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Thoughts On Eating

H. G. Wells, that extremely clever Englishman, is nothing if not scientific and so it is not surprising to find him writing a novel in which the emotions of the hero are treated quite frankly as matters of chemistry. Alfred Polly is the name of that hero, and he seems to be suffering from some sort of dilution or adulteration of his gastric juices. Twenty minutes after he rises from a ham pie or a leg of mutton (he is a Briton of course) a feeling of vague discomfort seizes him, and in half an hour he is a slave to abnormal and soul racking fermentations. He sees things through a greenish haze: he feels gloomy and ill at ease: he is a sorrowful and misanthropic man, sour in stomach and in mind.

Mr. Wells, going behind Mr. Polly's actual gastric juices, puts the blame upon the victuals that he eats and his unsanitary method of eating them. Mr. Polly is poor, and his wife is a bad cook and the combination results in long succession of dull, soggy meals, made up of cheap delicatessen, atrociously manhandled in the kitchen. There is no charm, no variety, no appeal to the imagination, in that depressing bill of fare: and so Mr. Polly bolts his food without gusto and his stomach wrestles with it heavily and unsuccessfully. A too copious outpouring of hydrochloric acid follows, leading to the quick exhaustion of the supply. Then poor Polly has that obscure stomach ache and sees the world through that greenish haze.

One day after trying to kill himself (and actually burning down his house), he takes French leave of his wife and her fatal frying pan, and fares forth into the world. A fortunate accident leads him, not exactly to fortune, but of a good cook—a hearty motherly old soul who knows just how long to the second to broil a beefsteak. A month of good eating, under this artist, works a revolution in Polly. No more that uneasy surging under the diaphragm; no more that vague feeling of impending doom; no more that sour temper.

Polly becomes a new man. Once a white-livered coward, he develops into a hero. Once a groping ignoramus, he becomes a serene philosopher. His supply of hydrochloric acid is just sufficient to do the business required of it. He sees the world clearly and knows that it is good.

A Sound Theory

I must confess a liking for the theory of Mr. Wells. It is sound and satisfying. It explains away many of the mysteries of life. It accounts for anarchy, love, patriotism, charity and the more appalling articles of dogmatic theology. A man fed upon garlic quite naturally feels that the world is out of joint—and so we understand why Sicilians join the Black Hand. A Kansas farmer eating biscuits made with saleratus, quite naturally groans when he thinks of the government (he must groan, indeed, whenever he thinks of anything, and even when he thinks of nothing) and so we have populism. Socialism is a disease of the stomach, to be cured with heroic doses of Bismarck herring, crab a la Creole, planked shad and other nutritious and artistic victuals. The notion that all actors, Congressmen, newspaper reporters, oboe players and city councilmen will go to hell is merely a symptom of malnutrition.

The human race in its stupid, groping way sensed all of this vaguely long, long ago. As far back as Plato's time it was noticed that a good dinner, digested at ease, had a tendency to promote geniality. Today the fact is so commonplace that even school teachers know it. But we have neglected to develop it and explore it, to determine its true bearings, to search out its ultimate implications. We say in our simple-minded way that a good dinner makes for geniality, but we attempt no very accurate definition of either a good dinner or geniality.

What is a good dinner? Is it actually possible for any dinner to be absolutely perfect? I have eaten, in my time, more than 10,000 dinners, and I recall not more than 10 or a dozen that were utterly bad, but by the same token I remember few that were beyond all improving. Even a chicken pot-pie, that greatest invention of scientific cookery, may have hidden defects. Lingering voluptuously over the last savory plateful, one may encounter, perchance, a stray feather, a BR shot, or a splinter from the rolling pin. It is a small thing of course, but it is yet enough to mar the sweet serenity of a perfect meal.

Mysterious Invaders

A whole book, indeed, might be written upon the foreign bodies found in victuals. Once, while lunching at a Baltimore hotel, I found a three cent postage stamp upon the bottom of a slab of smarkase pie. How did it get there? Did the pastry cook stick it on deliberately, in response to some obscure aesthetic impulse? Was he, perhaps, a worshipper of purple, the color of three-cent stamps? Or was the whole thing an accident? I wondered as I removed the stamp and pocketed it. It had not been cancelled, and so it reduced the cost of my slab of pie from 10 cents to 7.

Ordinarily, of course, the strange things found in food have no commercial value and afford the finder no half-hour of speculative revelry. Of such sort are the pieces of wood so often encountered in pastries—mute evidences that even rolling boards wear out. And of such sort are the bits of broken finery—breastpins, fragments of side combs, gold medals, pince-nez and such tawdry truck—that one dredges up from the mysterious depths of purees, chowders and beef stews. Cooks, it would seem, are fond of barbaric adornments. With that passion let us not quarrel, for it is not confined to cooks, but the thought will not down that they should lay aside their gauds while in the actual act of cooking.

Perhaps the day will come when they will prepare for the kitchen as surgeons now prepare for the operating room, arraying themselves in white from head to foot, wearing skull-caps of sterilized gauze and pulling on well-boiled rubber gloves. When that day comes there will be no more false frizzes in the omelette of commerce and no more jewelry in the low-priced Irish stew. But what will become of romance?

Science is Asleep!

Meanwhile, the influence of victuals upon the human soul is a matter that invites the serious consideration of physiologists and psychologists. At present their knowledge is distressingly fragmentary and unsatisfactory. They know, for example, that milk and eggs will make a thin man fat, and they assume, with some justice, that his fatness will be accompanied by geniality, but they are utterly unable to prescribe dishes that will infallibly turn a pessimist into an optimist, a Democrat into a Republican, or a Dunkard into a Presbyterian.

Suppose a man has a difficult mathematical problem to solve. What viands will best help him to solve it? We have learned, empirically, that such a man had better avoid Welsh "rabbits" and broiled lobster, but how about crab soup, roast lamb and chicken livers en

brochette? Will these aliments clear his mind or befog it? Are they fit victuals for mathematicians, or not fit victuals? Who knows?

Every man, of course, works out in the course of years, a diet that seems to meet the demands of his being, but that process is slow and inaccurate. It leads to all sorts of false reasoning; it is the father and mother of prejudices: it engenders that finicky fear of certain dishes—that absurd victualophobia which curses so many folk.

I once knew a man who avoided boiled hard crabs religiously, maintaining that they were as poisonous as toadstools or Pittsburgh rhubarb pie. One day, finding him in a communicative mood, I cross examined him, and it quickly developed that his fear of them was based upon a delusion. Years before he had gone to a picnic and eaten 33 hard crabs, and two days later he had been seized with typhoid fever. It took four days and four nights to convince him that there could have been no possible connection between the crabs and the typhoid. Then he began eating crabs again and now he devotes a great deal of his leisure to the exercise.

But about a year ago he suddenly placed fried perch, of which he was (and is) inordinately fond, under the ban. Something had made him remember that he had eaten 18 perch the day before the fever struck him!