

When a Man Is Small

WHEN a man is small, he loves and hates food with a ferocity which soon dims. At six years old his very bowels will heave when such a dish as creamed carrots or cold tapioca appears before him. His throat will close, and spots of nausea and rage swim in his vision. It is hard, later, to remember why, but at the time there is no pose in his disgust. He cannot eat; he says, "To hell with it!"

In the same way, some foods are utterly delicious, and he thinks of them and tastes them with a sensuous passion which too often disappears completely with the years.

Perhaps there are little chocolate cookies as a special treat, two apiece. He eats his, all two, with an intense but delicate avidity. His small sister Judy puts one of hers in her pocket, the smug thing. But Aunt Gwen takes a bite from each of her cookies and gives what is left of one to Judy, what is left of the other to him. She is quite calm about it.

He looks at her with dreadful wonder. How can she bear to do it? He could not, *could* not have given more than a crumb of his cooky to anyone. Perhaps even a crumb would be too big. Aunt Gwen is wonderful; she is brave and superhuman. He feels a little dizzy as he looks at the bitten cooky in his hand. How could she do it?

By the time a man is ten or twelve he has forgotten most of his young passions. He is hungry and he wants to be full. It is very simple.

A few more years and he is at his life's peak of energy. His body is electric with young muscle, young blood, a new-found manhood, an awakening mind. Strangely enough, it is now that he whips himself up to greater speed. He drinks strong raw spirits and countless cups of coffee, hot and black. He devours such mild aphrodisiacs

as chili, tamales, and rare beef drowned in bottled sauces. He pours salt and pepper over everything except desserts.

At this age, eighteen or nineteen, gastronomic perceptions are non-existent, or at the most naïve. I remember that when I was a college freshman my nearest approach to *la gourmandise* was a midnight visit to *Henry's*, the old *Henry's* on Hollywood Boulevard which all the world said that Charlie Chaplin owned secretly.

There I would call for the head waiter, which probably awed my escort almost as much as I hoped it would. The waiter, a kindly soul except on Saturday nights, played up to me beautifully, and together we ordered a large pot of coffee and a German pancake with hot apple-sauce and sweet butter. ("Salted butter ruins the flavor," I would add in a nonchalant aside to my Tommy or Jimmy.)

When the pancake appeared, after an impressive wait, it was big as a tabletop, with curled edges. Two waitresses fussed over it, while people stared at us and I made sure that the apple-sauce was spread on *after* the melted butter, and that plenty of lemon juice and cinnamon were sprinkled about.

I always looked away while the monstrous thing was rolled: the waitresses were too nervous and stuck out their tongues. And I cannot remember ever finishing even my half of the pancake, when it was sliced and powdered and laid before me. Nor can I imagine ordering one now.

It is, however, these innocent experiments with food, mixed though they may be with snobbishness and "showing off," that indicate what kind of older person a young one may become. And he had two choices, the two oft-quoted oft-abused alternatives of eating to live and of living to eat.

Any normal man must nourish his body by means of food put into it through the mouth. This process takes time, quite apart from the lengthy preparations and digestions that accompany it.

Between the ages of twenty and fifty, John Doe spends some twenty thousand hours chewing and swallowing food, more than eight hundred days and nights of steady eating. The mere contemplation of this fact is upsetting enough!

To some men it is actively revolting. They devise means of accomplishing the required nourishments of their bodies by pills of condensed victuals and easily swallowed draughts which equal, they are told, the food value of a beefsteak or a vegetable stew.

To others, the stunning realization of how much time is needed to feed themselves is accepted more philosophically. They agree with La Rochefoucauld's aphorism: To eat is a necessity, but to eat intelligently is an art.

Critics of the resulting scheme of life are easily led to accuse its practicers of substituting a less pleasant word for "intelligent." So, indeed, do many of us. We sink too easily into stupid and over-fed sensuality, our bodies thickening even more quickly than our minds. We sharpen one sense at the cost of losing many others, and call ourselves epicures, forgetting that Epicurus himself employed the same adjective as La Rochefoucauld when he advocated our finding an agreeable use for our faculties in "the intelligent enjoyment of the pleasures of the table."

Whichever school a man may adhere to, the protestant or the philosophical, he continues to eat through the middle years of life with increasing interest. He grows more conscious of his body as it becomes less tolerant.

No longer can he dine heavily at untoward hours, filling his stomach with the adolescent excitations of hot sauces and stodgy pastries—no longer, that is, with impunity. No more can he say with any truth: "Oh, I can eat anything. I can drink without showing it. I am made of iron."

He is confused by strange aches and rumblings, and shudders at the thought of being forced by old age to return to the pap and pabulum of his infancy.

Most of us, unhappily, shudder and ache and rumble as secretly as possible, seeming to feel disgrace in what is but one of the common phenomena of age: the general slowing of all physical processes. For years we hide or ignore our bodily protests and hasten our own dyspeptic doom by trying to eat and drink as we did when we were twenty.

When we are past fifty, especially if we have kept up this pathetic pose of youth-at-table, we begin to grow fat. It is then that even the blindest of us should beware. Unfortunately, however, we are too used to seeing other people turn heavy in their fifties: we accept paunches and double chins as a necessary part of growing old.

Instead, we should realize this final protest of an overstuffed system, and ease our body's last years by lightening its burden. We should eat sparingly.

It is here that gastronomy, or an equivalent, can play its most comforting rôle. Even in crude form the desire for a special taste or sensation has often helped an old man more than his critical family can know. They may call him heartless; he in his turn may as logically be acting with good sense, like the ancient sailor whose much-loved son was lost at sea. When at last some one mustered courage to tell the father this tragic news, the old man looked at him coldly for a minute, glanced out the window at the blown sea, and then snapped: "Dad blast it, where's my dish of tea? I want my tea!"

For many old people, eating is the only pleasure left, as were the "endless dishes" and "unceasing cups of wine" to the aged Ulysses. And between gobbling down an indistinguishable mess of heavy meat and bread, or savouring a delicate broiled trout or an aspic full of subtle vegetable flavours, how few of us would choose the distressful insomnia that follows the first for the light easy rest of the second?

But men are thoughtless and they are habit-followers. They have eaten meat and starches for years: they see no reason for stopping when they are old, even when they think enough to realize that every function of their bodies is carried on more slowly and with more effort than ever before.

They go on whipping up their blood with "well-done" roasts, which travel haltingly through the system to the final colonic decay that makes one of the great foes of senescence—constipation.

They are floated to their coffins on a river of "stimulating" infusions of beef-extract and iron, usually fed to them surreptitiously by well-meaning daughters.

They plump out their poor sagging paunches for years with the puffed richness of such "nourishing" desserts as the typical English sweet which a friend described to me: "cake soaked with bad port, smothered in boiled custard stained a purple-brown with blackberry juice, which is in turn top-layered with warm ill-beaten white of egg tinted fuchsia pink, the whole garnished with small dirty-brown buttons of granite that are reported by us hardier Britons to be macaroons. This particular foul concoction is called 'Queen o' Puddings'!"

No wonder old people are dubbed "quaintly crabbed and testy"

by sentimental novelists, and "plain hell to live with" by their less idealistic offspring!

But we must grow old, and we must eat. It seems far from unreasonable, once these facts are accepted, for a man to set himself the pleasant task of educating his palate so that he can do the former not grudgingly and in spite of the latter, but easily and agreeably because of it.

Talleyrand said that two things are essential in life: to give good dinners and to keep on fair terms with women. As the years pass and fires cool, it can become unimportant to stay always on fair terms either with women or one's fellows, but a wide and sensitive appreciation of fine flavours can still abide with us, to warm our hearts.