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Culture and Cooking

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Minden jog fenntartva!

CHAPTER I.
a few preliminary remarks

Alexandre Dumas, *père*, after writing five hundred novels, says, "I wish to close my literary career with a book on cooking."

And in the hundred pages or so of preface—or perhaps overture would be the better word, since in it a group of literary men, while contributing recondite recipes, flourish trumpets in every key—to his huge volume he says, "I wish to be read by people of the world, and practiced by people of the art" (*gens de l'art*); and although *I* wish, like every one who writes, to be read by all the world, I wish to aid the practice, not of the professors of the culinary art, but those whose aspirations point to an enjoyment of the good things of life, but whose means of attaining them are limited.

There is a great deal of talk just now about cooking; in a lesser degree it takes its place as a popular topic with ceramics, modern antiques, and household art. The fact of it being in a mild way fashionable may do a little good to the eating world in general. And it may make it more easy to convince young women of refined proclivities that the art of cooking is not beneath their attention, to know that the Queen of England's daughters—and of course the cream of the London fair—have attended the lectures on the subject delivered at South Kensington, and that a young lady of rank, Sir James Coles's daughter, has been recording angel to the association, is in fact the R. C. C. who edits the "Official Handbook of Cookery."

But, notwithstanding all that has been done by South Kensington lectures in London and Miss Corson's Cooking School in New York to popularize the culinary art, one may go into a dozen houses, and find the ladies of the family with sticky fingers, scissors, and gum pot, busily porcelainizing clay jars, and not find one where they are as zealously trying to work out the problems of the "Official Handbook of Cookery."

I have nothing to say against the artistic distractions of the day. Anything that will induce love of the beautiful, and remove from us the possibility of a return to the horrors of hair-cloth and brocatel and crochet tidies, will be a stride in the right direction. But what I do protest against, is the fact, that the same refined girls and matrons, who so love to adorn their houses that they will spend hours improving a pickle jar, mediævalizing their furniture, or decorating the dinner service, will shirk everything that pertains to the preparation of food as dirty, disagreeable drudgery, and sit down to a commonplace, ill-prepared meal, served on those artistic plates, as complacently as if dainty food were not a refinement; as if heavy rolls and poor bread, burnt or greasy steak, and wilted potatoes did not smack of the shanty, just as loudly as coarse crockery or rag carpet—indeed far more so; the carpet and crockery may be due to poverty, but a dainty meal or its reverse will speak volumes for innate refinement or its lack in the woman who serves it. You see by my speaking of rag carpets and dainty meals in one breath, that I do not consider good things to be the privilege of the rich alone.

There are a great many dainty things the household of small or moderate means can have just as easily as the most wealthy. Beautiful bread—light, white, crisp—costs no more than the tough, thick-crusted boulder, with cavities like eye-sockets, that one so frequently meets with as *home-made bread*. As Hood says:

"Who has not met with home-made bread, A heavy compound of putty and lead?"

Delicious coffee is only a matter of care, not expense—and indeed in America the cause of poor food, even in a boarding-house, is seldom in the quality of the articles so much as in the preparation and selection of them—yet an epicure can breakfast well with fine bread and butter and good coffee. And this leads me to another thing: many people think that to give too much attention to food shows gluttony. I have heard a lady say with a tone of virtuous rebuke, when the conversation turned from fashions to cooking, "I give very little time to cooking, we eat to live only"—which is exactly what an animal does. Eating to live is mere feeding. Brillat-Savarin, an abstemious eater himself, among other witty things on the same topic says, "*L'animal se repait, l'homme mange, l'homme d'esprit seul sait manger.*"

Nine people out of ten, when they call a man an epicure, mean it as a sort of reproach, a man who is averse to every-day food, one whom plain fare would fail to satisfy; but Grimod de la Reyniere, the most celebrated gourmet of his day, author of "*Almanach des Gourmands*," and authority on all matters culinary of the last century, said, "A true epicure can dine well on one dish, provided it is excellent of its kind." Excellent, that is it. A little care will generally secure to us the refinement of having only on the table what is

excellent of its kind. If it is but potatoes and salt, let the salt be ground fine, and the potatoes white and mealy. Thackeray says, an epicure is one who never tires of brown bread and fresh butter, and in this sense every New Yorker who has his rolls from the Brevoort House, and uses Darlington butter, is an epicure. There seems to me, more mere animalism in wading through a long bill of fare, eating three or four indifferently cooked vegetables, fish, meat, poultry, each second-rate in quality, or made so by bad cooking, and declaring that you have dined well, and are easy to please, than there is in taking pains to have a perfectly broiled chop, a fine potato, and a salad, on which any true epicure could dine well, while on the former fare he would leave the table hungry.

Spenser points a moral for me when he says, speaking of the Irish in 1580, "That wherever they found a plot of shamrocks or water-cresses they had a feast;" but there were gourmets even among them, for "some gobbled the green food as it came, and some picked the faultless stalks, and looked for the bloom on the leaf."

Thus it is, when I speak of "good living," I do not mean expensive living or high living, but living so that the table may be as elegant as the dishes on which it is served.

I believe there exists a feeling, not often expressed perhaps, but prevalent among young people, that for a lady to cook with her own hands is vulgar; to love to do it shows that she is of low intellectual caliber, a sort of drawing-room Bridget. When or how this idea arose it would be difficult to say, for in the middle ages cooks were often noble; a Montmorency was *chef de cuisine* to Philip of Valois; Montesquieu descended, and was not ashamed of his descent, from the second cook of the Connetable de Bourbon, who ennobled him. And from Lord Bacon, "brightest, greatest, meanest of mankind," who took, it is said, great interest in cooking, to Talleyrand, the Machiavelli of France, who spent an hour every day with his cook, we find great men delighting in the art as a recreation.

It is surprising that such an essentially artistic people as Americans should so neglect an art which a great French writer calls the " *science mignonne* of all distinguished men of the world." Napoleon the Great so fully recognized the social value of keeping a good table that, although no gourmet himself, he wished all his chief functionaries to be so. "Keep a good table," he told them; "if you get into debt for it I will pay." And later, one of his most devoted adherents, the Marquis de Cussy, out of favor with Louis XVIII. on account of that very devotion, found his reputation as a gourmet very serviceable to him. A friend applied for a place at court for him, which Louis refused, till he heard that M. de Cussy had invented the mixture of cream, strawberries, and champagne, when he granted the petition at once. Nor is this a solitary instance in history where culinary skill has been a passport to fortune to its possessor. Savarin relates that the Chevalier d'Aubigny, exiled from France, was in London, in utter poverty, notwithstanding which, by chance, he was invited to dine at a tavern frequented by the young bucks of that day.

After he had finished his dinner, a party of young gentlemen, who had been observing him from their table, sent one of their number with many apologies and excuses to beg of him, as a son of a nation renowned for their salads, to be kind enough to mix theirs for them. He complied, and while occupied in making the salad, told them frankly his story, and did not hide his poverty. One of the gentlemen, as they parted, slipped a five-pound note into his hand, and his need of it was so great that he did not obey the prompting of his pride, but accepted it.

A few days later he was sent for to a great house, and learned on his arrival that the young gentleman he had obliged at the tavern had spoken so highly of his salad that they begged him to do the same thing again. A very handsome sum was tendered him on his departure, and afterwards he had frequent calls on his skill, until it became the fashion to have salads prepared by d'Aubigny, who became a well-known character in London, and was called "*the fashionable salad-maker*." In a few years he amassed a large fortune by this means, and was in such request that his carriage would drive from house to house, carrying him and his various condiments—for he took with him everything that could give variety to his concoctions—from one place, where his services were needed, to another.

The contempt for this art of cooking is confined to this country, and to the lower middle classes in England. By the "lower middle classes" I mean, what Carlyle terms the gigocracy—*i.e.*, people sufficiently well-to-do to keep a gig or phaeton—well-to-do tradesmen, small professional men, the class whose womenkind would call themselves "genteel," and many absurd stories are told of the determined ignorance and pretense of these would-be ladies. But in no class above this is a knowledge of cooking a thing to be ashamed of; in England, indeed, so far from that being the case, indifference to the subject, or lack of understanding and taste for certain dishes is looked upon as a sort of proof of want of breeding. Not to like curry, macaroni, or parmesan, *pâté de foie gras*, mushrooms, and such like, is a sign that you have not been all your life accustomed to good living. Mr. Hardy, in his "Pair of Blue Eyes," cleverly hits this prejudice when he makes Mr. Swancourt say, "I knew the fellow wasn't a gentleman; he had no acquired tastes, never took Worcestershire sauce."

Abroad many women of high rank and culture devote a good deal of time to a thorough understanding of the subject. We have a lady of the "lordly line of proud St. Clair" writing for us "Dainty Dishes," and doing it with a zest that shows she enjoys her work, although she does once in a while forget something she ought to have mentioned, and later still we have Miss Rose Coles writing the "Official Handbook of Cookery."

But it is in graceful, refined France that cookery is and has been, a pet art. Any bill of fare or French cookery book will betray to a thoughtful reader the attention given to the subject by the wittiest, gayest, and most beautiful women, and the greatest men. The high-sounding names attached to French standard dishes are no mere caprice or homage of a French cook to the great in the land, but actually point out their inventor. Thus *Bechamel* was invented by the Marquis de Bechamel, as a sauce for codfish; while *Filets de Lapereau à la Berry* were invented by the Duchess de Berry, daughter of the regent Orleans, who himself invented *Pain à la d'Orleans*, while to Richelieu we are indebted for hundreds of dishes besides the renowned mayonnaise.

Cailles à la Mirepois, *Chartreuse à la Mauconseil*, *Poulets à la Villeroy*, betray the tastes of the three great ladies whose name they bear.

But not in courts alone has the art had its devotees. Almost every great name in French literature brings to mind something its owner said or did about cooking. Dumas, who was a prince of cooks, and of whom it is related that in 1860, when living at Varennes, St. Maur, dividing his time, as usual, between cooking and literature (*Lorsqu'il ne faisait pas sauter un roman, il faisait sauter des petits oignons*), on Mountjoye, a young artist friend and neighbor, going to see him, he cooked dinner for him. Going into the poultry yard, after donning a white apron, he wrung the neck of a chicken; then to the kitchen garden for vegetables, which he peeled and washed himself; lit the fire, got butter and flour ready, put on his saucepans, then cooked, stirred, tasted, seasoned until dinner time. Then he entered in triumph, and announced, "*Le diner est servi*." For six months he passed three or four days a week cooking for Mountjoye. This novelist's book says, in connection with the fact that great cooks in France have been men of literary culture, and literary men often fine cooks, "It is not surprising that literary men have always formed the *entourage* of a great chef, for, to appreciate thoroughly all there is in the culinary art, none are so well able as men of letters; accustomed as they are to all refinements, they can appreciate better than others those of the table," thus paying himself and confrères a delicate little compliment at the expense of the non-literary world; but, notwithstanding the naïve self-glorification, he states a fact that helps to point my moral, that indifference to cooking does not indicate refinement, intellect, or social pre-eminence.