

"Fire!"—he knocked him down by a blow from his formidable staff, instantly falling himself by a ball from a Sicilian carabineer, who aimed full at the cross between the two C's on the wretched man's forehead.

Immediately he fell, a few shots were discharged by a concealed party of his friends, and a large shower of stones was thrown, but not one of the public force was seriously hurt, although each of their ten balls had found its billet. The people seemed utterly demoralised at the unexpected conclusion of the campaign, and picking up David's body, they all wended their way back to whence they had come. David never recovered consciousness, and died in a few hours.

The civilian was soon assisted by peaceable citizens, and the affair ended much better than could have been expected. There were no reinforcements nearer than

Siena, fifteen hours from Grosseto. Some news of the projected rising, which was to have sacked two prosperous villages near, must have reached headquarters, it is said; and yet the Prefect allowed the usual small party of ten soldiers to remain without reinforcements in its distant and exposed position.

Such performances merely invite the commission of crime, and everybody in Italy is indignant at the neglect which led to the effusion of blood, which a little care and common sense would have prevented.

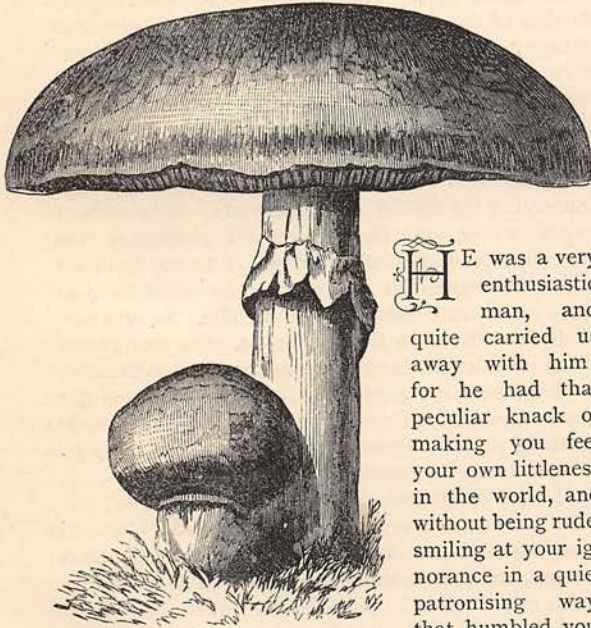
One word, in conclusion, regarding the supernatural mark on David's broad forehead. Unbelieving outsiders declare he had tattooed it; of late, they say, the heart within a parallelogram had disappeared, leaving only the cross between reversed C's visible.

He was a tall, commanding person, and only just forty-five years old.*

C.

OUR MUSHROOM BED.

A NARRATIVE OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS.



HE was a very enthusiastic man, and quite carried us away with him; for he had that peculiar knack of making you feel your own littleness in the world, and without being rude, smiling at your ignorance in a quiet patronising way, that humbled you,

and made you feel as if you had been neglecting your education most abominably, and that you ought to be ashamed of yourself.

He was staying with us for a few days in our little country home, and one way and another he had given me a pretty good rating.

"Ah! yes," it would be; "outbuildings, melon-pits, vineries—hum!—yes. You see, my dear fellow, you do not make proper use of your advantages. With such a place as this you ought to enjoy every vegetable luxury of the kingdom; as it is, you—"

He finished with a peculiar twist of his lips and a shrug of his shoulders, which, of course, all meant contemptuous pity of a more unpleasant kind than the simple verbal way in which some people express it.

I know him now, and I have no hesitation in saying that our friend was a sham—the gardening sham. You have the same type of individual everywhere, and find him ready to take you to task. He is not always a gardening sham, for he may be "horsey," and talk spavins, splinters, and swollen hocks at you. He may be a medical amateur, and give you goose-skin by his discourse upon your various organs and the ailments from which you suffer. Beware of this man of all others. The others will touch your pockets; this man will touch your health. This type is to be found in all walks of life, and is female sometimes as well as male, and the best advice I can give respecting them is—find them out as soon as you can.

"Now, look here," said our friend at dinner one day: "mushrooms—tough, leathery, tasteless. I'll be bound to say that you gave a shilling for those mushrooms."

"I gave two," I said modestly.

"Ah! yes," he said, poking at a button mushroom, which he impaled with a fork, rubbed in the sauce, and then popped in his mouth.

"I am sorry they are not better," I observed.

"Yes, they are bad," he continued, holding up a threatening finger at me. "Two shillings for a wretched little punnet of brown mushrooms not fit to eat, when for an expenditure of, say, half-a-crown you might have hundreds of basketfuls of fresh, delicious fungi—sappy, nutritious, and full of aroma!"

"But could we?" I said.

"Could you! my dear fellow. Why, you can grow mushrooms anywhere; in dark cupboards, in your old boots, in pots, and pans, and pails; in old boxes, in halves of beer-barrels, or—why, of course, the very thing—that dark pit-like shed. The very place!"

* While this is passing through the press, one at least of the party of order has succumbed to the injuries received. It is reported also that a number of Lazarettisti continually watch David's grave, expecting his resuscitation.

"But how?" I said.

"How! My dear fellow, what have you been doing all your life that you do not know how to grow mushrooms?"

"It was left out of my education," I said, feeling abashed at my ignorance, especially as there was a look upon my wife's face which seemed to say she had at last found out what a miserable pretender I was.

"Left out of your education, sir? I'm ashamed of you. There! I'll show you in the morning."

He did, and his process was very simple. It was merely making our man wheel a few barrowfuls of manure into the shed, fork them up into shape, and then cover them with earth, well patted down, till the whole looked as if we had been making a neat grave for a giant of about twelve feet long.

"There," said my friend; "now all you have got to do is to send to one of the London seedsmen for half a dozen bricks of mushroom spawn, stick it into the bed, cover it all over with straw, and wait for your mushrooms. They'll soon come."

I followed out his instructions to the letter. I bought the spawn; I stuck it into the bed; I covered it over with straw, and I waited for my mushrooms, but they did not soon come.

"When do you think we shall have any delicious mushrooms, dear?" said my wife; "I'm so fond of them!"

"I can't say," I replied. "Of course they take time to develop. I've no doubt we shall have some soon."

"But are you sure you quite followed out Mr. Nostick's directions?"

"Quite," I replied. "I couldn't have made a mistake."

"It's very strange!" said my wife; and she repeated that observation at intervals of a week, during which time I watched that giant's grave in the shed, hoping to see it burst forth into an efflorescence of glistening buttons; but it did not; the only thing it bore was a disgusting-looking white fungus, which came up like a cadaverous-looking thumb, upon a thin leg, stood there sickly and strange for a few days, and then dissolved away in a kind of mouldy ink that was objectionable in the extreme.

But no mushrooms. I waited and waited, and I watched and watched, but not a vestige of one did I see, and at last I came to the conclusion that Mr. Nostick might have been a little wrong, for a friend whom I consulted assured me that the seedsmen from whom I obtained the mushroom spawn were to be depended upon for sending it thoroughly good.

Now the very fact of not getting the delicious agarics I had been trying to grow made me ten times as anxious to obtain them, so seeking the advice of a practised old gardening friend, I told him all about our mushroom bed, and asked him how long the mushrooms would be before they came up.

His reply was terribly concise, and very far from conveying hope to the human breast. It was—

"Never!"

"What have we done wrong, then?" I asked.

"Everything," was the reply; and I rubbed my ear in a vicious annoyed way.

"But Nosticks said it was as easy as possible to grow them," I said, "and declared you could produce them in boxes, or tubs, or pails. He even said you could grow them in old boots."

"Nosticks is quite right, and he's quite wrong," said my gardening acquaintance, smiling. "You can grow mushrooms very easily—in boxes, or tubs, or old boots if you like. So you could potatoes. He is right so far; but when it comes to how to grow them, he is quite wrong. I suppose you would like to have another try?"

"I certainly should," I replied.

"Good! Then we'll go to work at once, and see what we can do with your mushroom bed."

He went with me to the shed, and the very first thing he did with the giant's grave was to have it pulled all to pieces and barrowed away, declaring it to be quite useless, after which he proceeded to make the new one; I, of course, helping to the best of my little skill.

For down here in the country we set aside a great number of the patent leather and white kid glovisms of town. We try to retain our cultivation, but our wives do not consider it derogatory to their dignity to take the rich cream off a pan, while we, the husbands, use a spade, wheel barrows, and for recompense eat heartily and digest well. In fact we do as did the gentleman who wrote to the paper some years back concerning the dignity of men-servants. He was about engaging one, and the gentleman's gentleman was punctilious, and full of questions as to the work he would be required to do—whether he would have to carry coals, clean windows, and the like. So very particular was he that the advertiser, who was rather out of patience, exclaimed in similar words to these—

"Look here, my good fellow, ours is a quiet country home, where, if you come, you will be expected to do anything you are requested to do, except feed the pigs. That I always do myself."

The would-be domestic fled in disgust.

So in this case; my practical friend and I obtained from the stable a sufficiency of good fresh horse-manure, and the accompanying litter. This was afterwards mixed up with about the same quantity of fresh dry loamy soil, full of fibre, which we dug from the side of a meadow, but before adding the loam a portion of the straw shaken out from the manure was chopped up with a bill-hook, mixed with the horse-droppings, and the whole left to ferment.

"But are we not going on?" I said to my practical friend.

"No," he said; "*festina lente*—hasten slowly—is the way to grow mushrooms. That heap of manure must lie now and ferment, but not too rapidly. In about three days' time you may turn it over, so as to get the outside within."

"And what am I to do meanwhile?" I asked.

"Write and get some more bricks of spawn from your seedsmen, and in a week's time I will come and help you to get forward another stage."

This was very much like getting into the interesting part of a magazine story, and then having to wait a week; but there was no help for it, so I ordered my bricks of spawn, and turned over the heap of material, and waited till my friend came again, when, taking off our coats, we went to work in the dark shed. First of all a layer of the dry friable loam was laid down, then a layer of manure, and both were beaten down firmly. Of course I asked why.

"To prevent over-heating, and to make the mushroom spawn run well," said my friend.

Then more layers of manure and more layers of loam were added, and beaten down, till an oblong patch of about fourteen inches high was formed, the edges being kept up with boards and old packing-case lids, which we retained in their places by driving broomsticks into the ground.

"What! 'to be continued in our next' again?" I said in dismay.

"Yes, my friend," was the reply. "We can do no more now, only leave the bed to ferment."

"But the spawn—isn't that to go in?"

"Certainly not yet. There, you may break it up into bits about twice the size of lumps of sugar ready for use, and meanwhile you must watch the bed."

"What, all night?" I said. "Perhaps you'd like me to sleep in it."

"Nonsense, man! Stick an old thermometer into it, and look now and then during the day. It must not get above eighty degrees, because if so the fermentation is too rapid, and you must thrust a stick in here and there to let out the heat. In a few days I'll come again."

I followed out his advice to the letter, and when he came he smiled with satisfaction, for the thermometer marked seventy-four degrees.

"That will do," he said, "capitally;" and taking up an old dibber, he proceeded to make holes all over the bed about a foot apart, into which holes, that were about three inches deep, he instructed me to drop one of the lumps of spawn. This being done, the bed was covered with a layer half an inch thick of dry loam, when it was again "to be continued in our next," and nothing more was done for ten days, when my practical friend showed me that a peculiar thread-like fibrey growth was beginning to pervade the interior of the bed, which he said was the running of the spawn; and now at his command we covered the bed over with about a couple of inches of dry loam that had been warming in the sun, and the bed was complete.

My instructions were, though, that I was to let the heat gradually decrease to sixty degrees, and keep it at that heat—a matter that caused me no difficulty, for the tendency was to get hotter, and a few punctures

with a stick kept it down. I had to water the bed too, but very slightly, and with tepid water, for everything like a chill had to be avoided; and then, according to my friend's instructions, I had to wait.

It was at the end of May that the mushroom bed was finished; and, my practical friend going out for a three months' continental tour, I was left to my own resources and the banter of my wife, whose favourite joke was to sigh and say—

"Ah! how nice a few mushrooms would be for breakfast!"

I bore it all like a martyr, and then tried hard to have perfect faith in that dark brown bed in the dark shed; but the faith would not come any more than the mushrooms. However, I consoled myself with the idea that the material would be capital for next year's cucumbers.

It was one splendid morning just in the middle of July that we were seated at breakfast, when my wife glanced at me, and said with a teasing smile—

"How I could relish a few mushrooms for breakfast this morning!"

"Could you, dear?" I said, jumping up and ringing the bell. "Then you shall have some."

Of course it was all planned, for maid Mary entered with a covered dish of delicious stewed mushrooms from our own bed. In fact, on the previous day when I went gloomily into the shed, I gave a start, for there peeping up through the dark mass were the little round heads, which developed so rapidly that the next morning I cut a delicious little dish, and after that, for fully three months, that bed went on producing abundantly.

Since then I have made dozens of beds in boxes, egg-cases, cut-down tea-chests, on shelves—anywhere in fact, though I have never tried the old boots; and my experience is this, that the secret of growing mushrooms is getting good fresh horse-manure and dry loam, minding it does not ferment too fast, and grow rank and hot; going patiently to work, and then carefully attending to the temperature and degree of moisture. We know that in the fields mushrooms in plenty are produced in some summers, none in others. The reason is simple. Too much rain chills the spawn when running, even as too much watering will destroy it in the bed. Warm genial showers are what are needed, and with our beds we trust to gentle fermentation of manure, and tepid water from a pot, to imitate the working of nature. This is all that need be done to gain an abundant crop from April to September, one bed being made to succeed another.

Here, then, is the history of a failure and a success; the difference seems trifling, and yet one plan produced nothing but our giant's grave—the grave of Giant Despair if you will—the other produced Our Mushroom Bed.

