

THE TOUCHING TALE OF A PLUM-PUDDING.

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“**W**ELL, my dear, if you do not make a noble appearance at the Christmas dinner tomorrow, I don't know who will,” chirped a big, tempting-looking plum-pudding, walking on tiptoe round an equally toothsome ditto, the object of her admiration, who was surveying himself in a diminutive hand-glass with perfect self-satisfaction depicted on every plum in his shining countenance. “Why,” she added, “it isn't safe for you to go out alone.”

“My love,” said the other, holding his plum-pudding head high in the air, “I should like to behold the hand daring enough to pluck so much as a currant from off my brow. Where's the boy?” he asked, brushing away at a roguish little hat. “Oh, you're there, are you!”



“Surveying himself in a diminutive hand-glass.”

—as a dirty pasty pudding (a milk and watery production of stale groceries) dressed in page-boy garments, and carrying a lilliputian plum-pudding robed in a long white dress, and who was howling

lustily, came cringing into the room.

“That child is always bellowing,” said Mr. Plumpudding, wrathfully glaring at the page, who forthwith became more pasty than ever.

“It's the almonds, sir, please.”

“The what!” screamed Mr. and Mrs. Plumpudding.

“The almonds,” repeated the page, in an awestruck voice. “He's been an' swallowed of 'em, an' they're sticking out tremendous like, all over him.”

“Oh, why does that boy exist!” cried Mr. Plumpudding, waving with tragic gesture

a scented handkerchief. “Oh, why is he allowed to torment me thus!”

“It warn't me,” sobbed the small page.

“Cease, wretched youth; attire thyself instantly and follow me,” said his master. “Wife, what's for supper?”

“Sparrow-pie—delicious,” answered Mrs. Plumpudding, smacking her lips.

“Ahem! Wife!”

“Yes, love?”

“Don't pick.”

The pasty page, who meanwhile had enveloped his pale features in a huge muffler and sun-bonnet, now stood respectfully awaiting his master's pleasure.

“Boy, where's the infant?”

The page in utter bewilderment stared into vacancy, and muttered that “It might be up the spout!”

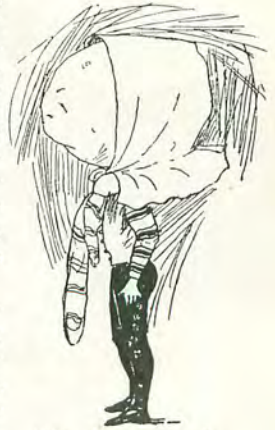
Mrs. Plumpudding sank in a fainting condition on a chair, murmuring feebly for something “hot and strong, and quick.” While Mr. Plumpudding, having boxed the page's doughy ears, which stuck in flabby despair to his plumless head, tore in frantic alarm round the room, in his efforts to obtain all utensils that contained liquid, the contents of which he poured over his swooning spouse.

This remedy having the surprising effect of bringing her to in no time, there ensued a search for the missing heir, who was shortly discovered heels up in the coal-scuttle, making a hearty meal off the coal.

“I give that child up as a bad job,” cried Mr. Plumpudding; “he will be the death of

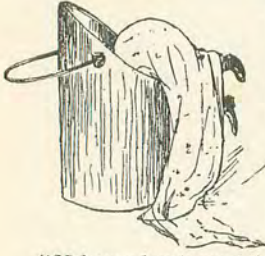


“It's the almonds, sir, please.”



“In a huge muffler.”

somebody when he comes to table, that's certain. Boy, attend me. Adieu, wife; I would salute you, but you have a dirty



"Making a hearty meal."

face." So saying, Mr. Plumpudding strutted to the door, followed by the pasty page.

"What a magnificent night!" observed his master, proceeding to walk at a brisk pace down the brilliantly-lighted street, with the small

boy trotting breathlessly behind.

The outward and visible sign of the season was seen everywhere that bright Christmas Eve—in the shape of sweets and savouries of all descriptions. Big plum-puddings, little plum-puddings stepped along with jaunty airs, well knowing their own value, for were not their brown bodies filled to bursting with groceries of the clearest water and warranted not gritty? Dainty mince-pies tripped by, whispering merrily of the coming festivities, in which they would bear no small part; ruddy bottles of wine, descended from the finest bin, were to be seen walking arm in arm, laughing gaily; saucy little hazel-nuts hopped up and down on the pavement, getting in everyone's way in their excitement, and being threatened by kingly joints that they would have their cheeky heads cracked if better respect was not shown to superiors. Lordly sirloins beamed upon all through golden collars of fat, while numbers of turkeys, already staffed and roasted, passed, talking genteelly together.

"What an august spectacle!" exclaimed Mr. Plumpudding, pausing for a moment with folded arms to watch the animated scene. "Ha!" he continued. "It requires a mind such as mine to appreciate with sufficient admiration so magnificent a sight. What have you to say to this, boy?" he asked, looking down with lofty dignity at the pasty page.

"I should say, Mister," replied that pale youth, "that if so be as the human party as were a-lookin' at this 'ere 'ad no stomick like, 'e might hobserve without a-wantin' to stick a knife and fork into 'im."

"Oh, the vulgarity of the lower class!" cried Mr. Plumpudding. "They creep and they crawl in their ignorance, but never soar to more elevated regions. Oh, you—you—you animal!" roared he, backing away from

the page, who meekly asked what he had "been an' gone an' done."

But Mr. Plumpudding at that moment was unable to speak, for he had come in violent collision with a bottle of port wine that was leaning upside down against a lamp-post, and nearly sent him sprawling on his aristocratic nose. Meanwhile the bottle of port wine, having with difficulty reared himself the right end up, reeled up to Mr. Plumpudding, and waving his arms to support his balance, said, with a tipsy giggle—

"My head'sh qui' cleash, but my legs are deshidedly intoxicated." Here he sank in a confused heap upon the pavement.

"Master," said the page in a tragic whisper, "I believe he's drunk and incapable."

At this remark the bottle of port wine once more staggered to his feet, and standing with inebriated legs very wide apart, glared indignantly in Mr. Plumpudding's face, and roared forth, "Notch so tipsy as you!" Here he again fell to the ground, for the forty-ninth and last time, where he remained, swearing horribly at the world in general, and his own tipsy limbs in particular.

"What a degrading exhibition!" said Mr. Plumpudding, turning away in disgust, and motioning to the small boy to follow; but the page could not resist waiting a minute to screw his face into a hideous grimace and stare at the recumbent form of the bottle of port, at the same time emitting



"My legs are deshidedly intoxicated."

a kind of whirring noise from his mouth, which appeared to have an extremely irritating effect on that gentleman, for he bubbled and frothed, and foamed in indignation, and

certainly would have burst if the cork had not given vent to his outraged feeling by popping out with a bang, and hitting in the eye a huge round of beef, who happened at that moment to be driving past on a dish. The beefy monarch rose to his feet and shrieked out, "He'd be dished if he stood that!" But as he was dished already, it would be rather undignified to descend, chastise the offender, and then dish himself again; so he took the wisest course of remaining where he was, taking a little comfort by fixing his one uninjured orb fiercely on the bottle of port, who was rapidly disappearing in a cataract of foam.

The pasty page, alarmed at the result of his game, sneaked after Mr. Plumpudding.

"Why did you not come at once, boy?" he was sternly asked.

"Because, Mister," meekly replied the page, "I could not 'elp a-giving that 'ere degrader a bit of my mind, an' I told 'im you was so noble, as you did not know what it was to fetch a drop of water to wash your own 'ands, and as 'ow you 'ad 'caps and 'caps."

"Oh," said Mr. Plumpudding, somewhat mollified, "and what did the wretched creature say to that?"

"'E didn't say nothin'," answered the pasty page—"it seemed to squench 'im."

"Well, well," returned his master, "I must endeavour to forget him. We will now wend our way homewards; it is on the point of seven. At what hour did your mistress say the dinner would be served?"

"She said as 'ow at seven o'clock *precise* the sparrer-pie 'll be took out of the hoven," replied the page.

"By jabbers, she'll pick!" exclaimed Mr. Plumpudding, in an agitated whisper, striding rapidly in the direction of his home, while the pasty youth, smiling a bilious smile, hurried after him. This speed was continued in silence until they had traversed several streets, when Mr. Plumpudding, in turning a corner, stumbled over what appeared to be a grimy heap of rags squatting on the pavement.

"Why, bless my soul!" cried Mr. Plumpudding, holding up his eyeglass. "What is this?"

"It's me," said a voice.

"Dear me, how very extraordinary!" ejaculated Mr. Plumpudding.

The heap of rags slowly rose, and disclosed a little loaf of bread, attired in an old top hat and high-lows very much the worse for wear.

"Please," whined the small loaf, "I ain't got nothing in my inside."

"Poor forlorn one," said Mr. Plumpudding, adjusting his eyeglass. "Page, my money-purse. This is sad, very sad indeed," he muttered. "Christmas-time and not even a currant in him. Here, forlorn one, take this and fill yourself instantly."

In great glee the small loaf commenced turning head over heels down the street, in the direction of the nearest grocer's, while Mr. Plumpudding and page went on their way, the former's heart expanding with warmth at having performed so magnanimous an act.

"I wonder if anybody saw me," he thought. "Boy, did you observe any pedestrians perambulating the street during my little deed of kindness?"

"No, sir; not one human bean."

"Of course not," said Mr. Plumpudding

in an injured tone—"of course not. Slave," he added, stopping and listening, "hear you a strange fluttering in mid-air?"

"I do," replied the page in a frightened voice.

"Good gracious!" cried Mr. Plumpudding,

as a

number of sparrows alighted on the pavement and popped gravely up to him.

"I believe," said the foremost bird, who was dressed in deep mourning, "that I behold my enemy—the wretched creature who stole my beloved wife." Here he wept copiously in a black-edged handkerchief.

"This is very fearful!" exclaimed Mr. Plumpudding, streaming with perspiration. "Boy, stand in front."

"Oh, sir, I dursn't," whimpered the horrified page, retreating.

"See," continued the small bird, "he pales—my enemy pales. Oh, my sweet Maria Jane, to think that you should end your days in pie-crust. But I will be avenged!"

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Plumpudding, "this is getting frightful! Boy, defend your master!"



"Oh, sir, I can't, my legs are so slender," sobbed the page.

"Then there is nothing for it but flight; we must flee."

So saying, he commenced tearing down



"I believe that I behold my enemy."

the street, followed by the page holding tight to his master's coat-tails.

"Mates," called out the sparrow, "charge!"

"Loose me, loose me!" screamed Mr. Plumpudding to the page; but that pasty youth only clung tighter.

Away flew the sparrows after Mr. Plumpudding, and each as they came up to him picked out a currant.

"I shan't have a morsel left!" shrieked Mr. Plumpudding.

"Oh, oh, oh!" roared the page, as a sparrow alighted on his master's head and pecked out a huge almond.

"The pride of my life gone," wailed Mr. Plumpudding. "I will give in and die like a Briton!"

"No, no, sir!" panted the pasty youth. "Remember your hoffspring. I'm a-hegging of you on," he gasped, clinging in desperation to the coat of his unfortunate master; and thus in horror-stricken silence they raced on.

The revengeful sparrow with his mates fluttered excitedly about Mr. Plumpudding, twittering loudly as they fought over the fruity contents of his cranium; while the pasty page inwardly rejoiced that his own pale pate was so utterly devoid of the like delicacies.

The roast joints of meat they encountered in that headlong flight started aside in wonder and alarm as Mr. Plumpudding with the page tore past, surrounded by angry birds; the rich cakes and mince-pies thought their last hour had come; and the stuffed turkeys screamed hoarsely as they fluttered away in terror. I regret to say the little hazel-nuts were cracked most prematurely in the general confusion,

"I feel that fainty 'ot, Mister," whined the page, as at last they reached home and visions of nice resuscitating drinks rose before him; but Mr. Plumpudding answered never a word, but bursting open the door—which the pasty youth quickly barred and bolted—tumbled into the arms of his wondering wife.

"I shall never hold up my head again," he wept.

"It was them sparrers, Missus," said the page, who was not hurt in the least; "an' if it 'adn't been for me a-shoving of 'im on he wouldn't 'ave so much as a bit of peel left, though I just did 'ave queer feels a-doing of it."

"Oh, dear," wept Mr. Plumpudding, "to think how noble I looked when I sallied forth, and see me now!"

This was too much. Mrs. Plumpudding began to sob, the small infant also howled dismally in some remote region, and the pasty page who wanted—for the first time in his meagre life—to laugh, exploded in a dish-cover, which had the effect of extreme grief.

The sparrows, fully satisfied with their revenge, chucked as they heard the lamentations within, and the bereaved one, leaving his mates to finish the carols of jubilation, flew away to seek another bride.

Mr. Plumpudding slowly emerged from his handkerchief, embraced his wife, and extending a hand to the page said—

"I bear no malice, and I hope all the readers of my direful tale will not pick the few remaining currants left me, and like the sparrows will spare my page,"



"A sparrow pecked out a huge almond."