

FOOD IN FICTION

By Edna Ferber

DICKENS did it. If, in the old walnut bookcase back in Appleton, Wisconsin, we had had a complete set of, say, Jane Austen instead of Charles Dickens, I probably should not now be accused by our more spiritual book reviewers of being vulgarly lavish in the amount of food and clothing that I bestow upon my fiction characters. One midwest critic of somewhat anæmic cast devoted two columns to the expression of his overwhelming repulsion at the amount of food spread over the pages of "So Big", and his delicate shrinking from the sordid paragraphs that describe the clothes of the people who move through the chapters of that, in his opinion, all too earthy novel.

It all comes, I suppose, of having been brought up on Dickens and Thackeray — but mostly Dickens. There weren't many books in that walnut bookcase; so I read and reread what there was. Veal and ham pies, hot pineapple toddies, succulent oysters, great joints of beef and mutton, stews of tripe, and rashers of bacon oozed and sizzled in the volumes that made Sairey Gamp and Mr. Micawber, Bill Sikes and Fanny Squeers, real and living persons to me. Daniel Quilp could never have been so delightfully horrible in my eyes if I hadn't seen him drink his boiling hot tea without batting his mean little eyes. Imagine a Miss Havisham without a description of her age-yellowed and withered satin wedding gown, her shroudlike veil, and

her tattered stockings of finest silk. I knew these people; not only what they said and thought, but what they ate and drank and wore. They were real. They were human beings.

I like to know what people eat and wear. I enjoy writing about food and clothes. But apparently it isn't done. Ever since the discovery of sex by our Younger Set of Fictionists (this was about eight years ago: they just stumbled upon it as is so often the way in the revelation of a great truth) all other appetites have been barred from the fictional page. It has got so now that mention of meat and drink is looked upon as being downright indelicate. Of course some upstart claimants have come forward recently with the contention that sex was an acknowledged fact way back in 1911, but the Younger Fictionists soon made short work of these. One poor fool even had the effrontery to mumble something about the Book of Genesis, but he was quickly shouted down.

In time they will probably have their way, these new purists. Of course it will make a lot of difference in some old stories of which the fogies among us have grown fond. The story of Adam and Eve, for example. Eliminate the apple and the fig leaf and it loses something. I don't know what — but something. And that one about the loaves and fishes. Somehow, it would seem so different with all that vulgar food left out. The whole school of what has been called *gefüllte fiction* will, in time, be stamped out. The new generation will never be subjected to the degrading glimpses of Jos Sedley and his top boots. They will know nothing of the crass details of what Jos and Becky Sharp and Amelia and her young man — Whatshisname — had to eat at Vauxhall Gardens. Take food and drink and raiment away from

Joseph Hergesheimer's novels — banish the Bacardi rum, the rose-pink clams, the chiffon, the perfume, the silver girdled girls — and you have — well — what have you?

Give these Nice Nellies of fiction another twenty five years and we shall have a whole new set of moral standards. Food will be something not to be mentioned in polite society. The offspring of two decades hence, dashing in upon a roomful of people with his shameless, "I want a piece of bread and butter and jelly", will find himself hustled from the room by an embarrassed and irate parent and treated to a lecture such as:

"Melville, hasn't Mama told you that you mustn't say a thing like that in company! It isn't nice. Those are things we don't speak of. You can come and talk to Mama about them, but not anyone else. What will the ladies and gentlemen think!"

But in another fifty years the revolution will come. Slowly it will dawn upon a narrow world that it is, after all, wisest to be Open and Honest about the Facts of Life like Food and Clothes. The child will find it all out one way or another. Why not teach him, frankly and intelligently, in the home or in the school? We shall have modernists who will advocate taking the child out into the fields and woods to let him behold how the mother bird feeds the angle-worm to her young. And then, very gently, his maternal teacher can say, "Melville, dear, that is why your dear father works in the great big office downtown, and why Mother goes to market and buys chopped beef and turnips and mangel wurzel and bread pudding and all the delicious things you like so much. It is because they want their little Melville to grow up to be a strong, sturdy, clean limbed young American."

But before that day of freedom dawns, the drama, too, will no doubt be writhing under the cruel thongs of bondage. Instead of the big seduction scene as we have known it, the real thrill of the new-school play of daring will come when tea is served in the second act. And there's little doubt, as things are shaping themselves now, that when the heroine utters the almost unspeakable line, "Lemon or cream?" the minions of the law, armed with right and power, will rush in and close the show.