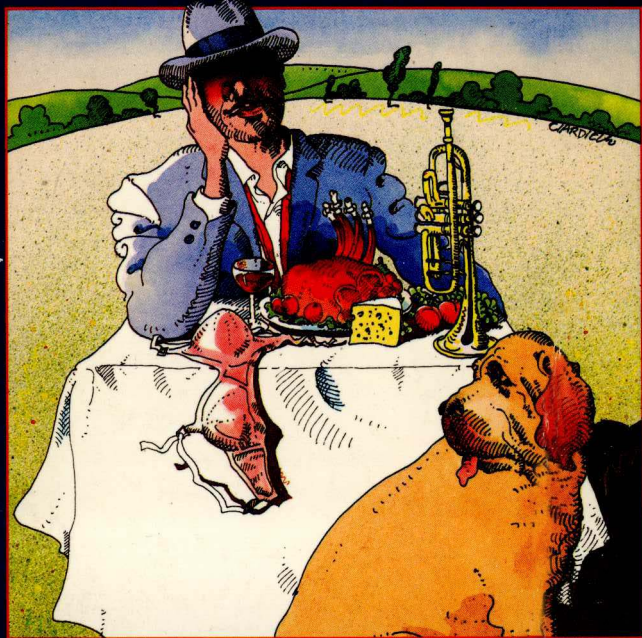


A GASTRONOMIC MYSTERY

# MONSIEUR PAMPLEMOUSSE AND THE SECRET MISSION



MICHAEL BOND

There's a mystery  
brewing in the Loire Valley

"OOH-LA-LA, HERE'S FUN!  
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

MONSIEUR  
PAMPLEMOUSSE  
AND  
SECRET MISSION

Michael Bond

FAWCETT CREST • NEW YORK

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**Published by Ballantine Books**

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# 1

## DINNER WITH THE DIRECTOR



'PAMPLEMOUSSE, I HAVE TO TELL YOU, AND I SAY this not simply in my capacity as your commander-in-chief, Director of *Le Guide*, the greatest gastronomic publication in all France, but also, I trust, as a friend and confidant; we are, at this very moment, sitting on a *bombe à retardement*. A *bombe* which could, moreover, explode at any moment.'

Having delivered himself at long last of a matter that had clearly been exercising his mind for most of the evening, the Director sat back in his chair with a force which, had his words been taken literally, might well have triggered off the mechanism and blown them both to Kingdom Come. As it was he took advantage of the finding of a piece of white cotton on

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the lapel of his dinner jacket in order to study the effect his pronouncement had made on his audience of one.

He eyed Monsieur Pamplemousse with some concern. Normally Monsieur Pamplemousse managed to retain an air of unruffled calm no matter what the situation. It was a habit he had acquired during his years working as a detective for the Paris Sûreté, when to show the slightest spark of emotion would have been taken by others as a sign of weakness. But for once he appeared to have lost this valuable faculty. His features were contorted out of all recognition and he seemed to be fighting to avoid losing control of himself altogether before finally disappearing under the dining-room table.

The Director jumped to his feet. 'Are you unwell, Aristide? I assure you, it was not my intention to cause alarm. I merely . . .'

Monsieur Pamplemousse struggled back into a sitting position, regaining his composure in an instant. The mask slipped back into place as if it had never left his face.

'Forgive me, Monsieur.' He mopped his brow with a napkin. 'I don't know what came over me.'

The fact of the matter was he'd been searching under the table for his right shoe. It had become detached from its appropriate foot earlier in the evening under circumstances best left unexplained to his host, and he'd been taking advantage of the other's preoccupation with his problems in the hope of solving one of his own.

The Director looked relieved. 'I feel you may have been overworking lately, Pamplemousse. Too much work and no play. Perhaps,' he added meaningfully, 'a

rest of some kind might be in order? A spell in some quiet, out of the way place for a while.'

He reached across to an occasional table and lifted the lid of a small satinwood-lined silver cigar box. 'Can I tempt you?'

'Thank you, Monsieur, but no.' Monsieur Pamplemousse picked up his glass and passed it gently to and fro just below his nose, swirling the remains of the wine as he did so, savouring the aroma with the accustomed ease of one to whom such an action was as natural as the breathing in of the air around him. It was a noble wine, a wine of great breeding; a Chambertin, Clos de Bèze, '59. He wondered if the Director made a habit of drinking such classic wines with his meals or whether he wanted some favour that only he, Pamplemousse, could provide. Suspecting the latter, he decided to pay more attention to what was being said.

'It is necessary that I protect my olfactory nerves, Monsieur,' he added primly. 'Nerves which, like my taste buds, are on duty day and night in the service of *Le Guide*; selecting and savouring, accepting and rejecting . . .'

'Yes, yes, Pamplemousse . . .'

The Director snipped the end off his Corona with a gesture of impatience. 'I am fully aware of your dedication to duty and of your total incorruptibility. Those qualities are, if I may say so, two of the main reasons why I invited you and Madame Pamplemousse to dine with us tonight.'

The implication that perhaps they were the only two reasons was not lost on Monsieur Pamplemousse, but he accepted the underlying rebuke without rancour. Had he been totally honest there was noth-



ing he would have liked better than to round off the meal with a cigar; especially one of a more modest nature than his host had chosen. In his experience large cigars tended to lose their appeal halfway through, when they either went out or the end became too soggy for comfort. A slim panatella would have been ideal. He felt his mouth begin to water at the thought. However, with his annual increment due in a little less than a month there was no harm in sacrificing the pleasure to be derived from inhaling smoke in exchange for a few bonus points.

'Apart from which,' he added, 'Madame Pamplemousse does not like the smell of tobacco fumes in my clothes.'

'Ah!' The Director's voice held a wealth of understanding. 'Wives, Pamplemousse! Wives!' He paused before applying the flame of a match to his cigar. 'Would Madame Pamplemousse rather I didn't?'

'Of course not, Monsieur.' Monsieur Pamplemousse refrained from embarking on a tedious explanation of his wife's ability to distinguish between smoke which came about through self-indulgence and smoke which was acquired second-hand. The former attracted a sniff full of accusation, the latter a snort which merely expressed disgust.

Instead he sat back, wishing his host would get on with the business in hand rather than continue to beat about the bush. That there was something on his mind was clear. Equally, it must be a matter too delicate to be discussed in the office. The Director didn't normally invite members of his staff, however valued, to his home. That it was something he did not wish to talk about in the presence of either his own wife or Doucette, was equally apparent. Several

times during the meal there had been a gap in the conversation; sometimes an uneasily long gap, but each time it had been neatly plugged by an abrupt change of subject, rather as if the Director, like the chairman of a television chat show, had armed himself with a list of topics to cover every eventuality.

Talk over the fish soufflé—a delightfully airy concoction containing a *poisson* he didn't immediately recognise—had been devoted to the future of the E.E.C. The *gigot d'agneau*, done in the English manner with roast potatoes, peas and mint jelly, had come and gone over a discourse ranging from the price of eggs to the iniquities of the tax collector. The fact that the dish had been accompanied by a strange yellow substance, like a kind of thick pancake, had gone unremarked—and in the case of Madame Pamplemousse, who had a naturally suspicious nature, uneaten. It had been overshadowed by talk of the history of clocks and the invention of the fusee mechanism of regulation by means of a conical pulley wheel, a subject on which the Director was something of an expert.

The cheese and the sweet—a totally entrancing syllabub, again done in the English way using sherry rather than white wine, had triggered off a long monologue from the Director about his early days on the Paris Bourse.

At the end of the meal, the *petits fours* reduced to less than half their original number, the coffee cups drained, the Director, with an almost audible note of relief in his voice, drew breath long enough to suggest that perhaps Madame Pamplemousse would like a tour of the house. Madame Pamplemousse had been only too pleased. Madame Pamplemousse, in

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fact, could hardly wait. She had been on the edge of her seat ever since they arrived.

It was the kind of house that many people dream of, but relatively few set foot in, let alone achieve. Situated on the edge of a small forest, it was less than thirty kilometres from Paris, yet it could have been a million miles away. Mullioned windows looked out on-to gardens of a neatness which could only have been brought about by the constant attention of many hands over the centuries; not a blade of grass was out of place, not a flower ever shed its petals unnoticed. He was glad he had parked his car with its exhaust pipe facing away from the shrubbery.

Beyond the gardens lay orchards and fields in which corn grew and sheep could be seen grazing peacefully within the boundary walls, their concentration undisturbed by any sound other than those made by passing birds en route for sunnier climes or bees going about their endless work. In its day it must have been even more remote and self-contained, well able to live off its own fat.

It was a tranquil scene, as unlike his own flat in the eighteenth arrondissement of Paris as it was possible to imagine. Doucette would be in her element; so, for that matter, would Pommes Frites, who'd taken advantage of the moment to go off on his own voyage of exploration. He'd seemed in rather a hurry and Monsieur Pamplemousse hoped he was behaving himself. Habits acquired in the streets of Montmartre, where every tree and every lamp-post received its full quota of attention, would not go down well in such gracious surroundings. Alarm bells would sound.

Alone at last, he sat back awaiting the moment of truth, but the Director was not to be hurried. Putting

off the evil moment yet again, he reached for a bell push.

'I'm sure you won't say "no" to an Armagnac, Aristide. I have some of your favourite—a '28 Réserve d'Artagnon.'

Not for the first time Monsieur Pamplemousse found himself marvelling at the other's knowledge and attention to detail. Such thoughtfulness! Nineteen twenty-eight—the year of his birth. Beneath the somewhat aloof exterior there was an incisive mind at work—cataloguing information, sorting and storing it for future use as and when required. Unless . . . He stiffened; unless the Director had had his file out for some reason!

His thoughts were broken into by a knock on the door.

*'Entrez!'*

Monsieur Pamplemousse glanced up. Had a butler entered bearing balloon glasses and bottle on a silver salver he would not have been unduly surprised. An elderly retainer, perhaps, kept on in the family despite his advancing years, because that was the way it had always been and because his wife, an apple-cheeked octogenarian from Picardy, would not be parted from her stove. That would account for a certain Englishness in the meal.

What he didn't expect to see framed in the doorway was a figure of such loveliness and roundness and juxtapositioning of roundnesses, each vying one with the other for pride of place, it momentarily took his breath away and nearly caused him to slip back under the table again.

'Ah, Elsie,' the Director turned in his chair. 'A glass of the Réserve d'Artagnon for our guest. I think per-

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haps I will join him with a cognac; the Grande Champagne.'

Monsieur Pamplemousse watched in a dream as the apparition wiggled its way to a marble-topped side cabinet on the far side of the room and bent down to open one of the lower doors.

He closed his eyes and then opened them again, allowing the figure to swim into view and place two large glasses on the table in front of him, before clasping the bottle to her bosom in order to withdraw the cork.

'Say when.' The voice came as a surprise. Somehow it didn't go with the body.

Half expecting one of the three musketeers depicted on the label to wink back at him, he focused his gaze on two large round eyes of a blueness that beggared description. Lowering his gaze slightly in an effort to escape them he found himself peering into a valley of such lushness and depth it only served to emphasise the delights of mentally scaling the mountainous slopes on either side to reach their all too visible cardinal points. A voice which he barely recognised as his own and which seemed to come from somewhere far away, tardily repeated the word 'when'.

'Thank you, Elsie. That was an excellent meal. I'm sure Monsieur Pamplemousse will agree, won't you, Aristide?'

Monsieur Pamplemousse cleared his throat. 'Stock Pot material,' he said, not to be outdone in gallantry. The lamb had been a trifle overdone for his taste, the merest soupçon, but that was a minor criticism. Had he been on duty reporting on the meal for *Le Guide*, he would most certainly have recommended the chef for a Stock Pot.

'Forgive my asking, but the cake which accompanied the lamb . . .'

'Koik!' Elsie's eyes narrowed as she fixed him with a withering look. 'That's not koik. That's Yorkshire puddin', innit.'

'Ah!' Monsieur Pamplemousse sank back into his chair feeling suitably ashamed of himself, his copy-book blotted. So that was the famous pudding from Yorkshire he had heard so much about. It had been a memorable experience, an eye-opener. He looked at her with new respect. 'Is it one of your recipes?'

"course.'

'Perhaps,' he ventured, oblivious to a disapproving grunt on his right, 'perhaps you could show me how to make it one day? With Monsieur le Directeur's approval, of course.'

Elsie gave a giggle as she crossed to the door. 'Saucebox!' She jerked a thumb in the direction of his host. 'You're worse than what 'e is and that's saying something. See you later,' she added meaningly.

The Director shifted uneasily in the silence which followed Elsie's departure.

'Nothing in this life is wholly perfect, Pamplemousse,' he said at last. 'A nice girl, but she has a strange way of expressing herself. I imagine it has something to do with the difference in the English education system.'

Monsieur Pamplemousse looked thoughtful. There were times when he wondered about the Director.

His thoughts were read and analysed in an instant. 'She also suffers a great deal from *mal de tête*. You wouldn't think so to look at her, but I have never known a girl so given to headaches.'

Monsieur Pamplemousse cupped the glass of Ar-

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magnac in his hands. It was dark with age. The fumes were powerful and heady. There was a velvety fire to it which would cling to the side of the glass for many days to come.

'*C'est la vie*, Monsieur!'

'The trouble is I took her in to oblige a friend. She is learning the language and she came over to do her practicals—there was some kind of domestic trouble—it's all rather embarrassing. I engaged her out of sheer kindness, hoping she would help the children with their English, but it hasn't worked out. They say they have difficulty in understanding her. Rapport is low. She will have to go, of course. My wife does not approve.'

'Wives, Monsieur,' sighed Monsieur Pamplemousse. 'Wives!'

He could hardly blame her. It was difficult to imagine Doucette allowing him to be alone in the kitchen with Elsie for five minutes, let alone accept her as part of the ménage. Wherever she went there would be trouble with the distaff side.

'What particularly grieves me is that in the meantime I have discovered she is possessed of a hidden talent. A God-given gift—and at its highest level, Pamplemousse, it is a God-given gift—she cooks like an angel; an angel from heaven, without help, without recourse to recipe books . . .'

Monsieur Pamplemousse nearly choked on his Armagnac. 'You mean . . . she cooked the meal this evening? Not just the pudding from Yorkshire, but the *entire* meal?'

The Director nodded.

'Including these exquisite *petits fours*?'

'*Especially* the *petits fours*. "Afters", she calls them.

They are one of her specialities. That and a dish called "Spotted Dick". She has a great predilection for Spotted Dick.

'I tell you, Pamplémousse, her departure will cause me untold grief. Such talent should not be let go to waste, but unless I find someone to take her in soon I fear the worst. She has only to meet the wrong person, someone less scrupulous than you or I, and poof!' The Director left the rest to the imagination. 'With a figure like that the pressures must be enormous. Even some kind of temporary shelter would be better than nothing.'

Monsieur Pamplémousse felt his mind racing on ahead of him. Things were beginning to fall into place. The reason for the unexpected invitation to dinner. What was it the Director had said earlier? We are sitting on a time bomb, Pamplémousse. And what of the strange incident during the meal? The cause of his losing a shoe.

It had happened soon after the entrée. Having decided that the oak, splat-back chairs had been chosen more with an eye to matching the Louis XV refectory table than to their comfort, which was minimal, he had taken advantage of a momentary lull between courses to stretch out his right leg which was in great danger of going to sleep. Almost immediately he wished he hadn't for it encountered another leg, apparently doing the same thing. At first he thought it was an accident and would have apologised to the owner of its opposite number had the Director not once again been in full flight.

A moment later he'd felt a soft but undeniably persistent pressure on the top of his shoe. Then, seconds later, after a half-hearted attempt at with-



drawal, there had been another even more persistent squeeze; a sortie from the opposite side of the table from which retreat was impossible. Then came the mounting of the shoe by a toe, a toe which had wriggled its way upward and over the tongue towards his ankle. Soon afterwards it had been joined by a second toe and within moments, so great was the onslaught, so totally irresistible, it began to feel as though there were many more than two toes at work; a whole regiment of toes in fact, gripping and caressing, squeezing and embracing.

A quick glance at Doucette had assured him that all was well. True, she was wearing her pained expression, but that was not unusual. Her attention appeared to be centred wholly on her host.

So, too, was that of the Director's wife. He had to marvel at the duplicity of women. No one would have thought from the rapt expression on her face that her mind was on anything other than her husband, and that other things were going on, or as matters turned out coming off, under cover of the table. In a matter of moments his shoe had parted company with his foot, pushed to one side in order to facilitate an exploratory reconnaissance of his lower calf.

Clearly there were undercurrents at work in the Director's household. Undreamed of depths yet to be plumbed.

Suddenly, he came back to earth with a bump, aware of a silence. A question had been posed; an answer was awaited.

'We have only a small flat, Monsieur,' he began, 'and Madame Pamplemousse is not, I fear, the most understanding of persons when it comes to such matters. Besides, there is Pommes Frites to be con-