Wine Is a Mocker

Isaac Asimov

GEORGE HAD ORDERED A GLASS OF white wine with which to begin his dinner, and I had ordered a Virgin Mary, which is as close as I care to come to vinous revelry.

I sipped at my spiced tomato juice gently and became aware that George was staring at his bijou goblet with disgust. It was quite empty’ and I had not seen him down it. He can be extraordinarily deft at times.

“What’s the matter, George?” I asked.

He sighed heavily. “In the old days," he said, “you could get a huge tankard of hearty ale for a penny.”

“In what old days, George? Are we talking about the Middle Ages?”

“In the *old* days,” repeated George. “Now, for just enough weak wine to cast a mist on your upper lip, you have to break into your little boy’s piggy bank—if you have one.”

“What piggy bank are you discussing? It's not even costing you that medieval penny you've |ust mentioned. And if you didn't have enough, order another. I'm good for it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing it,” said George haughtily. “Ordi­narily. But since you suggest it. and I would like to oblige you—" He tapped the rim of his empty glass and rhe waiter hastened to bring him another.

“Wine.” he said, staring at his second goblet, “is a mocker. The Bible says that. Either Moses or Beelzebub said it.”

“Actually.” I said, “you’ll find it in Proverbs 20:1. where it says. ‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whoever is deceived thereby is not wise.’ The book is attributed, by tradition, to King Solomon.”

He stared ar me with massive indignation. “Why on Earth do you insist in indulging in your pseudo-erudition? It gets you con­demned on all sides. As I was about to say. you'll find rhe statement either in Habbakuk or Malachi. I suppose you’re not going to argue about its being in the Bible.”

“Not ar all.”

“There you are. then. I mentioned the fact that wine is a mocker because I was thinking of my friend. Cambyses Green.”

“Cambyses?”

“He was named for some ancient oriental potentate.”

“I know that.” I said. “The son of Cyrus the Great of Persia. But how did he come—”

“Let us order our dinner.” said George, “and I will tell you rhe story of Cambyses Green.”

My triend. Cambyses Green [said George], who was named in honor of some ancient oriental potentate, was very nearly rhe most charming, the most pleasant person you could ever expect to meet. He had a never-ending fund of droll stories that he could tell in a fascinating manner. He was utterly at ease with strangers and could win them over at once. He was suave and charming toward young women, all of whom were fascinated with him. though he reserved his love, with all the ardor that Eros could bestow on him. for Valencia Judd, a young woman of surpassing beauty and intelligence.

It was Valencia who came to me on one occasion, her light blonde hair disheveled, her small tip-tilted nose just slightly red­dened. as though she had been weeping, and a little handkerchief, suspiciously moist, clutched in her left hand. Her name was nor really Valencia, you know. That was actually a shortened version of her true name, which was Benevolencia, from which you can judge the sweetness of her disposition and the warmth of her heart.

She said, “Oh, Uncle George," and she paused to gurgle a bit, as the words stuck in her throat.

I was not her uncle in the generic sense, but if she considered me an uncle, I was bound to consider her my niece, and with the natu­ral affection I would have for any incredibly beautiful young woman bearing such a relationship, I put my arm about her waist, and let her weep softly on my shoulder, while I soothed her with a gentle kiss or two.

“It's Cambyses," she said, at last.

“Surely," I said, a nameless fear tugging at my chest, “he has not forgotten himself and made any suggestions—"

“Oh, no," she said, her large, blue eyes opening wide. “/ make all the suggestions. It’s just that—well, he is *so* nice."

“Of course, and handsome and intelligent and charming and w ith a keen sense of humor—"

“Oh, yes. Uncle George, oh, yes. All that and more."

“In that case, dear little Valencia, what is it that is making you weep? An overdose of joy?"

“Not really. You see, Uncle George, I don't know’ if you've ever noticed it, but Cambyses is always just a little bit drunk."

“Is he?" I looked blank. I had always been with him under con­vivial conditions, at which times he *was* drunk, but then so was everybody. Even I, myself, having had a very few drinks, was usually in a rather pleasant humor, as any barmaid would be willing to tes­tify. “Surely, on those occasions, when he—"

“No, Uncle George," she said, gently. “There are no occasions when it is not so. He is *always* just a little bit drunk." She sighed. “And, of course, when I say ‘a little bit drunk,’ I mean he is quite drunk. In fact, mostly stinking drunk."

“I cannot believe it."

“Just the same, I cannot endure it. Do you think. Uncle George, since you are such an impressive figure of rectitude and dignity, that you could perhaps speak to Cambyses and persuade him that wine is a mocker and that he should drink fresh, wholesome water, with perhaps an occasional Perrier at times of great hilarity."

“Granted," I said, dubiously, “that I am a model of rectitude and dignity, I don't know’ if I can persuade Cambyses—"

At this point, Valencia's mouth opened, her handkerchief moved to her eyes and I know she was a microsecond removed from howl­ing her grief. So I said, “But I will try, little one. I will do my best.”

1 did see Cambyses in consequence. It was the first time I had ever visited him at his home. In fact, it was the first time I had ever seen him alone and without the presence of a roystering throng, all of whom were steadily consuming spirituous liquor of varying degrees of potency.

I suppose I had, therefore, an instinctive expectation that I would meet up with a grave and serious Cambyses, for it is not for nothing that those who are grave and serious are characterized by the adjective “sober.”

But I was quite wrong. It was the same merry Cambyses I was accustomed to. As I stepped into his room, he laughed loudly and clapped me on rhe shoulder by way of a hearty’ greeting.

“My pal,” he said. “My buddy. What are you doing without a drink in your hand? You look naked. Come, let me correct that vile omission.”

And he forced a small whiskey on me. It was a little early for such dissipation but it would have been unkind of me to refuse. I tossed it off and, as I did so, I thought of all the times when he had stood me a drink, and of all those other times when he had refused to let me stand him a drink bur had stood me another. He was, if you like, one of nature’s noblemen in that respect.

He was also, now that Valencia had opened my eyes, one of nature’s drunks. Although it was early afternoon and he was alone, there was a distinct weave to his steps, a pronounced glaze to his eyes, a definite vagueness to his smile, and an emphatic touch of alcoholic fragrance in the air—especially w hen he exhaled.

I said, “Cambyses, my friend, I come to you on behalf of that excellent young creature, Valencia Judd.”

He said, “Nature’s noblewoman; a beautiful and virtuous god­dess. I drink to her.”

“No,” I said, urgently, “don’t drink to her. That is the root of the problem. She has the feeling you drink to her too often and to everything else, indiscriminately, as well. She wishes you to cease.”

He stared at me owhshly. “She has never said so to me.”

“I suspect that, cowed by your manifold good qualities, she has hesitated to hurt your feelings by pointing out your one small fault, your one tiny misdemeanor, your one minuscule flaw—the fact that you are a drunken bum.”

“Just because I take a tiny sip of something for medicinal pur­poses on rare occasions?”

“The sips are not tiny, Cambyses, nor the occasions rare, nor the reasons medicinal, though the rest of your statement I accept. Therefore, though Valencia did not say so directly, she wishes you to understand that lips that touch liquor are likely to touch hers only at infrequent intervals.”

“But it's too late, George, old boy, old friend. My lips touch liquor. I can’t deny it.”

“They are pickled in it, Cambyses. Can you not cease? Can you not turn away from this dreadful habit and bathe in the pure sun of sobriety as you once did?”

He frowned thoughtfully. “When did I once do?”

“Start now.”

He poured himself another drink, and put it to his lips. “George,” he said, “have you ever thought what a stinking, miser­able hellhole the world is?”

“Frequently,” I said.

“Have you never wanted to change it into a fine, warm, delight­ful paradise?”

“Often,” I said.

“I’ve done it. I’ve discovered the secret. A few drinks, the merest imbibing of the friendly warmth of gin, or rum, or brandy or—or any of a number of drinks of the sort—and the grim misery of this Earth, melts and dissolves. Tears are changed to laughter, sour looks to smiles, the welkin rings with song. Come, come, am I to give up all this?”

“Some of it. When Valencia is looking, at least.”

“I cannot. Not even for Valencia. My duty is to humanity and to the world. Can I allow society to sink back into the foulness that would characterize it were it not for the alchemy of alcohol?”

“But the alchemy you speak of is subjective. It shows its effect only in your mind. It has no real existence.”

“George,” said Cambyses, solemnly, “you are a dear and beloved friend, so I cannot order you out of my house. But I intend to do it anyway. Out of my house!”

As you know, old man, if I have a failing it is that of having an incredibly soft heart. I would never consent to these meals I con­sume at your expense, for instance, were I not concerned over your obvious need for stimulating company. It means that I must suffer yours, but what of that?

In any case, my heart was aching for Valencia and I felt it was a case for Azazel, my two-centimeter friend from another plane of existence.

This being —Oh, have I told you about him? —Very well, there is no need to sigh melodramatically.

For once, Azazel was not annoyed at being called up. He was delighted. At least, he said he was.

He was dancing around, making peculiar gestures with his tiny hands, the details of w hich I could not make out. “How triply fortu­nate for him that you called me here,” he said in his squeaky little voice. “I would have sepotulated him. I would have flaxated his modinem. I would have—”

“You would have done this to whom?” I asked with mild inter­est. “And for what reason?”

Azazel said, with an attempt at dignity quite incompatible with his squeaky voice and tiny size, “He addressed me in terms no gen­tlebeing would use to another, the big sasquam.”

I let him cool down. Being a small object on his own world as on ours, he was forever being stepped on and tripped over, which was a good thing, for it was his forever bruised ego that made him willing to help me. He had a great need to demonstrate his powers.

I said, “A friend of mine is an alcoholic.”

“Ah,” said Azazel. “He creeps into holes with alcos. What are alcos?”

“No, no. Alcohol is an organic fluid that acts as a stimulant in small doses, but as a mental disorienter in large. My friend is inca­pable of refraining from large doses.”

For a moment, Azazel looked puzzled. Then, “Ah, you mean a ‘phosphotonic.’”

“A phosphotonic?” I said, rather puzzled, I admit.

Azazel explained. “People on my world enjoy phosphatones of one sort or another. We sniff phosphine, drink a variety of phos­phate solutions, lap up phosphopyruvic acid and so on.” Azazel shuddered. “Carried to excess it is a vile habit, but I have found that a little bit of phosphorylized ammonia taken after meals is an excellent digestive aid. Hence our proverb, ‘Take a little phospham for your stomach's sake.'” Azazel rubbed his BB-shaped abdomen and licked his red lips with a small red tongue.

I said, “The question is: how to cure my alcoholic friend and induce him to lay off the sauce?”

“Lay off the—”

“I mean cease drinking in and out of season.”

“That is easy,” said Azazel. “It is child's play to a being of my technological attainments. I need merely to alter the taste centers of his brain as to make alcohol taste to him like something vile—excre­ment, perhaps.”

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not. That is going too far. A rational amount of alcoholic intake, such as the amount in which I indulge myself, scarcely a quart a day, is invigorating and no one should be deprived of that. In the excellence of your w isdom, O Mighty Vast­ness, think of something else.”

“Well,” said Azazel, “is there any way in which drinking alco­hol can be made into a virtue? Are there drinkers who are admired?”

“There are connoisseurs,” I said, after some thought. “There are people who are very knowledgeable about drinks, and can distin­guish those of high quality. They are usually treated with great admiration.”

“Your friend is not one of these? He does not distinguish between high quality and low?”

“Good lord, no. He’ll drink bathtub gin, hair tonic, shoe pol­ish, antifreeze. It is astonishing that nothing seems to kill him out- nght.”

“Well, there you are, then, I shall so alter the sense receptors of his brain that he will be able to distinguish between any two vari­eties, however closely allied, and tell the superior. He will no longer be considered an alcoholic to be despised but a connoisseur to be admired. —Actually, I have this connoisseurish quality with regard to our own phosphatones and have frequently struck large assem­blages with awe ar my ability—”

He went on and on in excruciating detail, but I listened, if not gladly, then with patience, so eager was I to help Cambyses.

I visited Cambyses some time afterward w hen I thought that he had gotten over the spleen with which he had ordered me from his digs. I found I had nothing to fear. Alcoholics are merry spirits who never remember the evanescent angers and petulances of the past— or anything else, either.

Not that Cambyses looked much like a merry spirit. He sat on the floor surrounded by a sea of shotglasses, filled with liquids of different appearances. On his face was a look of settled melancholy.

I said, in alarm, “Cambyses, what is wrong?”

“I scarcely know,” said Cambyses, “but I have apparently become aware of the shortcomings of these items. Here, George, try this.”

It was a tawny port of considerable power, as a slight sip showed me. I said, “Very good, old man.”

He said, “Very good? Are you serious? It is deficient in fruiti­ness!”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I said.

“You wouldn’t,” he said, insultingly. “Nor is it as mellow as it should be. You weren't aware of an inappropriate sharpness?”

“Not at all.”

Cambyses closed his eyes and shook his head as though overcome with faintness at having witnessed my obtuseness. He said, “About the best thing I could find in my collection is this one. Try this.”

It was a cherry Heering of surpassing excellence. I almost cried aloud at the magnificence of its bouquet and the delicacy of its taste. “Magnificent,” I said in awe.

“Barely tolerable,” he said. “I admit the idiots meant well, but somewhere in the preparation, the fluid passed over a rusty nail­head. There is a not-quite-overpowering but definitely unpleasant metallic taste to it.”

“I noticed no such thing,” I said indignantly.

“That’s because you wouldn’t notice a unicorn if it jabbed you in your fat behind,” he replied coarsely.

I could no longer fail to notice the ill nature of his taunts and these forced me to observe a characteristic I had never before associ­ated with my young friend.

“Cambyses,” I said, “surely you are sober.”

He looked up at me with a snarl. “What do you expect? I have nothing here I can bear to drink. It is all dishwater and poison.”

It was strange, I acknowledged to myself in the months that fol­lowed. Azazel had not so reoriented Cambyses’ sense perceptions so to make all alcoholic drinks taste like excrement. Azazel had instead simply given Cambyses a sense of discrimination of superlative deli­cacy and in his search for an unattainable ideal, Cambyses acted as though any drink that fell short of that ideal (that is, *all* of them) tasted like excrement.

Cambyses became not merely sober, he became a very model of sobriety. He walked stiffly upright, cultivated an austere glance, went to bed early, woke early, adopted habits of distressing regular­ity and was stern to the point of captiousness toward anyone who deviated from the paths of rigid virtue in the slightest. To him, all normal human behavior resembled drinks of insufficient fruitiness and metallic taste.

My dear young niece, Valencia, was woebegone. She was wrenching at a sopping wet handkerchief, and her face was blotched.

“Cambyses is, as you wished,” I pointed out, “sober.”

“Cold sober,” she said. “Frigidly sober. Liquid-air sober. Yes, that is as it should be.” She blubbered a bit, then seized hold of her emotions and said, “His post in his father’s financial firm, until now a sinecure, has become a showcase for his talents. He is known as the ‘tyrannosaur of Wall Street.’ He is widely admired as the epit­ome of American financial enterprise, and crowds gather to watch him grind the faces of widows and orphans. The deftness with which he does it elicits unbounded applause and has won him a citation from the secretary of the Treasury.”

“How proud you must be,” I said.

“Proud, indeed. His merciless virtue is admired by all, and his eloquent denunciation of lying, theft, and connivery, except when these characteristics arc necessary for the gathering of corporate profits, are cheered to the echo. And yer—”

“And yet?”

“He has grown cold to me, Uncle George.”

“Cold? Surely you jest. You are as virtuous as he.”

“Oh, every bit,” she admitted. “I am a solid mass of virtue. And yet—for some reason—I no longer seem to satisfy him.”

I went to see Cambyses. It was not easy. So attentive was he now to business that he found twelve hours a day insufficient to the dedica­tion he brought to his task of bilking the public by overcharging the Department of Defense for toothpicks and bottlecaps. He was there­fore surrounded by secretaries, assistants, and aides-de-camp whom it took al! my skill and address to evade.

I finally made my way into his large office, and found him scowling at me. He had aged quite a bit, for the essence of sobriety that now consumed him had etched vertical furrows in his cheeks and turned those once bright and sparkling eyes into the hard opac­ity of marble.

He said, “What in Tophet do you want, George ?”

“I come, my friend,” I said, “on behalf of your loved one, Valen­cia?”

“My what one, who?”

I had to admit that was a bad sign. “Valencia,” I said. “Blonde little girl so high, beautiful, virtuous, and made to be loved.”

“Oh, yes.” Cambyses picked up a glass of water from his desk, frowned at it and put it back. “I seem to remember her. She won’t do, George.”

“Why ever not? She has been acclaimed as utterly lovable by some of the finest experts in the field.”

“Finest experts, bah! Incompetent bunglers! George, that woman makes use of perfume that would sicken a muskrat. Toward the end of the day, despite the perfume, I detect an unpleasant body odor. Her breath is frequently appallingly rancid. She has a ten­dency to eat Swiss cheese, sardines, and other items that linger on her tongue and teeth. Am I expected to bathe myself in this foul effluvium? For that matter, George, you yourself have neglected to bathe this morning, I perceive.”

“No such thing, Cambyses,” I replied hotly. “I bathed.”

“In that case, stand closer to the soap next time,” he said. “You needn't tell Valencia the details if you think it will offend her—as it certainly offends me. But you may tell her that if she ever sees me, she must remain downwind.”

“This is ridiculous, Cambyses,” I said. “Valencia is a dainty and sweet-smelling young lady. You will not find anything better.”

“No,” said Cambyses, his face growing grimmer. “I expect not. This is a filthy and rancid world. I am astonished that people do not notice.”

“Has it occurred to you that you, yourself, might be imperfect in this regard.”

He lifted one wrist and sniffed at it. “No,” he said, “it has not.”

“That can only be because your senses are saturated with your own odor. To others, you are probably offensive.”

“To others? What on earth do I care about others?”

Which, I had to admit to myself, was an unanswerable point.

Cambyses lifted the glass of water again, sipped at it, made an appalling face, and said, “I can detect at least five organic chemicals of noisome taste that have been added to this water. Even bottled spring water has a siliceous tang owing to the traces of glass that it dissolves.”

I sighed and left. The case was hopeless. Azazel, in giving him a nice discrimination of rhe senses, had overdone it.

I tried to break the news to Valencia gently. She blubbered, squealed and keened dreadfully. It took me three days and nights to console her, and it was a difficult task, for some of my spring had been sprung in recent years and you can’t imagine how much conso­lation that woman needed.

As for Cambyses, the last I heard of him, he was searching the world for a place to live where the air and water were sufficiently pure for his refined palate, for a cook who could meet his exacting needs and, most of all, a young woman who would not offend his delicate nose. He is as rich as you would expect a defense contracter to be—his low-quality, high-cost equipment is the pride of the armed forces of our glorious nation—but I suspect he’s not happy.

George heaved a vinous sigh of commiseration and tossed off his fifth goblet of white wine.

I was furious. I said, “I thought you said wine is a mocker.”

“So it is. Not its presence, of course, but its absence.”

“I deny that.” I had rarely been so annoyed with the man. “I am always prepared for the peculiar attitude toward life that these very dubious reminiscences of yours portray, but I draw the line at this one. I deny that a sober man, simply because he is sober, develops all the evil characteristics you ascribe to this Cambyses you speak of.”

“You do?” said George, sounding astonished. “What possible evidence can you have to the contrary?”

“Well, for one thing, *I* am a teetotaler.”

“I rest my case,” said George.