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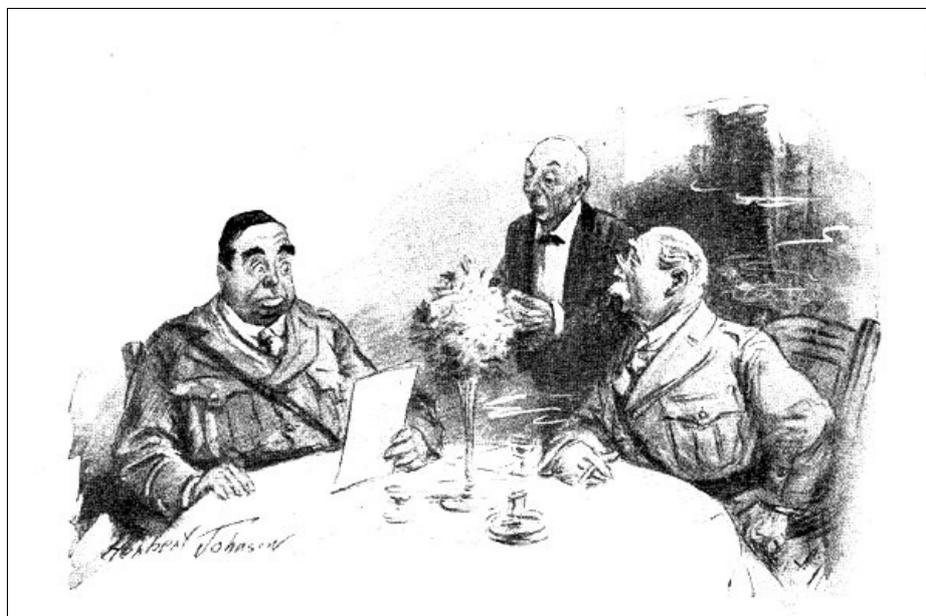
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NO RED MEATS, BUT ONLY SEA FOODS

Eating in Two or Three Languages

By

Irvin S. Cobb

Author of

"Paths of Glory," "Those Times and These," etc.

New York

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TO

B.B. McALPIN, ESQUIRE,

WHO KNOWS A LOT

ABOUT EATING

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Eating in Two or Three Languages

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On my way home from overseas I spent many happy hours mapping out a campaign. To myself I said: "The day I land is going to be a great day for some of the waiters and a hard day on some of the cooks. Persons who happen to be near by when I am wrestling with my first ear of green corn will think I am playing on a mouth organ. My behaviour in regard to hothouse asparagus will be reminiscent of the best work of the late Bosco. In the matter of cantaloupes I rather fancy I shall consume the first two on the half shell, or *au naturel*, as we veteran correspondents say; but the third one will contain about as much vanilla ice cream as you could put in a derby hat.

"And when, as I am turning over my second piece of fried chicken, with Virginia ham, if H. Hoover should crawl out from under it, and, shaking the gravy out of his eyes, should lift a warning hand, I shall say to him: 'Herb,' I shall say, 'Herb, stand back! Stand well back to avoid being splashed, Herb. Please desist and do not bother me now, for I am busy. Kindly remember that I am but just returned from over there and that for months and months past, as I went to and fro across the face of the next hemisphere that you'll run into on the left of you if you go just outside of Sandy Hook and take the first turn to the right, I have been storing up a great, unsatisfied longing for the special dishes of my own, my native land. Don't try, I pray you, to tell me a patriot can't do his bit and eat it too, for I know better.

[14]



"HERB, STAND BACK! STAND WELL BACK TO AVOID BEING SPLASHED!"

"Shortly I may be in a fitter frame of mind to listen to your admonitions touching on rationing schemes; but not to-day, and possibly not to-morrow either, Herb. At this moment I consider food regulations as having been made for slaves and perhaps for the run of other people; but not for me. As a matter of fact, what you may have observed up until now has merely been my preliminary attack—what you might call open warfare, with scouting operations. But when they bring on the transverse section of watermelon I shall take these two trenching tools which I now hold in my hands, and just naturally start digging in. I trust you may be hanging round then; you'll certainly overhear something.' [15]

"Kindly pass the ice water. That's it. Thank you. Join me, won't you, in a brimming beaker? It may interest you to know that I am now on my second carafe of this wholesome, delicious and satisfying beverage. Where I have lately been, in certain parts of the adjacent continent, there isn't any ice, and nobody by any chance ever drinks water. Nobody bathes in it either, so far as I have been able to note. You'll doubtless be interested in hearing what they do do with it over on that side. It took me months to find out.

"Then finally, one night in a remote interior village, I went to an entertainment in a Y.M.C.A. hut. A local magician came out on the platform; and after he had done some tricks with cards and handkerchiefs which were so old that they were new all over again, he reached up under the tails of his dress coat and hauled out a big glass globe that was slopping full of its crystal-pure fluid contents, with a family of goldfish swimming round and round in it, as happy as you please. [16]

"So then, all in a flash, the answer came and I knew the secret of what the provincials in that section of Europe do with water. They loan it to magicians to keep goldfish in. But I prefer to drink a little of it while I am eating and to eat a good deal while I am drinking it; both of which, I may state, I am now doing to the best of my ability, and without let or hindrance, Herb."

To be exactly correct about it, I began mapping out this campaign long before I took ship for the homeward hike. The suggestion formed in my mind during those weeks I spent in London, when the resident population first went on the food-card system. You had to have a meat card, I think, to buy raw meat in a butcher shop, and you had to have another kind of meat card, I know, to get cooked meat in a restaurant; and you had to have a friend who was a smuggler or a hoarder to get an adequate supply of sugar under any circumstances. Before I left, every one was carrying round a sheaf of cards. You didn't dare go fishing if you had mislaid your worm card. [17]

The resolution having formed, it budded and grew in my mind when I was up near the Front gallantly exposing myself to the sort of table-d'hôte dinners that were available then in some of the lesser towns immediately behind the firing lines; and it kept right on growing, so that by the time I was ready to sail it was full sized. En route, I thought up an interchangeable answer for two of the oldest conundrums of my childhood, one of them being: "Round as a biscuit, busy as a bee; busiest thing you ever did see," and the other, "Opens like a barn door, shuts like a trap; guess all day and you can't guess that." In the original versions the answer to the first was "A watch," and to the second, "A corset"—if I recall aright. But the joint answer I worked out was as follows: "My face!" [18]

Such was the pleasing program I figured out on shipboard. But, as is so frequently the case with the most pleasing things in life, I found the anticipation rather outshone the realisation. Already I detect myself, in a retrospective mood, hankering for the savoury *ragoûts* we used to get in peasant homes in obscure French villages, and for the meals they gave us at the regimental messes of our own forces, where the cooking was the home sort and good honest American slang abounded.

They called the corned beef Canned Willie; and the stew was known affectionately as Slum, and the doughnuts were Fried Holes. When the adjutant, who had been taking French lessons, remarked "What the *la* hell does that *sacré-blew* cook mean by serving forty-fours at every meal?" you gathered he was getting a mite tired of baked army beans. And if the lieutenant colonel asked you to pass him the Native Sons you knew he meant he wanted prunes. It was a great life, [19]

if you didn't weaken—and nobody did.

But, so far as the joys of the table are concerned, I think I shall be able to wait for quite a spell before I yearn for another whack at English eating. I opine Charles Dickens would be a most unhappy man could he but return to the scenes he loved and wrote about.

Dickens, as will be recalled, specialised in mouth-watering descriptions of good things and typically British things to eat—roast sucking pigs, with apples in their snouts; and baked goose; and suety plum puddings like speckled cannon balls; and cold game pies as big round as barrel tops—and all such. He wouldn't find these things prevailing to any noticeable extent in his native island now. Even the kidney, the same being the thing for which an Englishman mainly raises a sheep and which he always did know how to serve up better than any one else on earth, somehow doesn't seem to be the kidney it once upon a time was when it had the proper sorts of trimmings and sauces to go with it. [20]

At this time England is no place for the epicure. In peacetime English cooks, as a rule, were not what you would call versatile; their range, as it were, was limited. Once, seeking to be blithesome and light of heart, I wrote an article in which I said there were only three dependable vegetables on the average Englishman's everyday menu—boiled potatoes, boiled cabbage, and a second helping of the boiled potatoes.

That was an error on my part; I was unintentionally guilty of the crime of underestimation. I should have added a fourth to the list of stand-bys—to wit: the vegetable marrow. For some reason, possibly because they are a stubborn and tenacious race, the English persist in looking upon the vegetable marrow as an object designed for human consumption, which is altogether the wrong view to take of it. As a foodstuff this article hasn't even the merit that attaches to stringy celery. You do not derive much nourishment from stale celery, but eating at it polishes the teeth and provides a healthful form of exercise that gives you an appetite for the rest of the meal. [21]

From the vegetable marrow you derive no nourishment, and certainly you derive no exercise; for, being a soft, weak, spiritless thing, it offers no resistance whatever, and it looks a good deal like a streak of solidified fog and tastes like the place where an indisposed carrot spent the night. Next to our summer squash it is the feeblest imitation that ever masqueraded in a skin and called itself a vegetable. Yet its friends over there seem to set much store by it.

Likewise the English cook has always gone in rather extensively for boiling things. When in doubt she boiled. But it takes a lot of retouching to restore to a piece of boiled meat the juicy essences that have been simmered and drenched out of it. Since the English people, with such admirable English thoroughness, cut down on fats and oils and bacon garnishments, so that the greases might be conserved for the fighting forces; and since they have so largely had to do without imported spices and condiments, because the cargo spaces in the ships coming in were needed for military essentials, the boiled dishes of England appear to have lost most of their taste. [22]

You can do a lot of browsing about at an English table these days and come away ostensibly filled; but inside you there will be a persistent unsatisfied feeling, all the same, which is partly due, no doubt, to the lack of sweetening and partly due to the lack of fats, but due most of all, I think, to a natural disappointment in the results. In the old times a man didn't feel that he had dined well in England unless for an hour or two afterward he had the comfortable gorged sensation of a python full of pigeons.

I shall never forget the first meals I had on English soil, this latest trip. At the port where we landed, in the early afternoon of a raw day, you could get tea if you cared for tea, which I do not; but there was no sugar—only saccharine—to sweeten it with, and no rich cream, or even skim milk, available with which to dilute it. The accompanying buns had a flat, dry, floury taste, and the portions of butter served with them were very homoeopathic indeed as to size and very oleomargarinish as to flavour. [23]

Going up to London we rode in a train that was crowded and darkened. Brilliantly illuminated trains scooting across country offered an excellent mark for the aim of hostile air raiders, you know; so in each compartment the gloom was enhanced rather than dissipated by two tiny pin points of a ghastly pale-blue gas flame. I do not know why there should have been two of these lights, unless it was that the second one was added so that by its wan flickerings you could see the first one, and vice versa.

During the trip, which lasted several hours longer than the scheduled running time, we had for refreshments a few gnarly apples, purchased at a way station; and that was all. Recalling the meals that formerly had been served aboard the boat trains of this road, I realised I was getting my preliminary dose of life on an island whose surrounding waters were pestered by U-boats and whose shipping was needed for transport service. But I pinned my gastronomic hopes on London, that city famed of old for the plenteous prodigality of its victualling facilities. In my ignorance I figured that the rigours of rationing could not affect London to any very noticeable extent. A little trimming down here and there, an enforced curtailment in this direction and that—yes, perhaps so; but surely nothing more serious. [24]

Immediately on arrival we chartered a taxicab—a companion and I did. This was not so easy a job as might be imagined by one who formed his opinions on past recollections of London, because, since gasoline was carefully rationed there, taxis were scarce where once they had been numerous. Indeed, I know of no city in which, in antebellum days, taxis were so numerous

distributed through almost every quarter of the town as in London. At any busy corner there were almost as many taxicabs waiting and ready to serve you as there are taxicabs in New York whose drivers are cruising about looking for a chance to run over you. The foregoing is still true of New York, but did not apply to London in war time. [25]

Having chartered our cab, much to the chagrin of a group of our fellow travellers who had wasted precious time getting their heavy luggage out of the van, we rode through the darkened streets to a hotel formerly renowned for the scope and excellence of its cuisine. We reached there after the expiration of the hour set apart under the food regulations for serving dinner to the run of folks. But, because we were both in uniform—he as a surgeon in the British Army, and I as a correspondent—and because we had but newly finished a journey by rail, we were entitled, it seemed, to claim refreshment.

However, he, as an officer, was restricted to a meal costing not to exceed six shillings—and six shillings never did go far in this hotel, even when prices were normal. Not being an officer but merely a civilian disguised in the habiliments of a military man, I, on the other hand, was bound by no such limitations, but might go as far as I pleased. So it was decided that I should order double portions of everything and surreptitiously share with him; for by now we were hungry to the famishing point. [26]

We had our minds set on a steak—a large thick steak served with onions, Desdemona style—that is to say, smothered. It was a pretty thought, a passing fair conception—but a vain one.

"No steaks to-night, sir," said the waiter sorrowfully.

"All right, then," one of us said. "How about chops—fat juicy chops?"

"Oh, no, sir; no chops, sir," he told us.

"Well then, what have you in the line of red meats?"

He was desolated to be compelled to inform us that there were no red meats of any sort to be had, but only sea foods. So we started in with oysters. Personally I have never cared deeply for the European oyster. In size he is anæmic and puny as compared with his brethren of the eastern coast of North America; and, moreover, chronically he is suffering from an acute attack of brass poisoning. The only way by which a novice may distinguish a bad European oyster from a good European oyster is by the fact that a bad one tastes slightly better than a good one does. In my own experience I have found this to be the one infallible test. [27]

We had oysters until both of us were full of verdigris, and I, for one, had a tang in my mouth like an antique bronze jug; and then we proceeded to fish. We had fillets of sole, which tasted as they looked—flat and a bit flabby. Subsequently I learned that this lack of savour in what should be the most toothsome of all European fishes might be attributed to an insufficiency of fat in the cooking; but at the moment I could only believe the trip up from Dover had given the poor thing a touch of car sickness from which he had not recovered before he reached us.

After that we had lobsters, half-fare size, but charged for at the full adult rates. And, having by now exhausted our capacity for sea foods, we wound up with an alleged dessert in the shape of three drowned prunes apiece, the remains being partly immersed in a palish custardlike composition that was slightly sour. [28]

"Never mind," I said to my indignant stomach as we left the table—"Never mind! I shall make it all up to you for this mistreatment at breakfast to-morrow morning. We shall rise early—you and I—and with loud gurgling cries we shall leap headlong into one of those regular breakfasts in which the people of this city and nation specialise so delightfully. Food regulators may work their ruthless will upon the dinner trimmings, but none would dare to put so much as the weight of one impious finger upon an Englishman's breakfast table to curtail its plenitude. Why, next to Magna Charta, an Englishman's breakfast is his most sacred right."

This in confidence was what I whispered to my gastric juices. You see, being still in ignorance of the full scope of the ration scheme in its application to the metropolitan district, and my disheartening experience at the meal just concluded to the contrary notwithstanding, I had my thoughts set upon rashers of crisp Wiltshire bacon, and broad segments of grilled York ham, and fried soles, and lovely plump sausages bursting from their jackets, and devilled kidneys paired off on a slice of toast, like Noah and his wife crossing the gangplank into the Ark. [29]

Need I prolong the pain of my disclosures by longer withholding the distressing truth that breakfast next morning was a failure too? To begin with, I couldn't get any of those lovely crisp crescent rolls that accord so rhythmically with orange marmalade and strawberry jam. I couldn't get hot buttered toast either, but only some thin hard slabs of war bread, which seemingly had been dry-cured in a kiln. I could have but a very limited amount of sugar—a mere pinch, in fact; and if I used it to tone up my coffee there would be none left for oatmeal porridge. Moreover, this dab of sugar was to be my full day's allowance, it seemed. There was no cream for the porridge either, but, instead, a small measure of skimmed milk so pale in colour that it had the appearance of having been diluted with moonbeams. [30]

Furthermore, I was informed that prior to nine-thirty I could have no meat of any sort, the only exceptions to this cruel rule being kippered herrings and bloaters; and in strict confidence the waiter warned me that, for some mysterious reason, neither the kippers nor the bloaters seemed to be up to their oldtime mark of excellence just now. From the same source I gathered that it

would be highly inadvisable to order fried eggs, because of the lack of sufficient fat in which to cook them. So, as a last resort, I ordered two eggs, soft-boiled. They were served upended, English-fashion, in little individual cups, the theory being that in turn I should neatly scalp the top off of each egg with my spoon and then scoop out the contents from Nature's own container.

Now Englishmen are born with the faculty to perform this difficult achievement; they inherit it. But I have known only one American who could perform the feat with neatness and despatch; and, as he had devoted practically all his energies to mastering this difficult alien art, he couldn't do much of anything else, and, except when eggs were being served in the original packages, he was practically a total loss in society. He was a variation of the breed who devote their lives to producing a perfect salad dressing; and you must know what sad affairs those persons are when not engaged in following their lone talent. Take them off of salad dressings and they are just naturally null and void. [31]

In my crude and amateurish way I attacked those eggs, breaking into them, not with the finesse the finished egg burglar would display, but more like a yeggman attacking a safe. I spilt a good deal of the insides of those eggs down over their outsides, producing a most untidy effect; and when I did succeed in excavating a spoonful I generally forgot to season it, or else it was full of bits of shell. Altogether, the results were unsatisfactory and mussy. Rarely have I eaten a breakfast which put so slight a subsequent strain upon my digestive processes. [32]

Until noon I hung about, preoccupied and surcharged with inner yearnings. There were plenty of things—important things, too, they were—that I should have been doing; but I couldn't seem to fix my mind upon any subject except food. The stroke of midday found me briskly walking into a certain restaurant on the Strand that for many decades has been internationally famous for the quality and the unlimited quantity of its foods, and more particularly for its beef and its mutton. If ever you visited London in peacetime you must remember the place I mean.

The carvers were middle-aged full-ported men, with fine ruddy complexions, and moustaches of the Japanese weeping mulberry or mammoth droop variety. On signal one of them would come promptly to you where you sat, he shoving ahead of him a great trencher on wheels, with a spirit lamp blazing beneath the platter to keep its delectable burden properly hot. It might be that he brought to you a noble haunch of venison or a splendid roast of pork or a vast leg of boiled mutton; or, more likely yet, a huge joint of beef uprearing like a delectable island from a sea of bubbling gravy, with an edging of mashed potatoes creaming up upon its outer reefs. [33]

If, then, you enriched this person with a shilling, or even if you didn't, he would take in his brawny right hand a knife with a blade a foot long, and with this knife he would cut off from the joint a slice about the size and general dimensions of a horseshoer's apron. And if you cared for a second slice, after finishing the first one, the carver felt complimented and there was no extra charge for it. It was his delight to minister to you.

But, alas, on this day when I came with my appetite whetted by my sea voyage, and with an additional edge put upon it by the privations I had undergone since landing, there was to be had no beef at all! Of a sudden this establishment, lacking its roast beef, became to me as the tragedy of Hamlet, the melancholy Dane, would be with Hamlet and Ophelia and her pa and the ghost and the wicked queen, and both the gravediggers, all left out. [34]

When I had seated myself one of the carvers came to me and, with an abased and apologetic air, very different from his jaunty manner of yore, explained in a husky half whisper that I might have jugged hare or I might have boiled codfish, or I might have one of the awful dishes. Anyhow, that was what I understood him to say.

This last had an especially daunting sound, but I suppose I was in a morbid state, anyhow, by now; and so I made further inquiry and ascertained from him that the restrictions applying to the sale of meat did not apply to the more intimate organs of the butchered animal, such as the liver and the heart, and, in the case of a cow, the tripe. But the English, with characteristic bluntness, choose to call one of these in its cooked state an offal dish—pronounced as spelled and frequently tasting as pronounced. [35]

As one who had primed himself for a pound or so of the rib-roast section of a grass-fed steer, I was not to be put off with one of the critter's spare parts, as it were. Nor did the thought of codfish, and especially boiled codfish, appeal to me greatly. I have no settled antipathy to the desiccated tissues of this worthy deep-sea voyager when made up into fish cakes. Moreover that young and adolescent creature, commonly called a Boston scrod, which is a codfish whose voice is just changing, is not without its attractions; but the full-grown species is not a favourite of mine.

To me there has ever been something depressing about an adult codfish. Any one who has ever had occasion to take cod-liver oil—as who, unhappily, has not?—is bound to appreciate the true feelings that must inevitably come to a codfish as he goes to and fro in the deep for years on a stretch, carrying that kind of a liver about with him all the while. [36]

As a last resort I took the jugged hare; but jugged hare was not what I craved. At eventide, returning to the same restaurant, I was luckier. I found mutton on the menu; but, even so, yet another hard blow awaited me. By reason of the meat-rationing arrangements a single purchaser was restricted to so many ounces a week, and no more. The portion I received in exchange for a corner clipped off my meat card was but a mere reminder of what a portion in that house would have been in the old days.

There had been a time when a sincere but careless diner from up Scotland way, down in London on a visit, would have carried away more than that much on his necktie; which did not matter particularly then, when food was plentiful; and, besides, usually he wore a pattern of necktie which was improved by almost anything that was spilled upon it. But it did matter to me that I had to dine on this hangnail pared from a sheep.

A few days later I partook of a fast at what was supposed to be a luncheon, which the Lord Mayor of London attended, in company with sundry other notables. Earlier readings had led me to expect an endless array of spicy and succulent viands at any table a Lord Mayor might grace with his presence. Such, though, was not the case here. We had eggs for an *entrée*; and after that we had plain boiled turbot, which to my mind is no great shakes of a fish, even when tuckered up with sauces; and after that we had coffee and cigars; and finally we had several cracking good speeches by members of a race whose men are erroneously believed by some Americans to be practically inarticulate when they get up on their feet and try to talk. [37]

There was a touch of tragedy mingled in with the comedy of the situation in the spectacle of these Englishmen, belonging to a nation of proverbially generous feeders, stinting themselves and cutting the lardings and the sweetenings and the garnishments down to the limit that there might be a greater abundance of solid sustenance forthcoming for their fighting forces. [38]

I do not mean by this that there was any real lack of nourishing provender in London or anywhere else in England that I went. The long queues of waiting patrons in front of the butcher shops during the first few days of my sojourn very soon disappeared when people learned that they could be sure of getting meat of one sort or another, and at a price fixed by law; which was a good thing too, seeing that thereby the extortioner and the profiteer lost their chances to gain unduly through the necessities of the populace. So far as I was able to ascertain, nobody on the island actually suffered—except the present writer of these lines; and he suffered chiefly because he could not restrain himself from comparing the English foods of pre-war periods with the English foods of the hour.

If things were thus in England, what would they be in France? This was the question I repeatedly put to myself. But when I got to France a surprise awaited me. It was a surprise deferred, because for the first week of my sojourn upon French soil I was the guest of the British military authorities at a château maintained for the entertainment of visiting Americans who bore special credentials from the British Foreign Office. [39]

Here, because Britain took such good and splendid care to provide amply for her men in uniform, there was a wide variety of good food and an abundance of it for the guests and hosts alike. I figured, though, that when I had passed beyond the zone of this gracious hospitality there would be slim pickings. Not at all!

In Paris there was to be had all the food and nearly all the sorts of food any appetite, however fastidious, might crave. This was before the French borrowed the card system of ration control in order to govern the consumption of certain of the necessities. Of poultry and of sea foods the only limits to what one might order were his interior capacity and his purse. Of red meats there was seemingly a boundless supply.

One reason for this plenitude lay in the fact that France, to a very great extent, is a self-contained, self-supporting land, which England distinctly is not; and another reason undoubtedly was that the French, being more frugal and careful than their British or their American brethren ever have been, make culinary use of a great deal of healthful provender which the English-speaking races throw away. Merely by glancing at the hors d'œuvres served at luncheon in a medium-priced café in Paris one can get a good general idea of what discriminating persons declined to eat at dinner the night before. [40]

The Parisian garbage collector must work by the day and not by the job. On a piecework contract he would starve to death. And a third reason was that all through the country the peasants, by request of the Government, were slaughtering their surplus beeves and sheep and swine, so there might be more forage for the army horses and more grain available for the flour rations of the soldiers.

In Paris the bread was indifferently poor. An individual was restricted to one medium-sized roll of bread at a meal. Butter was not by any means abundant, and of sugar there was none to be had at all unless the traveller had bethought him to slip a supply into the country with him. The bulk of the milk supply was requisitioned for babies and invalids and disabled soldiers. Cakes or pastries in any form were absolutely prohibited in the public eating places, and, I think, in private homes as well. But of beef and mutton and veal and fowls, and the various products of the humble but widely versatile pig, there was no end, provided you had the inclination plus the price. [41]

And so, though the lack of sugar in one's food gave one an almost constant craving for something sweet—and incidentally insured a host of friends for anybody who came along with a box of American candy under his arm or a few cakes of sweet chocolate in his pocket—one might take his choice of a wide diversity of fare at any restaurant of the first or second class, and keep well stayed. [42]

In connection with the Paris restaurants I made a most interesting discovery, which was that when France called up her available man power at the time of the great mobilisation, the military heads somehow overlooked one group who, for their sins, should have been sent up where bullets

and Huns were thickest. The slum gave up its Apache—and a magnificent fighter he is said to have made too! And the piratical cab drivers who formerly infested the boulevards must have answered the summons almost to a man, because only a few of them are left nowadays, and they mainly wear markings to prove they have served in the ranks; but by a most reprehensible error of somebody in authority the typical head waiters of the cafés were spared. I base this assertion upon the fact that all of them appeared to be on duty at the time of my latest visit. If there was a single absentee from the ranks I failed to miss him.

There they were, the same hawk-eyed banditti crew that one was constantly encountering in the old days; and up to all the same old tricks too—such as adding the date of the month and all the figures of the year into the bill; and such as invariably recommending the most expensive dishes to foreigners; and such as coming to one and bending over one and smiling upon one and murmuring to one: "An' wot will ze gentailman 'ave to-day?"—and then, before the gentailman can answer, jumping right in and telling him what he is going to have, always favouring at least three different kinds of meats for even the lightest meal, and never less than two vegetables, and never once failing to recommend a full bottle of the costliest wine on the premises. [43]

Stress of war had not caused these gentry to forget or forgo a single one of the ancient wiles that for half a century their kind has practised upon American tourists and others who didn't care what else they did with their money so long as they were given a chance to spend it for something they didn't particularly want. Yep; those charged with the responsibility of calling up the reserves certainly made a big mistake back yonder in August of 1914. They practised discrimination in the wrong quarter altogether. If any favouritism was to be shown they should have taken the head waiters and left the Apaches at home. [44]

Many's the hard battle that I had with these chaps in 1918. It never failed—not one single, solitary time did it fail—that the functionary who took my order first tried to tell me what my order was going to be, and then, after a struggle, reluctantly consented to bring me the things I wanted and insisted on having. Never once did he omit the ceremony of impressing it upon me that he would regard it as a deep favour if only I would be so good as to order a whole lobster. I do not think there was anything personal in this; he recommended the lobster because lobster was the most expensive thing he had in stock. If he could have thought of anything more expensive than lobster he would have recommended that.

I always refused—not that I harbour any grudge against lobsters as a class, but because I object to being dictated to by a buccaneer with flat feet, who wears a soiled dickey instead of a shirt, and who is only waiting for a chance to overcharge me or short-change me, or give me bad money, or something. If every other form of provender had failed them the populace of Paris could have subsisted very comfortably for several days on the lobsters I refused to buy in the course of the spring and summer of last year. I'm sure of it. [45]

And when I had firmly, emphatically, yea, oftentimes passionately declined the proffered lobster, he, having with difficulty mastered his chagrin, would seek to direct my attention to the salmon, his motive for this change in tactics being that salmon, though apparently plentiful, was generally the second most expensive item upon the regular menu. Salmon as served in Paris wears a different aspect from the one commonly worn by it when it appears upon the table here.

Over there they cut the fish through amidships, in cross-sections, and, removing the segment of spinal column, spread the portion flat upon a plate and serve it thus; the result greatly resembling a pair of miniature pink horse collars. A man who knew not the salmon in his native state, or ordering salmon in France, would get the idea that the salmon was bowlegged and that the breast had been sold to some one else, leaving only the hind quarters for him. [46]

Harking back to lobsters, I am reminded of a tragedy to which I was an eyewitness. Nearly every night for a week or more two of us dined at the same restaurant on the Rue de Rivoli. On the occasion of our first appearance here we were confronted as we entered by a large table bearing all manner of special delicacies and cold dishes. Right in the middle of the array was one of the largest lobsters I ever saw, reposing on a couch of water cress and seaweed, arranged upon a serviette. He made an impressive sight as he lay there prone upon his stomach, fidgeting his feelers in a petulant way.

We two took seats near by. At once the silent signal was given signifying, in the cipher code, "Americans in the house!" And the *maitre d'hôtel* came to where he rested and, grasping him firmly just back of the armpits, picked him up and brought him over to us and invited us to consider his merits. When we had singly and together declined to consider the proposition of eating him in each of the three languages we knew—namely, English, bad French, and profane—the master sorrowfully returned him to his bed. [47]

Presently two other Americans entered and immediately after them a party of English officers, and then some more Americans. Each time the boss would gather up the lobster and personally introduce him to the newcomers, just as he had done in our case, by poking the monster under their noses and making him wriggle to show that he was really alive and not operated by clockwork, and enthusiastically dilating upon his superior attractions, which, he assured them, would be enormously enhanced if only *messieurs* would agree forthwith to partake of him in a broiled state. But there were no takers; and so back again he would go to his place by the door, there to remain till the next prospective victim arrived. [48]

We fell into the habit of going to this place in the evenings in order to enjoy repetitions of this

performance while dining. The lobster became to us as an old friend, a familiar acquaintance. We took to calling him Jess Willard, partly on account of his reach and partly on account of his rugged appearance, but most of all because his manager appeared to have so much trouble in getting him matched with anybody.



HALF A DOZEN TIMES A NIGHT OR OFTENER HE TRAVELLED UNDER ESCORT THROUGH THE DINING ROOM

Half a dozen times a night, or oftener, he travelled under escort through the dining room, always returning again to his regular station. Along about the middle of the week he began to fail visibly. Before our eyes we saw him fading. Either the artificial life he was leading or the strain of being turned down so often was telling upon him. It preyed upon his mind, as we could discern by his morose expression. It sapped his splendid vitality as well. No longer did he expand his chest and wave his numerous extremities about when being exhibited before the indifferent eyes of possible investors, but remained inert, logy, gloomy, spiritless—a melancholy spectacle indeed. [49]

It now required artificial stimulation to induce him to display even a temporary interest in his surroundings. With a practised finger, his keeper would thump him on the tenderer portions of his stomach, and then he would wake up; but it was only for a moment. He relapsed again into his lamentable state of depression and languor. By every outward sign here was a lobster that fain would withdraw from the world. But we knew that for him there was no opportunity to do so; on the hoof he represented too many precious francs to be allowed to go into retirement.

Coming on Saturday night we realised that for our old friend the end was nigh. His eyes were deeply set about two-thirds of the way back toward his head and with one listless claw he picked at the serviette. The summons was very near; the dread inevitable impended. [50]

Sunday night he was still present, but in a greatly altered state. During the preceding twenty-four hours his brave spirit had fled. They had boiled him then; so now, instead of being green, he was a bright and varnished red all over, the exact colour of Truck Six in the Paducah Fire Department.

We felt that we who had been sympathisers at the bedside during some of his farewell moments owed it to his memory to assist in the last sad rites. At a perfectly fabulous price we bought the departed and undertook to give him what might be called a personal interment; but he was a disappointment. He should have been allowed to take the veil before misanthropy had entirely undermined his health and destroyed his better nature, and made him, as it were, morbid. Like Harry Leon Wilson's immortal Cousin Egbert, he could be pushed just so far, and no farther. [51]

Before I left Paris the city was put upon bread cards. The country at large was supposed to be on bread rations too; but in most of the smaller towns I visited the hotel keepers either did not know about the new regulation or chose to disregard it. Certainly they generally disregarded it so far as we were concerned. For all I know to the contrary, though, they were restricting their ordinary patrons to the ordained quantities and making an exception in the case of our people. It may have been one of their ways of showing a special courtesy to representatives of an allied race. It would have been characteristic of these kindly provincial innkeepers to have done just that thing.

Likewise, one could no longer obtain cheese in a first-grade Paris restaurant or aboard a French dining car, though cheese was to be had in unstinted quantity in the rural districts and in the Paris shops; and, I believe, it was also procurable in the cafés of the Parisian working classes, provided it formed a part of a meal costing not more than five francs, or some such sum. In a first-rate place it was, of course, impossible to get any sort of meal for five francs, or ten francs either; especially after the ten per cent luxury tax had been tacked on. [52]

In March prices at the smarter café eating places had already advanced, I should say, at least one

hundred per cent above the customary pre-war rates; and by midsummer the tariffs showed a second hundred per cent increase in delicacies, and one of at least fifty per cent in staples, which brought them almost up to the New York standards. Outside of Paris prices continued to be moderate and fair.

Just as I was about starting on my last trip to the Front before sailing for home, official announcement was made that dog biscuits would shortly be advanced in price to a well-nigh prohibitive figure. So I presume that very shortly thereafter the head waiters began offering dog biscuits to American guests. I knew they would do so, just as soon as a dog biscuit cost more than a lobster did. [53]

Until this trip I never appreciated what a race of perfect cooks the French are. I thought I did, but I didn't. One visiting the big cities or stopping at show places and resorts along the main lines of motor and rail travel in peacetime could never come to a real and due appreciation of the uniformly high culinary expertness of the populace in general. I had to take campaigning trips across country into isolated districts lying well off the old tourist lanes to learn the lesson. Having learned it, I profited by it.

No matter how small the hamlet or how dingy appearing the so-called hotel in it might be, we were sure of getting satisfying food, cooked agreeably and served to us by a friendly, smiling little French maiden, and charged for at a most reasonable figure, considering that generally the town was fairly close up to the fighting lines and the bringing in of supplies for civilians' needs was frequently subordinated to the handling of military necessities. [54]

Indeed, the place might be almost within range of the big guns and subjected to bombing outrages by enemy airmen, but somehow the local Boniface managed to produce food ample for our desires, and most appetising besides. His larder might be limited, but his good nature, like his willingness and his hospitality, was boundless.

I predict that there is going to be an era of better cooking in America before very long. Our soldiers, returning home, are going to demand a tastier and more diversified fare than many of them enjoyed before they put on khaki and went overseas; and they are going to get it, too. Remembering what they had to eat under French roofs, they will never again be satisfied with meats fried to death, with soggy vegetables, with underdone breads.

Sometimes as we went scouting about on our roving commission to see what we might see, at mealtime we would enter a community too small to harbour within it any establishment calling itself a hotel. In such a case this, then, would be our procedure: We would run down to the railroad crossing and halt at the door of the inevitable *Café de la Station*, or, as we should say in our language, the Last Chance Saloon; and of the proprietor we would inquire the name and whereabouts of some person in the community who might be induced, for a price, to feed a duet or a trio of hungry correspondents. [55]

At first, when we were green at the thing, we sometimes tried to interrogate the local gendarme; but complications, misunderstandings, and that same confusion of tongues which spoiled so promising a building project one time at the Tower of Babel always ensued. Central Europe has a very dense population, as the geographies used to tell us; but the densest ones get on the police force.

So when by bitter experience we had learned that the gendarme never by any chance could get our meaning and that we never could understand his gestures, we hit upon the wise expedient of going right away to the Last Chance for information. [56]

At the outset I preferred to let one of my companions conduct the inquiry; but presently it dawned upon me that my mode of speech gave unbounded joy to my provincial audiences, and I decided that if a little exertion on my part brought a measure of innocent pleasure into the lives of these good folks it was my duty, as an Ally, to oblige whenever possible.

I came to realise that all these years I have been employing the wrong vehicle when I strive to dash off whimsicalities, because frequently my very best efforts, as done in English, have fallen flat. But when in some remote village I, using French, uttered the simplest and most commonplace remark to a French tavern keeper, with absolutely no intent or desire whatsoever, mind you, to be humorous or facetious, invariably he would burst instantly into peals of unbridled merriment.

Frequently he would call in his wife or some of his friends to help him laugh. And then, when his guffaws had died away into gentle chuckles, he would make answer; and if he spoke rapidly, as he always did, I would be swept away by the freshets of his eloquence and left gasping far beyond my depth. [57]

That was why, when I went to a revue in Paris, I hoped they'd have some good tumbling on the bill.

I understand French, of course, curiously enough, but not as spoken. I likewise have difficulty in making out its meaning when I read it; but in other regards I flatter myself that my knowledge of the language is quite adequate. Certainly, as I have just stated, I managed to create a pleasant sensation among my French hearers when I employed it in conversation.

As I was saying, the general rule was that I should ask the name and whereabouts of a house in the town where we might procure victuals; and then, after a bit, when the laughing had died

down, one of my companions would break in and find out what we wanted to know.

[58]

The information thus secured probably led us to a tiny cottage of mud-daubed wattles. Our hostess there might be a shapeless, wrinkled, clumsy old woman. Her kitchen equipment might be confined to an open fire and a spit, and a few battered pots.

Her larder might be most meagrely circumscribed as to variety, and generally was. But she could concoct such savoury dishes for us—such marvellous, golden-brown fried potatoes; such good soups; such savoury omelets; such toothsome fragrant stews! Especially such stews!

For all we knew—or cared—the meat she put into her pot might have been horse meat and the garnishments such green things as she had plucked at the roadside; but the flavour of the delectable broth cured us of any inclinations to make investigation as to the former stations in life of its basic constituents. I am satisfied that, chosen at random, almost any peasant housewife of France can take an old Palm Beach suit and a handful of potherbs and, mingling these together according to her own peculiar system, turn out a ragout fit for a king. Indeed, it would be far too good for some kings I know of.

[59]

And if she had a worn-out bath sponge and the cork of a discarded vanilla-extract bottle she, calling upon her hens for a little help in the matter of eggs, could produce for dessert a delicious meringue, with floating-island effects in it. I'd stake my life on her ability to deliver.

If, on such an occasion as the one I have sought to describe, we were perchance in the south of France or in the Côte-d'Or country, lying over toward the Swiss border, we could count upon having a bait of delicious strawberries to wind up with. But if perchance we had fared into one of the northeastern provinces we were reasonably certain the meal would be rounded out with helpings of a certain kind of cheese that is indigenous to those parts. It comes in a flat cake, which invariably is all caved in and squashed out, as though the cheese-maker had sat upon it while bringing it into the market in his two-wheeled cart.

[60]

Likewise, when its temperature goes up, it becomes more of a liquid than a solid; and it has an aroma by virtue of which it secures the attention and commands the respect of the most casual passer-by. It is more than just cheese. I should call it mother-of-cheese. It is to other and lesser cheeses as civet cats are to canary birds—if you get what I mean; and in its company the most boisterous Brie or the most vociferous Camembert you ever saw becomes at once deaf and dumb.

Its flavour is wonderful. Mainly it is found in ancient Normandy; and, among strangers, eating it—or, when it is in an especially fluid state, drinking it—comes under the head of outdoor sports. But the natives take it right into the same house with themselves.

And, no matter where we were—in Picardy, in Brittany, in the Vosges or the Champagne, as the case might be—we had wonderful crusty bread and delicious butter and a good light wine to go along with our meal. We would sit at a bare table in the smoky cluttered interior of the old kitchen, with the rafters just over our heads, and with the broken tiles—or sometimes the bare earthen floor—beneath our feet, and would eat our fill.

[61]

More times than once or twice or thrice I have known the mistress of the house at settlement time to insist that we were overpaying her. From a civilian compatriot she would have exacted the last sou of her just due; but, because we were Americans and because our country had sent its sons overseas to help her people save France, she, a representative of the most canny and thrifty class in a country known for the thriftiness of all its classes, hesitated to accept the full amount of the sum we offered her in payment.

She believed us, of course, to be rich—in the eyes of the European peasant all Americans are rich—and she was poor and hard put to it to earn her living; but here was a chance for her to show in her own way a sense of what she, as a Frenchwoman, felt for America. Somehow, the more you see of the French, the less you care for the Germans.

[62]

Moving on up a few miles nearer the trenches, we would run into our own people; and then we were sure of a greeting, and a chair apiece and a tin plate and a tin cup apiece at an American mess. I have had chuck with privates and I have had chow with noncoms; I have had grub with company commanders and I have dined with generals—and always the meal was flavoured with the good, strong man-talk of the real he-American.

The food was of the best quality and there was plenty of it for all, and some to spare. One reason—among others—why the Yank fought so well was because he was so well fed between fights.

The very best meals I had while abroad were vouchsafed me during the three days I spent with a front-line regiment as a guest of the colonel of one of our negro out fits. To this colonel a French general, out of the goodness of his heart, had loaned his cook, a whiskered poilu, who, before he became a whiskered poilu, had been the chef in the castle of one of the richest men in Europe.

[63]

This genius cooked the midday meals and the dinners; but, because no Frenchman can understand why any one should require for breakfast anything more solid than a dry roll and a dab of honey, the preparation of the morning meal was intrusted to a Southern black boy, who, I may say, was a regular skillet hound. And this gifted youth wrestled with the matutinal ham and eggs and flipped the flapjacks for the headquarters mess.

On a full Southern breakfast and a wonderful French luncheon and dinner a grown man can get through the day very, very well indeed, as I bear witness.

Howsomever, as spring wore into summer and summer ran its course, I began to long with a constantly increasing longing for certain distinctive dishes to be found nowhere except in my native clime; brook trout, for example, and roasting ears, and—Oh, lots of things! So I came home to get them.

[64]

And, now that I've had them, I often catch myself in the act of thoughtfully dwelling upon the fond remembrances of those spicy fragrant stews eaten in peasant kitchens, and those army doughnuts, and those slices of bacon toasted at daybreak on the lids of mess kits in British dugouts.

I suppose they call contentment a jewel because it is so rare.

BY IRVIN S. COBB

FICTION

THOSE TIMES AND THESE
LOCAL COLOR
OLD JUDGE PRIEST
FIBBLE, D.D.
BACK HOME
THE ESCAPE OF MR. TRIMM

WIT AND HUMOR

"SPEAKING OF OPERATIONS—"
EUROPE REVISED
ROUGHING IT DE LUXE
COBB'S BILL OF FARE
COBB'S ANATOMY

MISCELLANY

THE THUNDERS OF SILENCE
"SPEAKING OF PRUSSIAN"—
PATHS OF GLORY

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