

COBB IRVIN SHREWSBURY

COBB'S BILL-OF-FARE

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Irvin S. Cobb

Cobb's Bill-of-Fare

VITTLES

Upon a certain gladsome occasion a certain man went into a certain restaurant in a certain large city, being imbued with the idea that he desired a certain kind of food. Expense was with him no object. The coming of the holidays had turned his thoughts backward to the care-free days of boyhood and he longed for the holidaying provender of his youth with a longing that was as wide as a river and as deep as a well.

"Me, I have tried it all," he said to himself. "I have been down the line on this eating proposition from alphabet soup to animal crackers. I know the whole thing, from the nine-dollar, nine-course banquet, with every course bathed freely in the same kind of sauce and tasting exactly like all the other courses, to the quick lunch, where the only difference between clear soup and beef broth is that if you want the beef broth the waiter sticks his thumb into the clear soup and brings it along.

"I have feasted copiously at grand hotels where they charge you corkage on your own hot-water bottle, and I have dallied frugally with the forty-cent table d'hote with wine, when the victuals were the product of the well-known Sam Brothers—Flot

and Jet—and the wine tasted like the stuff that was left over from graining the woodwork for a mahogany finish.

"I now greatly desire to eat some regular food, and if such a thing be humanly possible I should also prefer to eat it in silence unbroken except by the noises I make myself. I have eaten meals backed up so close to the orchestra that the leader and I were practically wearing the same pair of suspenders. I have been howled at by a troupe of Sicilian brigands armed with their national weapons—the garlic and the guitar. I have been tortured by mechanical pianos and automatic melodeons, and I crave quiet. But in any event I want food. I cannot spare the time to travel nine hundred miles to get it, and I must, therefore, take a chance here."

So, as above stated, he entered this certain restaurant and seated himself; and as soon as the Hungarian string band had desisted from playing an Italian air orchestrated by a German composer he got the attention of an omnibus, who was Greek, and the bus enlisted the assistance of a side waiter, he being French, and the side waiter in time brought to him the head waiter, regarding whom I violate no confidence in stating that he was Swiss. The man I have been quoting then drew from his pockets a number of bank notes and piled them up slowly, one by one, alongside his plate. Beholding the denominations of these bills the head waiter with difficulty restrained himself from kissing the hungry man upon the bald spot on his head. The sight of a large bill invariably quickens the better nature of a head

waiter.

"Now, then," said the enhungered one, "I would have speech with you. I desire food—food suitable for a free-born American stomach on such a day as this. No, you needn't wave that menu at me. I can shut my eyes and remember the words and music of every menu that ever was printed. I don't know what half of it means because I am no court interpreter, but I can remember it. I can sing it, and if I had my clarinet here I could play it. Heave the menu over the side of the boat and listen to me. What I want is just plain food—food like mother used to make and mother's fair-haired boy used to eat. We will start off with turkey—turkey *a la* America, understand; turkey that is all to the Hail Columbia, Happy Land. With it I want some cramberry sauce—no, not cranberry, I guess I know its real name—some cramberry sauce; and some mashed potatoes—mashed with enthusiasm and nothing else, if you can arrange it—and some scalloped oysters and maybe a few green peas. Likewise I want a large cup of coffee right along with these things—not served afterward in a misses' and children's sized cup, but along with the dinner."

"Salad?" suggested the head waiter, reluctantly withdrawing his fascinated vision from the pile of bills. "Salad?" he said.

"No salad," said the homesick stranger, "not unless you could chop me up some lettuce and powder it with granulated sugar and pour a little vinegar over it and bring it in to me with the rest of the grub. Where I was raised we always had chewing tobacco for the salad course, anyhow."

The head waiter's whole being recoiled from the bare prospect. He seemed on the point of swooning, but looked at the money and came to.

"Dessert?" he added, poisoning a pencil.

"Well," said the man reflectively, "I don't suppose you could fix me up some ambrosia—that's sliced oranges with grated cocoanut on top. And in this establishment I doubt if you know anything about boiled custard, with egg kisses bobbing round it and sunken reefs of sponge cake underneath. So I guess I'd better compromise on some plum pudding; but mind you, not the imported English plum pudding. English plum pudding is not a food, it's a missile, and when eaten it is a concealed deadly weapon. I want an American plum pudding. Mark well my words—an American plum pudding.

"And," he concluded, "if you can bring me these things, just so, without any strange African sauces or weird Oriental fixings or trans-Atlantic goo stirred into them or poured on to them or breathed upon them, I shall be very grateful to you, and in addition I shall probably make you independently wealthy for life."

It was quite evident that the head waiter regarded him as a lunatic—perhaps only a lunatic in a mild form and undoubtedly one cushioned with ready money—but nevertheless a lunatic. Yet he indicated by a stately bow that he would do the best he could under the circumstances, and withdrew to take the matter up with the house committee.

"Now this," said the man, "is going to be something like. To be sure the table is not set right. As I remember how things used to look at home there should be a mustache cup at Uncle Hiram's plate, so he could drink his floating island without getting his cream-separators mussy, and there ought to be a vinegar cruet at one end and a silver cake basket at the other and about nine kinds of pickles and jellies scattered round; and in the center of the table there should be a winter bouquet—a nice, hard, firm, dark red winter bouquet—containing, among other things, a sheaf of wheat, a dried cockscomb and a couple of oak galls. Yet if the real provender is forthcoming I can put up with the absence of the proper settings and decorations."

He had ample leisure for these thoughts, because, as you yourself may have noticed, in a large restaurant when you order anything that is out of the ordinary—which means anything that is ordinary—it takes time to put the proposition through the proper channels. The waiter lays your application before the board of governors, and after the board of governors has disposed of things coming under the head of unfinished business and good of the order it takes a vote, and if nobody blackballs you the treasurer is instructed to draw a warrant and the secretary engrosses appropriate resolutions, and your order goes to the cook.

But finally this man's food arrived. And he looked at it and sniffed at it daintily—like a reluctant patient going under the ether—and he tasted of it; and then he put his face down in his

hands and burst into low, poignant moans. For it wasn't the real thing at all. The stuffing of the turkey defied chemical analysis; and, moreover, the turkey before serving should have been dusted with talcum powder and fitted with dress-shields, it being plainly a crowning work of the art preservative—meaning by that the cold-storage packing and pickling industry. And if you can believe what Doctor Wiley says—and if you can't believe the man who has dedicated his life to warning you against the things which you put in your mouth to steal away your membranes, whom can you believe?—the cranberry sauce belonged in a paint store and should have been labeled Easter-egg dye, and the green peas were green with Paris green.

As for the plum pudding, it was one of those burglar-proof, enamel-finished products that prove the British to be indeed a hardy race. And, of course, they hadn't brought him his coffee along with his dinner, the management having absolutely refused to permit of a thing so revolutionary and unprecedented and one so calculated to upset the whole organization. And at the last minute the racial instincts of the cook had triumphed over his instructions, and he had impartially imbued everything with his native brews, gravies, condiments, seasonings, scents, preservatives, embalming fluids, liquid extracts and perfumeries. So, after weeping unrestrainedly for a time, the man paid the check, which was enormous, and tipped everybody freely and went away in despair and, I think, committed suicide on an empty stomach. At any rate, he came no more. The moral of this fable

is, therefore, that it can't be done.

But why can't it be done? I ask you that and pause for a reply. Why can't it be done? It is conceded, I take it, that in the beginning our cookery was essentially of the soil. Of course when our forebears came over they brought along with them certain inherent and inherited Old World notions touching on the preparation of raw provender in order to make it suitable for human consumption; but these doubtless were soon fused and amalgamated with the cooking and eating customs of the original or copper-colored inhabitants. The difference in environment and climate and conditions, together with the amplified wealth of native supplies, did the rest. In Merrie England, as all travelers know, there are but three staple vegetables—to wit, boiled potatoes, boiled turnips, and a second helping of the boiled potatoes. But here, spread before the gladdened vision of the newly arrived, and his to pick and choose from, was a boundless expanse of new foodstuffs—birds, beasts and fishes, fruits, vegetables and berries, roots, herbs and sprouts. He furnished the demand and the soil was there competently with the supply.

We owe a lot to our red brother. From him we derived a knowledge of the values and attractions of the succulent clam, and he didn't cook a clam so that it tasted like O'Somebody's Heels of New Rubber either. From the Indian we got the original idea of the shore dinner and the barbecue, the planked shad and the hoecake. By following in his footsteps we learned about succotash and hominy. He conferred upon us the inestimable

boon of his maize—hence corn bread, corn fritters, fried corn and roasting ears; also his pumpkin and his sweet potato—hence the pumpkin pie of the North and its blood brother of the South, the sweet-potato pie. From the Indian we got the tomato—let some agriculturist correct me if I err—though the oldest inhabitant can still remember when we called it a love apple and regarded it as poisonous. From him we inherited the crook-neck squash and the okra gumbo and the rattlesnake watermelon and the wild goose plum, and many another delectable thing.

So, out of all this and from all this our ancestors evolved cults of cookery which, though they differed perhaps as between themselves, were all purely American and all absolutely unapproachable. France lent a strain to New Orleans cooking and Spain did the same for California. Scrapple was Pennsylvania's, terrapin was Maryland's, the baked bean was Massachusetts', and along with a few other things spoon-bread ranked as Kentucky's fairest product. Indiana had dishes of which Texas wotted not, nor kilowatted either, this being before the day of electrical cooking contrivances. Virginia, mother of presidents and of natural-born cooks, could give and take cookery notions from Vermont. Likewise, this condition developed the greatest collection of cooks, white and black alike, that the world has ever seen. They were inspired cooks, needing no notes, no printed score to guide them. They could burn up all the cook-books that ever were printed and still cook. They cooked by ear.

And perhaps they still do. If so, may Heaven bless and

preserve them! Some carping critics may contend that our grandfathers and grandmothers lacked the proper knowledge of how to serve a meal in courses. Let 'em. Let 'em carp until they're as black in the face as a German carp. For real food never yet needed any vain pomp and circumstance to make it attractive. It stands on its own merits, not on the scenic effects. When you really have something to eat you don't need to worry trying to think up the French for napkin. Perhaps there may be some among us here on this continent who, on beholding a finger-bowl for the first time, glanced down into its pellucid depths and wondered what had become of the gold fish. There may have been a few who needed a laprobe drawn up well over the chest when eating grapefruit for the first time. Indeed, there may have been a few even whose execution in regard to consuming soup out of the side of the spoon was a thing calculated to remind you of a bass tuba player emptying his instrument at the end of a hard street parade.

But I doubt it. These stories were probably the creations of the professional humorists in the first place. Those who are given real food to eat may generally be depended upon to do the eating without undue noise or excitement. The gross person featured in the comic papers, who consumes his food with such careless abandon that it is hard to tell whether the front of his vest was originally drygoods or groceries, either doesn't exist in real life or else never had any food that was worth eating, and it didn't make any difference whether he put it on the inside of his chest

or the outside.

Only a short time ago I saw a whole turkey served for a Thanksgiving feast at a large restaurant. It vaunted itself as a regular turkey and was extensively charged for as such on the bill. It wasn't though. It was an ancient and a shabby ruin—a genuine antique if ever there was one, with those high-polished knobs all down the front, like an old-fashioned highboy, and Chippendale legs. To make up for its manifold imperfections the chef back in the kitchen had crowded it full of mysterious laboratory products and then varnished it over with a waterproof glaze or shellac, which rendered it durable without making it edible. Just to see that turkey was a thing calculated to set the mind harking backward to places and times when there had been real turkeys to eat.

Back yonder in the old days we were a simple and a husky race, weren't we? Boys and girls were often fourteen years old before they knew oysters didn't grow in a can. Even grown people knew nothing, except by vague hearsay, of cheese so runny that if you didn't care to eat it you could drink it. There was one traveled person then living who was reputed to have once gone up to the North somewhere and partaken of a watermelon that had had a plug cut in it and a whole quart of imported real Paris—France—champagne wine poured in the plugged place. This, however, was generally regarded as a gross exaggeration of the real facts.

But there was a kind of a turkey that they used to serve in those parts on high state occasions. It was a turkey that in his younger

days ranged wild in the woods and ate the mast. At the frosted coming of the fall they penned him up and fed him grain to put an edge of fat on his lean; and then fate descended upon him and he died the ordained death of his kind. But, oh! the glorious resurrection when he reached the table! You sat with weapons poised and ready—a knife in the right hand, a fork in the left and a spoon handy—and looked upon him and watered at the mouth until you had riparian rights.

His breast had the vast brown fullness that you see in pictures of old Flemish friars. His legs were like rounded columns and unadorned, moreover, with those superfluous paper frills; and his tail was half as big as your hand and it protruded grandly, like the rudder of a treasure-ship, and had flanges of sizzled richness on it. Here was no pindling fowl that had taken the veil and lived the cloistered life; here was no wiredrawn and trained-down cross-country turkey, but a lusty giant of a bird that would have been a cassowary, probably, or an emu, if he had lived, his bosom a white mountain of lusciousness, his interior a Golconda and not a Golgotha. At the touch of the steel his skin crinkled delicately and fell away; his tissues flaked off in tender strips; and from him arose a bouquet of smells more varied and more delectable than anything ever turned out by the justly celebrated Islands of Spice. It was a sin to cut him up and a crime to leave him be.

He had not been stuffed by a taxidermist or a curio collector, but by the master hand of one of those natural-born home cooks—stuffed with corn bread dressing that had oysters or chestnuts

or pecans stirred into it until it was a veritable mine of goodness, and this stuffing had caught up and retained all the delectable drippings and essences of his being, and his flesh had the savor of the things upon which he had lived—the sweet acorns and beechnuts of the woods, the buttery goobers of the plowed furrows, the shattered corn of the horse yard.

Nor was he a turkey to be eaten by the mere slice. At least, nobody ever did eat him that way—you ate him by rods, poles and perches, by townships and by sections—ate him from his neck to his hocks and back again, from his throat latch to his crupper, from center to circumference, and from pit to dome, finding something better all the time; and when his frame was mainly denuded and loomed upon the platter like a scaffolding, you dug into his cadaver and found there small hidden joys and titbits. You ate until the pressure of your waistband stopped your watch and your vest flew open like an engine-house door and your stomach was pushing you over on your back and sitting upon you, and then you half closed your eyes and dreamed of cold-sliced turkey for supper, turkey hash for breakfast the next morning and turkey soup made of the bones of his carcass later on. For each state of that turkey would be greater than the last.

There still must be such turkeys as this one somewhere. Somewhere in this broad and favored land, untainted by notions of foreign cookery and unvisited by New York and Philadelphia people who insist on calling the waiter *garçon*, when his name is Gabe or Roscoe, there must be spots where a turkey is a turkey

and not a cold-storage corpse. And this being the case, why don't those places advertise, so that by the hundreds and the thousands men who live in hotels might come from all over in the fall of the year and just naturally eat themselves to death?

Perchance also the sucking pig of the good old days still prevails in certain sheltered vales and glades. He, too, used to have his vogue at holiday times. Because the gods did love him he died young—died young and tender and unspoiled by the world—and then everybody else did love him too. For he was barbered twice over and shampooed to a gracious pinkiness by a skilled hand, and then, being basted, he was roasted whole with a smile on his lips and an apple in his mouth, and sometimes a bow of red ribbon on his tail, and his juices from within ran down his smooth flanks and burnished him to perfection. His interior was crammed with stuff and things and truck and articles of that general nature—I'm no cooking expert to go into further particulars, but whatever the stuffing was, it was appropriate and timely and suitable, I know that, and there was onion in it and savory herbs, and it was exactly what a sucking pig needed to bring out all that was good and noble in him.

You began operations by taking a man's-size slice out of his midriff, bringing with it a couple of pinky little rib bones, and then you ate your way through him and along him in either direction or both directions until you came out into the open and fell back satiated and filled with the sheer joy of living, and greased to the eyebrows. I should like to ask at this time

if there is any section where this brand of sucking pig remains reasonably common and readily available? In these days of light housekeeping and kitchenettes and gas stoves and electric cookers, is there any oven big enough to contain him? Does he still linger on or is he now known in his true perfection only on the magazine covers and in the Christmas stories?

As a further guide to those who in the goodness of their hearts may undertake a search for him in his remaining haunts and refuges, it should be stated that he was no German wild boar, or English pork pie on the hoof, and that he was never cooked French style, or doctored up with anchovies, caviar, *marrons glacés*, pickled capers out of a bottle—where many of the best capers of the pickled variety come from—imported truffles, Mexican tamales or Hawaiian poi. He was—and is, if he still exists—just a plain little North American baby-shoat cooked whole. And don't forget the red apple in his mouth. None genuine without this trademark.

But, shucks! what's the use of talking that way? Patriotism is not dead and a democratic form of government still endures, and surely real sucking pigs are still being cooked and served whole somewhere this very day. And in that same neighborhood, if it lies to the eastward, there are cooks who know the art of planking a shad in season—not the arrangement of the effete East, consisting of a greased skin wrapped round a fine-tooth comb and reposing on a charred clapboard—but a real shad; and if it lies to the southward one will surely find in the same

vicinity a possum of a prevalent dark brown tint, with sweet potatoes baked under him and a certain inimitable, indescribable dark rich gravy surrounding him, and on the side corn pones—without any sugar in them. I think probably the reason why the possum doesn't flourish in the North is that they insist on tacking an O on to his name, simply because some misguided writer of dictionaries ordained it so. A possum is not Irish, nor is he Scotch. His name is not Opossum, neither is it MacPossum. He belongs to an old Southern family and his name is just possum.

Once I saw ostensible 'possum at a French restaurant in New York. It was advertised as *Opossum, Southern style*, and it was chopped up fine and cooked in a sort of casserole effect, with green peas and carrots and various other things mixed in along with it. The quivering sensations which were felt throughout the South on this occasion, and which at the time were mistaken for earthquake tremors, were really caused by so many Southern cooks turning over petulantly in their graves.

Still going on the assumption that the turkey and the sucking pig and their kindred spirits are yet to be found among us or among some of us, anyhow, it is only logical to assume that the food is not served in courses at the ratio of a little of everything and not enough of anything, but that it is brought on and spread before the company all together and at once—the turkey or the pig or the ham or the chickens; the mashed potatoes overflowing their receptacle like drifted snow; the celery; the scalloped oysters in a dish like a crock; the jelly layer cake, the fruit cake

and Prince of Wales cake; and in addition, scattered about hither and yon, all the different kinds of preserves—pusserves, to use the proper title—including sweet peach pickles dimpled with cloves and melting away in their own sweetness, and watermelon-rind pickles cut into cubes just big enough to make one bite—that is to say in cubes about three inches square—and the various kinds of jellies—crab-apple, currant, grape and quince—quivering in an ecstasy as though at their very goodness, and casting upon the white cloth where the light catches them all the reflected, dancing tints of beryl and amethyst, ruby and garnet—crown-jewels in the diadem of real food.

People who eat dinners like this must, by the very nature of things, cling also to the ancient North American custom of starting the day with an amount of regular food called collectively a breakfast. This, of course, does not mean what the dweller in the city by the seaboard calls a breakfast, he knowing no better, poor wretch—a swallow of tea, a bite of a cold baker's roll, a plate of gruel mayhap, or pap, and a sticky spoonful of the national marmalade of Perfidious Albumen, as the poet has called it, followed by a slap at the lower part of the face with a napkin and a series of V-shaped hiccoughs ensuing all the morning. No, indeed.

In speaking thus of breakfast, I mean a real breakfast. If it's in New England there'll be doughnuts and pies on the table, and not those sickly convict labor pies of the city either, with the prison pallor yet upon them, but brown, crusty, full-chested pies.

And if it's down South there will be hot waffles and fresh New Orleans molasses; and if it's in any section of our country, north or south, east or west, such comfits and kickshaws as genuine country smoked sausage, put up in bags and spiced like Araby the Blest, and fresh eggs fried in pairs—never less than in pairs—with their lovely orbéd yolks turned heavenward like the topaz eyes of beauteous prayerful blondes; and slices of home-cured ham with the taste of the hickory smoke and also of the original hog delicately blended in them, and marbled with fat and lean, like the edges of law books; and cornbeef hash, and flaky hot biscuits; and an assortment of those same pickles and preserves already mentioned; the whole being calculated to make a hungry man open his mouth until his face resembles the general-delivery window at the post-office—and sail right in.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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