 'All I want is to see the name on that bottle.'

He knew he was a winner now and I could see that he was prepared to become thoroughly nasty if there was any trouble. 'What are you waiting for?' he said to Mike. 'Go on and turn it round.'

Then this happened: the servant, a small, upright figure in her white-and-black uniform, was standing beside Richard Pratt, holding something out in her hand. 'I believe these are yours, sir,' she said.

Pratt looked round, saw the pair of glasses that she held out to him, and for a moment he paused. 'Are they? Perhaps they are, I don't know.'

'Yes, sir, they're yours.' The servant was an old woman – nearer seventy than sixty – a trusted employee of the family for many years. She put the glasses down on the table beside him.

Without thanking her, Pratt picked them up and slipped them into his top pocket.

But the servant did not go away. She remained standing beside Richard Pratt, and there was something so unusual in her manner and in the way she stood there, small, still and upright, that I found myself watching her with sudden anxiety. Her old grey face had a cold, determined look.

'You left them in Mr Schofield's study,' she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. 'On top of the green cupboard in his study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner.'

It took a few moments for the full meaning of her words to be understood, and in the silence that followed I saw Mike slowly pulling himself up in his chair, and the colour coming to his face, and his eyes opening wide, and the curl of his mouth – and a dangerous whiteness beginning to spread around his nose.

'Now, Michael!' his wife said. 'Keep calm now, Michael, dear! Keep calm!'