



Our Christmas Plum-Puddings.

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Illustrated by GORDON C. HOME.



HE is an utter and bombastic fraud. He rolls spluttering and crackling on to the English dinner-table at Yuletide, a sprig of English holly cocked jauntily in his cap, well-nigh bursting his rotund body in swaggering sham patriotism. Full of faults if you like, he exclaims, but English, my dear sir, good old English to the core! No mincing continental concoctions here, but good sound English food for hearty English appetite and unimpaired digestion. He is the genuine, rollicking comrade of the roast beef of old England. A dissipated, liverish ruffian, if you will; soaked in brandy; a rough practical joker to nervous folk who suffer from nightmare; but at least he will not be denied his honest birthright, and for that last sterling quality we forgive him all. It is the season of peace and goodwill and the forgetting of old injuries in the light of the blazing hearth log. So we remember no more the bad turns he served us a year ago, the health he robbed us of, his fair promises and pitiful performances, and the sleepless nights he brought us; the Englishman's right hand of friendship is extended anew in welcome to the prodigal who always returns when the Christmas bells begin to peal.

And he is a miserable fraud, with all his swagger. There is hardly a pennyworth of patriotism in his composition. He cannot justly claim to be called an Englishman at all. There is no more genuine Britishry in him than there is in the Anglo-maniac dude who turns up his trousers in New York because it is raining in London, you know. He is a mere colourless cosmopolitan, with as many homes as a duke or an American

millionaire. He never was able to make good his boast, but he gets worse every year, and it has reached such a pitch now that hardly a crumb in his body can be vouched for as genuine; the very wrapper that he steams in, the basin wherein he makes his first toilet, the butter which eases his growing pains in the mould, the pot in which he completes his preparations, are not above suspicion. Let us expose the impostor.

We will begin with the plums. There is nothing English about them. Of course they are not really even plums at all, but grapes. They come mostly from the land of the distressed Armenian, Asiatic Turkey having sent us over £400,000 worth last year; that means over 300,000 cwts. But our bill to Spain for that country's variety is even bigger. That is because the quality is better, for the total weight of the Spanish consignments was about 17,000 cwts. less than that of the Asiatic, while the sum paid for them was nearly £30,000 more. Lack of veracity seems to characterise the plum-pudding in all its dealings. Just as it boasts of plums which are no plums, so it is spotted with "currants" which are not currants. Their home also is the vineyard, and in nearly all cases a Greek vineyard. Edhem Pasha's victorious army trampled last spring through many a vineyard from which the English plum-pudding hoped to draw some of its nourishment. Whether the black spots of indigestion in our puddings this year will thereby be anyway modified remains to be seen. Probably not, even though the war last spring was a final calamity, coming on the top of bad seasons, for the industry is cultivated so assiduously on the fertile patches between the stony crags of Greece

that many dire calamities would be needed to send "currants" up to famine price. So far, judging from the Board of Trade returns, the consumption in England is better this year than last, though not so

stimulated to a second helping. The breezes which blow "soft o'er Ceylon's isle" are laden with cinnamon for England's plum-pudding. Last year we imported thence more than one and a quarter million pounds.



THE PIREUS, ATHENS, WHENCE THE CURRANTS ARE SHIPPED.

heavy as in 1895. As a matter of fact, currants have become very cheap indeed during the last few years. There was a tremendous drop in the price between 1892 and 1893. In the former year the wholesale price was a little over 23s. a cwt., in the latter year the price suddenly fell to an average of about 14s. 9d. a cwt., and since then it has been even lower. Now, the heaviest plum-pudding contains a very small fraction of a cwt. of currants. Yet the total consumption is enormous. What with currant cakes, currant dumplings, and currant buns, and the other seductive aids to dyspepsia wherein the currant plays its malevolent part, this country managed to get through last year 127,413,216 pounds of them. At any rate that was the amount "entered for home consumption" by the Customs officials. Prodigious!

Then there is the candied peel. The jam factories do their best to naturalise it, but it can never be a true-born English fruit. Similarly with almonds. They are dreadful outsiders. They come from Germany, they come from France, they come from Portugal; Spain sends us nearly 70,000 cwt. every year; Italy is good for nearly half that amount; Morocco contributes, Turkey contributes, the Canary Islands send their dole, and other countries, and even British possessions are on the list. Look again at those spices wherewith the jaded appetite is

here, too, there is room for chastened rejoicing. Though we buy over three million pounds of "unenumerated" spices from foreign countries, we purchase more than seven and a half million pounds from our own Possessions. Even more satisfactory is it to learn that the major part of our patronage is given to those unfortunate British West India Islands, which, by condoning the European sugar bounty, we have allowed to sink into ruin before

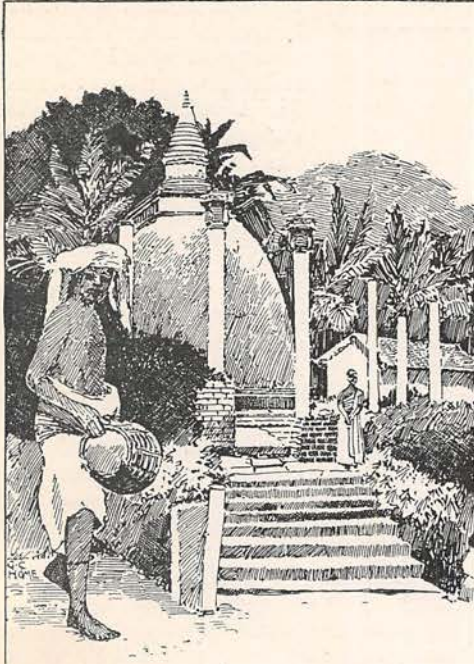
our eyes. From these islands we received nearly three and a half million pounds last year, for which we paid nearly £71,000. Where spices are concerned, quality and quantity do not always run together. From



A VIEW IN ALCUZA, SPAIN.

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the Straits Settlements we received rather more than one and a half million pounds of spices, and paid over £90,000 for them; but from Zanzibar and Pemba we bought over



A CINGALESE GROWER OF CINNAMON.

two million pounds, and they cost us only some £18,400.

Then there is the brandy with which this dissipated reveller, the Plum-pudding, flagrantly sets at nought Sir Wilfrid Lawson's best advice, tempting good Sunday-school children from their Band of Hope vows. Entirely a foreign vice. It is a sad thought, but in the course of the year we get through no less than two and three-quarter million gallons of the fiery and expensive spirit. The temptation is practically all provided by France. Of course no one would be so unjust as to credit the Plum-pudding with anything like the whole of this destroying flood, but the Plum-pudding must bear a heavy charge. Few of us finish our dinners with liqueurs of cognac, and Scotch whisky has in recent years charmed most of us away from the deadly brandy and soda. Yet in many a sober household brandy's seductive taste is only learned through the medium of the abandoned Pudding. Nor is he particular to confine his nefarious teaching to brandy. If the sideboard lacks the three-star label, whisky will serve his turn. Truly the

Christmas pudding sorely needs reformation. And yet the most virtuous among us, with the most cheerily blazing logs warming our backs, would feel a chill if the pudding came to table decorated with a blue ribbon. Nor would the oldest of English ale (though its presence is not unknown as an ingredient as well as an accompaniment) quite fill the void which lack of the Frenchman's fire-water would cause.

Now we come to a graver charge. The ingredients above mentioned show how hollow is the Pudding's pretension to English birth and breeding; but in respect to these matters he may fairly plead extenuating circumstances; they are more his misfortune than his fault. You would not enjoy his companionship as you do were it robbed of its foreign spicy flavour, and did he not scour Armenian vineyards his very name would become more of a misnomer than it is, his first claim upon our sympathy would be gone. These things must be brought from over seas, and it is to the Pudding's credit that a respectable proportion of them are culled from lands over which floats the Union Jack. In respect to the remainder, alas! no such plea can be put forward. Take first the welding matter, which is the pudding's fundamental basis, which holds the raisins and the currants in their appointed stations, and binds the rotund mass into a succulent whole—the breadcrumbs, namely,



A STREET IN SMYRNA.

and the flour. There is no land in the whole world which is decked with fairer wheat-fields than England can show, none which produces wheat-crops half so fine. England's

countryside, too, is yet dotted with absurdly beautiful windmills, and the uglier but more useful and up-to-date steam flour mills carry on their precarious existence here and there. Yet does that bluff and hearty patriot, the Christmas Pudding, furnish himself with home-grown bread and flour? The chances are three to one against any given Christmas pudding being made from wheat grown in this country. A pudding's appearance may be deceptive, but figures never lie, and the statistics show us that while the total produce of the United Kingdom's wheat-fields may be set down at about sixty million bushels, the total import of wheat is somewhere about a hundred and ninety million bushels every year. So does the Pudding's last claim to British origin disappear. Foreign graces might have been forgiven him if the solid stuff beneath had been British. And it is becoming just as bad in respect to that other solid foundation, the suet. What cares the Pudding in his heart for the beef of old England? More often than not he palms us off with an American imitation. Here are some figures which will convict him of dishonesty. The average consumption of meat by each man, woman and child in this realm is about 123 pounds every year. About $43\frac{1}{2}$ pounds out of this total are foreign, and if we continue very much longer at the present rate of unpatriotic retrogression it will become all foreign. For example, thirty years ago, when the total consumption per head was about 100 pounds, less than 9 pounds were foreign.

Nor can the Plum-pudding shelter his iniquities behind the greater criminality of the roast which precedes him at table, for he misuses all his opportunities for patriotism. You cannot even be sure of his eggs. "Shop 'uns, sixteen a shilling," as Mr. Middlewick used to remark, is a gloomy enough thought, but when you think of the distant lands whence those eggs have wandered from their mothers' wing, the terror of it all must shiver your marrow as remorselessly as the creepiest Christmas ghost story. Here is the awful fact. Last year one billion five hundred and eighty-nine million three hundred and eighty-seven thousand eggs found their odorous way to these shores. They were of all sorts: "new laid eggs,"

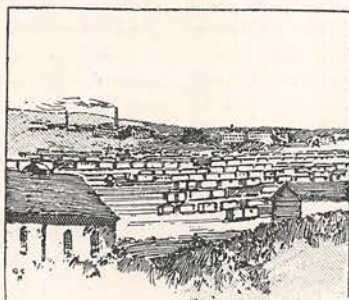
"fresh eggs," "eggs." Nor was there any General Election or political campaign to justify their presence. Europe seems to have been in conspiracy against us. From France, from Belgium, from Germany, from Russia, from Denmark, came those eggs in their legions; even Canada, our favourite colony, pelted over half a million of them at us across 3,000 miles of ocean. They were not all meant to be eaten. The whites of some eggs are used in certain manufactures; but, alas! the whites and the yolks of many more know no other factory than the grocer's shop. And to think that our English Plum-pudding lends himself to this dreadful trade!

When speaking above of spices I put in a word for the fraudulent Pudding, and showed that with all his faults he had in a measure grasped the Imperial idea, and was doing something practical for Commercial Federation. But in a more important matter he has proved himself a recreant to the cause. I speak of sugar. He used to get his sugar from colonial plantations in the first instance, and have it afterwards refined in British refineries. He has practically given up both practices now. He buys the poor, cheap stuff which is squeezed out of German beetroots, and prepared in colonial refineries. Our West Indian Colonies are face to face with ruin,

and the great majority of our refineries have shut down, the works are dismantled, the machinery sold for old iron. A remembrance of these things would damp the jollity even of a Christmas Plum-pudding, if it possessed a conscience. Of course it is just the same with the treacle, which sometimes enriches the Christmas pudding. We import nearly 777,000 cwts. in a year, and only one hundredth part of the total comes from British Possessions.

THE PLUM-PUDDING AS TAXPAYER.

It is difficult to contemplate patiently this wretched impostor, or to view him in any other connection than that of his fraudulent character. But let us be just. After all, he does contribute to the country's revenue. And one always likes a man who pays his way. For that matter, the Chancellor of the Exchequer takes very good



WHEAT TRUCKS AT KANSAS CITY, U.S.A.

care that he does pay his way. Indeed, that statesman seems to have somewhat of a special animus against the Plum-pudding. Perhaps Chancellors of the Exchequer have weaker digestions and more bitter memories than ordinary folk; but the fact remains that, through all these years of remitted taxation on imported products of nearly every sort, some of the leading ingredients of the Plum-pudding are still mulcted, as though in revenge for the Pudding's baleful influence on the nation's health. Occasionally, when the Budget has shown a bulging surplus, remissions and reductions of duty on articles affecting the Pudding's composition have been made, yet he is still as justly entitled to complain of disproportionate taxation as Ireland herself. There are the currants. Each cwt. imported pays to the State a toll of 2s. The total received from this source last year was £113,714. Still harder is the case of raisins. Theirs is a long-standing grievance. Not a penny has been remitted since the imposition in 1860 of a fine amounting to 7s. per cwt. In consequence raisins helped forward last year's Budget to the tune of £212,817. But how light is even this burden compared with that which weighs down the brandy bottle. Badly as raisins are treated, the tax imposed on them is only equal to less than a third of their value. But brandy has to pay a duty which exceeds its value. The average value of

brandy according to the Government's estimate for 1895 was about 9s. 2d. per proof gallon. But the Customs officer demands 10s. 10d. duty on every proof gallon imported. From this source the British Government reaped a revenue last year of £1,365,787.

The Plum-pudding has the best time, from a taxation point of view, when he visits the mess table of her Majesty's Navy and Army. On those occasions he gets off scot free. Some of us think it would only be just to give him equal freedom in the home of civilians. The case would be different if he could get his raisins and his currants and his brandy from English producers, and then bought them abroad out of sheer unpatriotic perversity. But that is not so. We have no vineyards in England, so the Pudding cannot help itself. It is obliged, therefore, to increase its expenditure by the payment of a Government duty—just at Christmas time too, when expenses are so much heavier all round. Now, if the Government would let the Pudding off the payment of taxes in respect of those ingredients which are necessarily imported, and would put them on to those foreign ingredients which are unnecessarily imported, there would be a much greater appearance of justice in the matter. But softly! I am dangerously near talking politics, and politics round the Christmas dinner-table must be relentlessly tabooed. What would become of our digestions?

