

A LESSON IN ARTISAN COOKERY.



I had long been a very cherished scheme of mine to give my poorer neighbours a few lessons in the art of cooking vegetable soups and other cheap dishes quite within reach of their means, which needed no costly ingredients—only a little accuracy in weighing and measuring the materials, and in observing the proper time to be given to cooking them. But it always seemed to me that it would be difficult to induce my neighbours to come to me to be taught. This difficulty, however, was ultimately surmounted in the following manner:—

There is a Cottage Gardening Society in our parish, which offers prizes for clean houses, well-stocked gardens, flowers in pots, cut flowers, fruit and vegetables; and most of the women had earned substantial prizes during the three years of its existence. The wives of the mason, the blacksmith, and the shoemaker had been especially fortunate with their vegetables.

It occurred to me that it would be a capital plan if I were to offer prizes for vegetable soup, to be judged on the day of the flower-show along with the flowers, fruit, and vegetables. Accordingly, when our report and rules for the next year were to be printed, I inserted a list of prizes for soup, the highest prize being 7s. 6d. It was not long before I heard that the new prizes were being much talked about, and that several women resolved to compete for them; but they wondered how the soup was to be made. Was it to consist of vegetables and water only, and were they to put a little of every vegetable in the garden into it? Their ideas of cookery were the most rudimentary and simple.

I left the subject to work in their minds, and when the desirability of winning 7s. 6d. had been discussed for a couple of months, I proposed to give lessons in making soup to any of our members who might wish to learn. The blacksmith's wife was eager to attend my class; she kept me in mind of my promise, and stirred up her friends in the village and parish at large, till at length I found I was likely to give my first lesson to a class of nineteen young women and girls, all anxious to compete for the prize.

As our flower-show was to take place the last week in July, I decided upon giving the lesson early in the month, since it would not do to let too long a time elapse between the lesson and the judging. The instructions ought to be fresh in the pupils' memories.

I had a nice little grate put into the kitchen of an empty cottage, and I laid in coal and the necessary ingredients for two kinds of soup. I was at the cottage on the day before our lesson to receive the messengers who were arriving with our stores, causing much interest and excitement in the village, especially

among the little boys. No rehearsal was ever carried out with more painstaking anxiety than mine, as, with my maid to assist me, I spent the afternoon in making the two soups I had decided upon to form the staple of our first lesson.

Great interest was displayed in our doings. Grown people walked lingeringly past the window, too respectful to pause altogether to stare at the novel sight, yet determined to see as much of it as they could, while my little enemies, the boys, flattened their noses against the panes, or pressed in at the door to watch what I was doing. I was not disturbed by all this observation, however; the experiment was too absorbing and important to admit of my thinking of other things.

At three o'clock next day the fire was burning clearly and brightly; the materials for our cookery were laid out upon a table in the centre of the room; forms were ranged along the walls, and my maid, Annie, and I stood with our aprons on, awaiting the arrival of our first pupil. Mrs. Dennehy, the blacksmith's wife, who had first seen the desirability of trying to earn the prize, was the earliest to appear.

"There's a whean o' them coming up the street, miss," said she: "there's Fanny Brown, an' young 'Essie, an' Mrs. McBeth from Clooney, an' Nancy Mahaffy from Letterbratt."

"But your next-door neighbour, Mrs. Dennehy, and the other women from Letterbratt, are not they coming?"

"I heered them sayin' they'd come, miss; but I thought I'd be too long if I waited on them. I was lazy to keep you waiting."

"Here they are now," cried Annie, who had been at the door to look out; and we soon welcomed fourteen women.

"We'll begin at once," said I, "for the dried-pea-soup will take three hours to make properly. I hope you are willing to stay with me until half-past six o'clock."

They all replied that they had made arrangements to stay. One woman had got a neighbour to promise to prepare her husband's supper; another had a little daughter at home who was old enough to fill her place; a third thought her husband would not mind waiting a little for once.

"He will be rewarded for waiting if you learn to make the soups I am going to show you; they are so good that I am sure he will ask you to give them to him often. Don't you all buy bacon sometimes?"

"Very often," replied some. "About twice a week," said others.

"And how do you prepare it generally?"

"We just fry a wee bit in the pan, an' it does for a taste to the potatoes."

"How much do you usually get at a time?"

"About two ounces."

"Why, that is precisely the quantity I am about to

use in the pea-soup; and it will both taste nicer and go further than if you were to eat it plain."

Our kettle came to the boil as I made the above remark. I took it off the fire and measured two quarts of boiling water into a large saucepan. I then put a pint of dried split-peas and two ounces of bacon cut in small pieces into the water, and set the saucepan upon the fire. Annie stood near with a spoon in her hand, and lifting the lid of the saucepan, gave the mess a good stir every few minutes to prevent its burning.

"Now," said I, "our pea-soup must boil for an hour and a half before we do anything more to it—an occasional stir is all it will require. See, I place my watch on the table, for it is most important to be particular about time in cooking. I think you all have clocks in your houses?"

"We have clocks surely, but we wouldna be bothered lookin' at them," said Nancy Mahaffy, my oldest pupil.

"Troth, Nancy, you would be glad enough to be bothered if it was a thing you were expectin' the prize," retorted another woman; and there was a general laugh at Nancy's expense.

"While the pea-soup is boiling," I continued, "we shall have ample time to make some sago-soup, which is very nice, very cheap, and can be made in an hour and a half. When the men taste *it*, I am quite sure they will insist on its being made for them very often."

There was a laugh at this view of the question, and the women joked one another, the faults and virtues of their husbands, sons, and brothers being very freely commented upon. One man was reported to be very careless what he got to eat if only the children were kept quiet while he was in the house. Another was "that fine an' particular you couldna satisfy him." Nancy Mahaffy asserted that *her* old man knew better than to give trouble about "his meat."

"Poor old crathure!" cried a neighbour, "it isn't much trouble you take about his meat, Nancy."

"Well, I should like to think the men had a comfortable, warm dinner after working in the cold and wet. Now for the sago-soup. You put four ounces of sago into a saucepan with a quart of cold water, an ounce of bacon, a little pepper and salt, and a teaspoonful of celery-seed tied up in a piece of muslin. Bring the saucepan, Annie, and let us measure the quart of cold water before their eyes. Set it on the fire, and let it come to the boil."

Mrs. Dennehy, who watched our operations very closely, observed that they all had celery-seed in their gardens, so that the seasoning would be easy to get. She called upon the others to remark that the sago was put on in *cold* water, and the peas in *boiling* water.

"The sago is boiling now, miss," said Annie.

"It must boil for an hour before we do anything further to it, and we must stir it very often while it is boiling."

The pupils watched while Annie and I peeled and cut up six large onions in very thin round rings, and then chopped them very fine. These we laid aside to

be added to the sago-soup when it should have boiled for an hour, and began to peel six more large onions for the pea-soup when its hour and a half should have expired. We stopped in our work every few minutes to run to the fire and give our two saucepans a stir.

I had by this time repeated the receipts so often—going over and over their directions in the plainest language—that I was quite hoarse. Some of the young girls had learnt them by heart, but were too shy to repeat them for the benefit of their companions as I requested.

At length the sago-soup had boiled for an hour, and while it was boiling fast we threw in the fine-chopped onions, which we stirred round, and left to boil for eight minutes. Our next proceeding was to mix a table-spoonful of flour in a basin with three table-spoonfuls of cold water, to which we added a little of the boiling soup so as to blend it properly. We then added it to the soup in the saucepan, gave all a last stir, took out the remains of the bacon and the little bag of celery-seed, and poured the soup into the nineteen little mugs which I had arranged upon the table in readiness. A slice of bread had been toasted and cut into very small dice. We put a few pieces of toast into each of the mugs before handing them to the class.

"Beautiful!" cried Mrs. Dennehy, as she tasted hers.

"It's just lovely, miss," smiled little Fanny Brown.

"Dear, dear, but it's the darling nourishment!" said Nancy Mahaffy.

"Won't you make it for your old man, then, Nancy?" asked I, highly pleased.

The reasonable refreshment cheered the class, who had, I fancied, seemed a little tired, and the remainder of our task was accomplished easily. At the expiration of the hour and a half, I had thrown the six onions into the boiling pea-soup. When the class had finished tasting the sago-soup, I found that the pea-soup had still an hour to boil. It was exactly half-past five. At half-past six we took the onions out of the pea-soup (they had fallen into halves and quarters, and were as tender as marrow) and set them aside while we strained the peas through a colander, mashing them with a spoon in the water they had been boiled in, so that they ran through like a thick soup. When we had strained it, we returned it to the saucepan. We then mixed a large table-spoonful of flour in three table-spoonfuls of cold water, and when the soup boiled again we mixed it with some of the boiling soup, then with the whole; and having cut the soft onions into tiny morsels, we added them and little bits of toast, and served as before in the nineteen mugs, which Mrs. Dennehy had washed for us.

"Darling" and "beautiful" were the faintest expressions of approval applied to it, and the class unanimously expressed their intention of making it for the show, Mrs. Dennehy laughingly assuring her companions that she meant to distance them all, and win the highest prize.