## Cupid à la Carte

O. Henry

“The dispositions of woman,” said Jeff Peters, after various opinions on the subject had been advanced, “run, regular, to diversions. What a woman wants is what you’re out of. She wants more of a thing when it’s scarce. She likes to have souvenirs of things that never happened. She likes to be reminded of things she never heard of. A one-sided view of objects is disjointing to the female composition.

“‘Tis a misfortune of mine, begotten by nature and travel,” continued Jeff, looking thoughtfully between his elevated feet at the grocery stove, “to look deeper into some subjects than most people do. I’ve breathed gasoline smoke talking to street crowds in nearly every town in the United States. I’ve held ‘em spellbound with music, oratory, sleight of hand, and prevarications, while I’ve sold ‘em jewelry, medicine, soap, hair tonic, and junk of other nominations. And during my travels, as a matter of recreation and expiation, I’ve taken cognisance some of women. It takes a man a lifetime to find out about one particular woman; but if he puts in, say, ten years, industrious and curious, he can acquire the general rudiments of the sex. One lesson I picked up was when I was working the West with a line of Brazilian diamonds and a patent fire kindler just after my trip from Savannah down through the cotton belt with Dalby’s Anti-explosive Lamp Oil Powder. ‘Twas when the Oklahoma country was in first bloom. Guthrie was rising in the middle of it like a lump of self-raising dough. It was a boom town of the regular kind—you stood in line to get a chance to wash your face; if you ate over ten minutes you had a lodging bill added on; if you slept on a plank at night they charged it to you as board the next morning.

“By nature and doctrines I am addicted to the habit of discovering choice places wherein to feed. So I looked around and found a proposition that exactly cut the mustard. I found a restaurant tent just opened up by an outfit that had drifted in on the tail of the boom. They had knocked together a box house, where they lived and did the cooking, and served the meals in a tent pitched against the side. That tent was joyful with placards on it calculated to redeem the world-worn pilgrim from the sinfulness of boarding houses and pick-me- up hotels. ‘Try Mother’s Home-Made Biscuits,’ ‘What’s the Matter with Our Apple Dumplings and Hard Sauce?’ ‘Hot Cakes and Maple Syrup Like You Ate When a Boy,’ ‘Our Fried Chicken Never Was Heard to Crow’— there was literature doomed to please the digestions of man! I said to myself that mother’s wandering boy should munch there that night. And so it came to pass. And there is where I contracted my case of Mame Dugan.

“Old Man Dugan was six feet by one of Indiana loafer, and he spent his time sitting on his shoulder blades in a rocking-chair in the shanty memorialising the great corn-crop failure of ‘96. Ma Dugan did the cooking, and Mame waited on the table.

“As soon as I saw Mame I knew there was a mistake in the census reports. There wasn’t but one girl in the United States. When you come to specifications it isn’t easy. She was about the size of an angel, and she had eyes, and ways about her. When you come to the kind of a girl she was, you’ll find a belt of ‘em reaching from the Brooklyn Bridge west as far as the courthouse in Council Bluffs, Ia. They earn their own living in stores, restaurants, factories, and offices. They’re chummy and honest and free and tender and sassy, and they look life straight in the eye. They’ve met man face to face, and discovered that he’s a poor creature. They’ve dropped to it that the reports in the Seaside Library about his being a fairy prince lack confirmation.

“Mame was that sort. She was full of life and fun, and breezy; she passed the repartee with the boarders quick as a wink; you’d have smothered laughing. I am disinclined to make excavations into the insides of a personal affection. I am glued to the theory that the diversions and discrepancies of the indisposition known as love should be as private a sentiment as a toothbrush. ‘Tis my opinion that the biographies of the heart should be confined with the historical romances of the liver to the advertising pages of the magazines. So, you’ll excuse the lack of an itemised bill of my feelings toward Mame.

“Pretty soon I got a regular habit of dropping into the tent to eat at irregular times when there wasn’t so many around. Mame would sail in with a smile, in a black dress and white apron, and say: ‘Hello, Jeff —why don’t you come at mealtime? Want to see how much trouble you can be, of course. Friedchickenbeefsteakporkchopshamandeggspotpie’—and so on. She called me Jeff, but there was no significations attached. Designations was all she meant. The front names of any of us she used as they came to hand. I’d eat about two meals before I left, and string ‘em out like a society spread where they changed plates and wives, and josh one another festively between bites. Mame stood for it, pleasant, for it wasn’t up to her to take any canvas off the tent by declining dollars just because they were whipped in after meal times.

“It wasn’t long until there was another fellow named Ed Collier got the between-meals affliction, and him and me put in bridges between breakfast and dinner, and dinner and supper, that made a three-ringed circus of that tent, and Mame’s turn as waiter a continuous performance. That Collier man was saturated with designs and contrivings. He was in well-boring or insurance or claim-jumping, or something—I’ve forgotten which. He was a man well lubricated with gentility, and his words were such as recommended you to his point of view. So, Collier and me infested the grub tent with care and activity. Mame was level full of impartiality. ‘Twas like a casino hand the way she dealt out her favours—one to Collier and one to me and one to the board, and not a card up her sleeve.

“Me and Collier naturally got acquainted, and gravitated together some on the outside. Divested of his stratagems, he seemed to be a pleasant chap, full of an amiable sort of hostility.

“‘I notice you have an affinity for grubbing in the banquet hall after the guests have fled,’ says I to him one day, to draw his conclusions.

“‘Well, yes,’ says Collier, reflecting; ‘the tumult of a crowded board seems to harass my sensitive nerves.’

“‘It exasperates mine some, too,’ says I. ‘Nice little girl, don’t you think?’

“‘I see,’ says Collier, laughing. ‘Well, now that you mention it, I have noticed that she doesn’t seem to displease the optic nerve.’

“‘She’s a joy to mine,’ says I, ‘and I’m going after her. Notice is hereby served.’

“‘I’ll be as candid as you,’ admits Collier, ‘and if the drug stores don’t run out of pepsin I’ll give you a run for your money that’ll leave you a dyspeptic at the wind-up.’

“So Collier and me begins the race; the grub department lays in new supplies; Mame waits on us, jolly and kind and agreeable, and it looks like an even break, with Cupid and the cook working overtime in Dugan’s restaurant.

“‘Twas one night in September when I got Mame to take a walk after supper when the things were all cleared away. We strolled out a distance and sat on a pile of lumber at the edge of town. Such opportunities was seldom, so I spoke my piece, explaining how the Brazilian diamonds and the fire kindler were laying up sufficient treasure to guarantee the happiness of two, and that both of ‘em together couldn’t equal the light from somebody’s eyes, and that the name of Dugan should be changed to Peters, or reasons why not would be in order.

“Mame didn’t say anything right away. Directly she gave a kind of shudder, and I began to learn something.

“‘Jeff,’ she says, ‘I’m sorry you spoke. I like you as well as any of them, but there isn’t a man in the world I’d ever marry, and there never will be. Do you know what a man is in my eye? He’s a tomb. He’s a sarcophagus for the interment of Beafsteakporkchopsliver’nbaconham-andeggs. He’s that and nothing more. For two years I’ve watched men eat, eat, eat, until they represent nothing on earth to me but ruminant bipeds. They’re absolutely nothing but something that goes in front of a knife and fork and plate at the table. They’re fixed that way in my mind and memory. I’ve tried to overcome it, but I can’t. I’ve heard girls rave about their sweethearts, but I never could understand it. A man and a sausage grinder and a pantry awake in me exactly the same sentiments. I went to a matinee once to see an actor the girls were crazy about. I got interested enough to wonder whether he liked his steak rare, medium, or well done, and his eggs over or straight up. That was all. No, Jeff; I’ll marry no man and see him sit at the breakfast table and eat, and come back to dinner and eat, and happen in again at supper to eat, eat, eat.’

“‘But, Mame,’ says I, ‘it’ll wear off. You’ve had too much of it. You’ll marry some time, of course. Men don’t eat always.’

“‘As far as my observation goes, they do. No, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do.’ Mame turns, sudden, to animation and bright eyes. ‘There’s a girl named Susie Foster in Terre Haute, a chum of mine. She waits in the railroad eating house there. I worked two years in a restaurant in that town. Susie has it worse than I do, because the men who eat at railroad stations gobble. They try to flirt and gobble at the same time. Whew! Susie and I have it all planned out. We’re saving our money, and when we get enough we’re going to buy a little cottage and five acres we know of, and live together, and grow violets for the Eastern market. A man better not bring his appetite within a mile of that ranch.’

“‘Don’t girls ever—’ I commenced, but Mame heads me off, sharp.

“‘No, they don’t. They nibble a little bit sometimes; that’s all.’

“‘I thought the confect—’

“‘For goodness’ sake, change the subject,’ says Mame.

“As I said before, that experience puts me wise that the feminine arrangement ever struggles after deceptions and illusions. Take England—beef made her; wieners elevated Germany; Uncle Sam owes his greatness to fried chicken and pie, but the young ladies of the Shetalkyou schools, they’ll never believe it. Shakespeare, they allow, and Rubinstein, and the Rough Riders is what did the trick.

“‘Twas a situation calculated to disturb. I couldn’t bear to give up Mame; and yet it pained me to think of abandoning the practice of eating. I had acquired the habit too early. For twenty-seven years I had been blindly rushing upon my fate, yielding to the insidious lures of that deadly monster, food. It was too late. I was a ruminant biped for keeps. It was lobster salad to a doughnut that my life was going to be blighted by it.

“I continued to board at the Dugan tent, hoping that Mame would relent. I had sufficient faith in true love to believe that since it has often outlived the absence of a square meal it might, in time, overcome the presence of one. I went on ministering to my fatal vice, although I felt that each time I shoved a potato into my mouth in Mame’s presence I might be burying my fondest hopes.

“I think Collier must have spoken to Mame and got the same answer, for one day he orders a cup of coffee and a cracker, and sits nibbling the corner of it like a girl in the parlour, that’s filled up in the kitchen, previous, on cold roast and fried cabbage. I caught on and did the same, and maybe we thought we’d made a hit! The next day we tried it again, and out comes old man Dugan fetching in his hands the fairy viands.

“‘Kinder off yer feed, ain’t ye, gents?’ he asks, fatherly and some sardonic. ‘Thought I’d spell Mame a bit, seein’ the work was light, and my rheumatiz can stand the strain.’

“So back me and Collier had to drop to the heavy grub again. I noticed about that time that I was seized by a most uncommon and devastating appetite. I ate until Mame must have hated to see me darken the door. Afterward I found out that I had been made the victim of the first dark and irreligious trick played on me by Ed Collier. Him and me had been taking drinks together uptown regular, trying to drown our thirst for food. That man had bribed about ten bartenders to always put a big slug of Appletree’s Anaconda Appetite Bitters in every one of my drinks. But the last trick he played me was hardest to forget.

“One day Collier failed to show up at the tent. A man told me he left town that morning. My only rival now was the bill of fare. A few days before he left Collier had presented me with a two-gallon jug of fine whisky which he said a cousin had sent him from Kentucky. I now have reason to believe that it contained Appletree’s Anaconda Appetite Bitters almost exclusively. I continued to devour tons of provisions. In Mame’s eyes I remained a mere biped, more ruminant than ever.

“About a week after Collier pulled his freight there came a kind of sideshow to town, and hoisted a tent near the railroad. I judged it was a sort of fake museum and curiosity business. I called to see Mame one night, and Ma Dugan said that she and Thomas, her younger brother, had gone to the show. That same thing happened for three nights that week. Saturday night I caught her on the way coming back, and got to sit on the steps a while and talk to her. I noticed she looked different. Her eyes were softer, and shiny like. Instead of a Mame Dugan to fly from the voracity of man and raise violets, she seemed to be a Mame more in line as God intended her, approachable, and suited to bask in the light of the Brazilians and the Kindler.

“‘You seem to be right smart inveigled,’ says I, ‘with the Unparalleled Exhibition of the World’s Living Curiosities and Wonders.’

“‘It’s a change,’ says Mame.

“‘You’ll need another,’ says I, ‘if you keep on going every night.’

“‘Don’t be cross, Jeff,’ says she; ‘it takes my mind off business.’

“‘Don’t the curiosities eat?’ I ask.

“‘Not all of them. Some of them are wax.’

“‘Look out, then, that you don’t get stuck,’ says I, kind of flip and foolish.

“Mame blushed. I didn’t know what to think about her. My hopes raised some that perhaps my attentions had palliated man’s awful crime of visibly introducing nourishment into his system. She talked some about the stars, referring to them with respect and politeness, and I drivelled a quantity about united hearts, homes made bright by true affection, and the Kindler. Mame listened without scorn, and I says to myself, ‘Jeff, old man, you’re removing the hoodoo that has clung to the consumer of victuals; you’re setting your heel upon the serpent that lurks in the gravy bowl.’

“Monday night I drop around. Mame is at the Unparalleled Exhibition with Thomas.

“‘Now, may the curse of the forty-one seven-sided sea cooks,’ says I, ‘and the bad luck of the nine impenitent grasshoppers rest upon this self-same sideshow at once and forever more. Amen. I’ll go to see it myself to-morrow night and investigate its baleful charm. Shall man that was made to inherit the earth be bereft of his sweetheart first by a knife and fork and then by a tencent circus?’

“The next night before starting out for the exhibition tent I inquire and find out that Mame is not at home. She is not at the circus with Thomas this time, for Thomas waylays me in the grass outside of the grub tent with a scheme of his own before I had time to eat supper.

“‘What’ll you give me, Jeff,’ says he, ‘if I tell you something?’

“‘The value of it, son,’ I says.

“‘Sis is stuck on a freak,’ says Thomas, ‘one of the sideshow freaks. I don’t like him. She does. I overheard ‘em talking. Thought maybe you’d like to know. Say, Jeff, does it put you wise two dollars’ worth? There’s a target rifle up town that—’

“I frisked my pockets and commenced to dribble a stream of halves and quarters into Thomas’s hat. The information was of the pile-driver system of news, and it telescoped my intellects for a while. While I was leaking small change and smiling foolish on the outside, and suffering disturbances internally, I was saying, idiotically and pleasantly:

“‘Thank you, Thomas—thank you—er—a freak, you said, Thomas. Now, could you make out the monstrosity’s entitlements a little clearer, if you please, Thomas?’

“‘This is the fellow,’ says Thomas, pulling out a yellow handbill from his pocket and shoving it under my nose. ‘He’s the Champion Faster of the Universe. I guess that’s why Sis got soft on him. He don’t eat nothing. He’s going to fast forty-nine days. This is the sixth. That’s him.’

“I looked at the name Thomas pointed out—‘Professor Eduardo Collieri.’ ‘Ah!’ says I, in admiration, ‘that’s not so bad, Ed Collier. I give you credit for the trick. But I don’t give you the girl until she’s Mrs. Freak.’

“I hit the sod in the direction of the show. I came up to the rear of the tent, and, as I did so, a man wiggled out like a snake from under the bottom of the canvas, scrambled to his feet, and ran into me like a locoed bronco. I gathered him by the neck and investigated him by the light of the stars. It is Professor Eduardo Collieri, in human habiliments, with a desperate look in one eye and impatience in the other.

“‘Hello, Curiosity,’ says I. ‘Get still a minute and let’s have a look at your freakship. How do you like being the willopus-wallopus or the bim-bam from Borneo, or whatever name you are denounced by in the sideshow business?’

“‘Jeff Peters,’ says Collier, in a weak voice. ‘Turn me loose, or I’ll slug you one. I’m in the extremest kind of a large hurry. Hands off!’

“‘Tut, tut, Eddie,’ I answers, holding him hard; ‘let an old friend gaze on the exhibition of your curiousness. It’s an eminent graft you fell onto, my son. But don’t speak of assaults and battery, because you’re not fit. The best you’ve got is a lot of nerve and a mighty empty stomach.’ And so it was. The man was as weak as a vegetarian cat.

“‘I’d argue this case with you, Jeff,’ says he, regretful in his style, ‘for an unlimited number of rounds if I had half an hour to train in and a slab of beefsteak two feet square to train with. Curse the man, I say, that invented the art of going foodless. May his soul in eternity be chained up within two feet of a bottomless pit of red-hot hash. I’m abandoning the conflict, Jeff; I’m deserting to the enemy. You’ll find Miss Dugan inside contemplating the only living mummy and the informed hog. She’s a fine girl, Jeff. I’d have beat you out if I could have kept up the grubless habit a little while longer. You’ll have to admit that the fasting dodge was aces-up for a while. I figured it out that way. But say, Jeff, it’s said that love makes the world go around. Let me tell you, the announcement lacks verification. It’s the wind from the dinner horn that does it. I love that Mame Dugan. I’ve gone six days without food in order to coincide with her sentiments. Only one bite did I have. That was when I knocked the tattooed man down with a war club and got a sandwich he was gobbling. The manager fined me all my salary; but salary wasn’t what I was after. ‘Twas that girl. I’d give my life for her, but I’d endanger my immortal soul for a beef stew. Hunger is a horrible thing, Jeff. Love and business and family and religion and art and patriotism are nothing but shadows of words when a man’s starving!’

“In such language Ed Collier discoursed to me, pathetic. I gathered the diagnosis that his affections and his digestions had been implicated in a scramble and the commissary had won out. I never disliked Ed Collier. I searched my internal admonitions of suitable etiquette to see if I could find a remark of a consoling nature, but there was none convenient.

“‘I’d be glad, now,’ says Ed, ‘if you’ll let me go. I’ve been hard hit, but I’ll hit the ration supply harder. I’m going to clean out every restaurant in town. I’m going to wade waist deep in sirloins and swim in ham and eggs. It’s an awful thing, Jeff Peters, for a man to come to this pass—to give up his girl for something to eat—it’s worse than that man Esau, that swapped his copyright for a partridge— but then, hunger’s a fierce thing. You’ll excuse me, now, Jeff, for I smell a pervasion of ham frying in the distance, and my legs are crying out to stampede in that direction.’

“‘A hearty meal to you, Ed Collier,’ I says to him, ‘and no hard feelings. For myself, I am projected to be an unseldom eater, and I have condolence for your predicaments.’

“There was a sudden big whiff of frying ham smell on the breeze; and the Champion Faster gives a snort and gallops off in the dark toward fodder.

“I wish some of the cultured outfit that are always advertising the extenuating circumstances of love and romance had been there to see. There was Ed Collier, a fine man full of contrivances and flirtations, abandoning the girl of his heart and ripping out into the contiguous territory in the pursuit of sordid grub. ‘Twas a rebuke to the poets and a slap at the best-paying element of fiction. An empty stomach is a sure antidote to an overfull heart.

“I was naturally anxious to know how far Mame was infatuated with Collier and his stratagems. I went inside the Unparalleled Exhibition, and there she was. She looked surprised to see me, but unguilty.

“‘It’s an elegant evening outside,’ says I. ‘The coolness is quite nice and gratifying, and the stars are lined out, first class, up where they belong. Wouldn’t you shake these by-products of the animal kingdom long enough to take a walk with a common human who never was on a programme in his life?’

“Mame gave a sort of sly glance around, and I knew what that meant.

“‘Oh,’ says I, ‘I hate to tell you; but the curiosity that lives on wind has flew the coop. He just crawled out under the tent. By this time he has amalgamated himself with half the delicatessen truck in town.’

“‘You mean Ed Collier?’ says Mame.

“‘I do,’ I answers; ‘and a pity it is that he has gone back to crime again. I met him outside the tent, and he exposed his intentions of devastating the food crop of the world. ‘Tis enormously sad when one’s ideal descends from his pedestal to make a seventeen-year locust of himself.’

“Mame looked me straight in the eye until she had corkscrewed my reflections.

“‘Jeff,’ says she, ‘it isn’t quite like you to talk that way. I don’t care to hear Ed Collier ridiculed. A man may do ridiculous things, but they don’t look ridiculous to the girl he does ‘em for. That was one man in a hundred. He stopped eating just to please me. I’d be hard-hearted and ungrateful if I didn’t feel kindly toward him. Could you do what he did?’

“‘I know,’ says I, seeing the point, ‘I’m condemned. I can’t help it. The brand of the consumer is upon my brow. Mrs. Eve settled that business for me when she made the dicker with the snake. I fell from the fire into the frying-pan. I guess I’m the Champion Feaster of the Universe.’ I spoke humble, and Mame mollified herself a little.

“‘Ed Collier and I are good friends,’ she said, ‘the same as me and you. I gave him the same answer I did you—no marrying for me. I liked to be with Ed and talk with him. There was something mighty pleasant to me in the thought that here was a man who never used a knife and fork, and all for my sake.’

“‘Wasn’t you in love with him?’ I asks, all injudicious. ‘Wasn’t there a deal on for you to become Mrs. Curiosity?’

“All of us do it sometimes. All of us get jostled out of the line of profitable talk now and then. Mame put on that little lemon glace smile that runs between ice and sugar, and says, much too pleasant: ‘You’re short on credentials for asking that question, Mr. Peters. Suppose you do a forty-nine day fast, just to give you ground to stand on, and then maybe I’ll answer it.’

“So, even after Collier was kidnapped out of the way by the revolt of his appetite, my own prospects with Mame didn’t seem to be improved. And then business played out in Guthrie.

“I had stayed too long there. The Brazilians I had sold commenced to show signs of wear, and the Kindler refused to light up right frequent on wet mornings. There is always a time, in my business, when the star of success says, ‘Move on to the next town.’ I was travelling by wagon at that time so as not to miss any of the small towns; so I hitched up a few days later and went down to tell Mame good-bye. I wasn’t abandoning the game; I intended running over to Oklahoma City and work it for a week or two. Then I was coming back to institute fresh proceedings against Mame.

“What do I find at the Dugans’ but Mame all conspicuous in a blue travelling dress, with her little trunk at the door. It seems that sister Lottie Bell, who is a typewriter in Terre Haute, is going to be married next Thursday, and Mame is off for a week’s visit to be an accomplice at the ceremony. Mame is waiting for a freight wagon that is going to take her to Oklahoma, but I condemns the freight wagon with promptness and scorn, and offers to deliver the goods myself. Ma Dugan sees no reason why not, as Mr. Freighter wants pay for the job; so, thirty minutes later Mame and I pull out in my light spring wagon with white canvas cover, and head due south.

“That morning was of a praiseworthy sort. The breeze was lively, and smelled excellent of flowers and grass, and the little cottontail rabbits entertained themselves with skylarking across the road. My two Kentucky bays went for the horizon until it come sailing in so fast you wanted to dodge it like a clothesline. Mame was full of talk and rattled on like a kid about her old home and her school pranks and the things she liked and the hateful ways of those Johnson girls just across the street, ‘way up in Indiana. Not a word was said about Ed Collier or victuals or such solemn subjects. About noon Mame looks and finds that the lunch she had put up in a basket had been left behind. I could have managed quite a collation, but Mame didn’t seem to be grieving over nothing to eat, so I made no lamentations. It was a sore subject with me, and I ruled provender in all its branches out of my conversation.

“I am minded to touch light on explanations how I came to lose the way. The road was dim and well grown with grass; and there was Mame by my side confiscating my intellects and attention. The excuses are good or they are not, as they may appear to you. But I lost it, and at dusk that afternoon, when we should have been in Oklahoma City, we were seesawing along the edge of nowhere in some undiscovered river bottom, and the rain was falling in large, wet bunches. Down there in the swamps we saw a little log house on a small knoll of high ground. The bottom grass and the chaparral and the lonesome timber crowded all around it. It seemed to be a melancholy little house, and you felt sorry for it. ‘Twas that house for the night, the way I reasoned it. I explained to Mame, and she leaves it to me to decide. She doesn’t become galvanic and prosecuting, as most women would, but she says it’s all right; she knows I didn’t mean to do it.

“We found the house was deserted. It had two empty rooms. There was a little shed in the yard where beasts had once been kept. In a loft of it was a lot of old hay. I put my horses in there and gave them some of it, for which they looked at me sorrowful, expecting apologies. The rest of the hay I carried into the house by armfuls, with a view to accommodations. I also brought in the patent kindler and the Brazilians, neither of which are guaranteed against the action of water.

“Mame and I sat on the wagon seats on the floor, and I lit a lot of the kindler on the hearth, for the night was chilly. If I was any judge, that girl enjoyed it. It was a change for her. It gave her a different point of view. She laughed and talked, and the kindler made a dim light compared to her eyes. I had a pocketful of cigars, and as far as I was concerned there had never been any fall of man. We were at the same old stand in the Garden of Eden. Out there somewhere in the rain and the dark was the river of Zion, and the angel with the flaming sword had not yet put up the keep-off-the-grass sign. I opened up a gross or two of the Brazilians and made Mame put them on—rings, brooches, necklaces, eardrops, bracelets, girdles, and lockets. She flashed and sparkled like a million-dollar princess until she had pink spots in her cheeks and almost cried for a looking-glass.

“When it got late I made a fine bunk on the floor for Mame with the hay and my lap robes and blankets out of the wagon, and persuaded her to lie down. I sat in the other room burning tobacco and listening to the pouring rain and meditating on the many vicissitudes that came to a man during the seventy years or so immediately preceding his funeral.

“I must have dozed a little while before morning, for my eyes were shut, and when I opened them it was daylight, and there stood Mame with her hair all done up neat and correct, and her eyes bright with admiration of existence.

“‘Gee whiz, Jeff!’ she exclaims, ‘but I’m hungry. I could eat a—’

“I looked up and caught her eye. Her smile went back in and she gave me a cold look of suspicion. Then I laughed, and laid down on the floor to laugh easier. It seemed funny to me. By nature and geniality I am a hearty laugher, and I went the limit. When I came to, Mame was sitting with her back to me, all contaminated with dignity.

“‘Don’t be angry, Mame,’ I says, ‘for I couldn’t help it. It’s the funny way you’ve done up your hair. If you could only see it!’

“‘You needn’t tell stories, sir,’ said Mame, cool and advised. ‘My hair is all right. I know what you were laughing about. Why, Jeff, look outside,’ she winds up, peeping through a chink between the logs. I opened the little wooden window and looked out. The entire river bottom was flooded, and the knob of land on which the house stood was an island in the middle of a rushing stream of yellow water a hundred yards wide. And it was still raining hard. All we could do was to stay there till the doves brought in the olive branch.

“I am bound to admit that conversations and amusements languished during that day. I was aware that Mame was getting a too prolonged one-sided view of things again, but I had no way to change it. Personally, I was wrapped up in the desire to eat. I had hallucinations of hash and visions of ham, and I kept saying to myself all the time, ‘What’ll you have to eat, Jeff?—what’ll you order now, old man, when the waiter comes?’ I picks out to myself all sorts of favourites from the bill of fare, and imagines them coming. I guess it’s that way with all hungry men. They can’t get their cogitations trained on anything but something to eat. It shows that the little table with the broken-legged caster and the imitation Worcester sauce and the napkin covering up the coffee stains is the paramount issue, after all, instead of the question of immortality or peace between nations.

“I sat there, musing along, arguing with myself quite heated as to how I’d have my steak—with mushrooms, or a la creole. Mame was on the other seat, pensive, her head leaning on her hand. ‘Let the potatoes come home-fried,’ I states in my mind, ‘and brown the hash in the pan, with nine poached eggs on the side.’ I felt, careful, in my own pockets to see if I could find a peanut or a grain or two of popcorn.

“Night came on again with the river still rising and the rain still falling. I looked at Mame and I noticed that desperate look on her face that a girl always wears when she passes an ice-cream lair. I knew that poor girl was hungry—maybe for the first time in her life. There was that anxious look in her eye that a woman has only when she has missed a meal or feels her skirt coming unfastened in the back.

“It was about eleven o’clock or so on the second night when we sat, gloomy, in our shipwrecked cabin. I kept jerking my mind away from the subject of food, but it kept flopping back again before I could fasten it. I thought of everything good to eat I had ever heard of. I went away back to my kidhood and remembered the hot biscuit sopped in sorghum and bacon gravy with partiality and respect. Then I trailed along up the years, pausing at green apples and salt, flapjacks and maple, lye hominy, fried chicken Old Virginia style, corn on the cob, spareribs and sweet potato pie, and wound up with Georgia Brunswick stew, which is the top notch of good things to eat, because it comprises ‘em all.

“They say a drowning man sees a panorama of his whole life pass before him. Well, when a man’s starving he sees the ghost of every meal he ever ate set out before him, and he invents new dishes that would make the fortune of a chef. If somebody would collect the last words of men who starved to death, they’d have to sift ‘em mighty fine to discover the sentiment, but they’d compile into a cook book that would sell into the millions.

“I guess I must have had my conscience pretty well inflicted with culinary meditations, for, without intending to do so, I says, out loud, to the imaginary waiter, ‘Cut it thick and have it rare, with the French fried, and six, soft-scrambled, on toast.’

“Mame turned her head quick as a wing. Her eyes were sparkling and she smiled sudden.

“‘Medium for me,’ she rattles out, ‘with the Juliennes, and three, straight up. Draw one, and brown the wheats, double order to come. Oh, Jeff, wouldn’t it be glorious! And then I’d like to have a half fry, and a little chicken curried with rice, and a cup custard with ice cream, and—’

“‘Go easy,’ I interrupts; ‘where’s the chicken liver pie, and the kidney saute on toast, and the roast lamb, and—’

“‘Oh,’ cuts in Mame, all excited, ‘with mint sauce, and the turkey salad, and stuffed olives, and raspberry tarts, and—’

“‘Keep it going,’ says I. ‘Hurry up with the fried squash, and the hot corn pone with sweet milk, and don’t forget the apple dumpling with hard sauce, and the crossbarred dew-berry pie—’

“Yes, for ten minutes we kept up that kind of restaurant repartee. We ranges up and down and backward and forward over the main trunk lines and the branches of the victual subject, and Mame leads the game, for she is apprised in the ramifications of grub, and the dishes she nominates aggravates my yearnings. It seems that there is a feeling that Mame will line up friendly again with food. It seems that she looks upon the obnoxious science of eating with less contempt than before.

“The next morning we find that the flood has subsided. I geared up the bays, and we splashed out through the mud, some precarious, until we found the road again. We were only a few miles wrong, and in two hours we were in Oklahoma City. The first thing we saw was a big restaurant sign, and we piled into there in a hurry. Here I finds myself sitting with Mame at table, with knives and forks and plates between us, and she not scornful, but smiling with starvation and sweetness.

“‘Twas a new restaurant and well stocked. I designated a list of quotations from the bill of fare that made the waiter look out toward the wagon to see how many more might be coming.

“There we were, and there was the order being served. ‘Twas a banquet for a dozen, but we felt like a dozen. I looked across the table at Mame and smiled, for I had recollections. Mame was looking at the table like a boy looks at his first stem-winder. Then she looked at me, straight in the face, and two big tears came in her eyes. The waiter was gone after more grub.

“‘Jeff,’ she says, soft like, ‘I’ve been a foolish girl. I’ve looked at things from the wrong side. I never felt this way before. Men get hungry every day like this, don’t they? They’re big and strong, and they do the hard work of the world, and they don’t eat just to spite silly waiter girls in restaurants, do they, Jeff? You said once—that is, you asked me—you wanted me to—well, Jeff, if you still care—I’d be glad and willing to have you always sitting across the table from me. Now give me something to eat, quick, please.’

“So, as I’ve said, a woman needs to change her point of view now and then. They get tired of the same old sights—the same old dinner table, washtub, and sewing machine. Give ‘em a touch of the various—a little travel and a little rest, a little tomfoolery along with the tragedies of keeping house, a little petting after the blowing-up, a little upsetting and a little jostling around—and everybody in the game will have chips added to their stack by the play.”