

A SEA COOK'S LIFE.

Trials of Dealing with a Land Lubber Stove.

LOG BOOK OF PRENTICE MULFORD

He Qualifies by Making an Irish Stew, the Only Irish He Could Make—Vessel "In a Stew" for Weeks—Pies—Dumplings—Plum Duff, Plain Duff—My Duff.

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V.



SHIPPED as cook and steward of the schooner Henry, bound from San Francisco for a whaling sealing, abalone curing and general "pick up" voyage along the Lower California coast. My acceptance as cook was based on the production of an Irish stew which I cooked for the captain and mate while the Henry was "hove down" on the beach at North point, and undergoing the process of cleaning her bottom of barnacles. I can't recollect at this lapse of time where I learned to cook an Irish stew. I will add that it was all I could cook—positively all—and with this astounding capital of culinary ignorance I ventured down upon the great deep to do the maritime house-work for twenty great men.

When we were fairly afloat and the Farallones were out of sight, my fearful incapacity for the duties of the position became apparent. Besides, I was dreadfully seasick, and so remained for two weeks. Yet I cooked. It was purgatory, not only for myself, but all hands. There was a general howl of execration forward and aft at my bread, my lobscouse, my tea, my coffee, my beef, my beans, my cake, my pies. Why the captain continued me in the position, why they didn't throw me overboard, why I was not beaten to a jelly for my continued culinary failures, is for me to this day one of the great mysteries of my existence. We were away nearly ten months. I was three months learning my trade. The sufferings of the crew during those three months were fearful. They had to eat my failures or starve. Several times it was intimated to me by the under officers that I had better resign and go "forward" as one of the crew. I would not. I persevered at the expense of many a pound of good flour. I conquered and returned a second class sea cook.

The Henry was a small vessel—the deck was a clutter of whaling gear. Where my galley or sea kitchen should have been stood the try works for boiling blubber. They shoved me around anywhere. Sometimes I was moved to the starboard side, sometimes to the larboard, sometimes when cutting in a whale way astern. I expected eventually to be hoisted into one of the tops and cook aloft. Any well regulated galley is placed amidships, where there is the least motion. This is an important consideration for a sea cook. At best he is often obliged to make his soup like an acrobat, half on his head and half on his heels, and with the roof of his unsteady kitchen trying to become the floor. My stove was not a marine stove. It had no rail around the edges to guard the pots and kettles from falling off during extra lurches.

The Henry was a most uneasy craft, and always getting up extra lurches or else trying to stand on her head or stern. Therefore, as she flew up high astern when I was located in that quarter, she has in more than one instance flung me bodily, in an unguarded moment, out of that galley door and over that quarter deck, while a host of kettles, covers and other culinary utensils rushed with clang and clatter out after me and with me as their commander at their head. We all eventually terminated in the scuppers. I will not, as usual, say "lee scuppers." Any scupper was a lee scupper on that infernal vessel. I endeavored to remedy the lack of a rail about this stove by a system of wires attaching both pots and lids to the galley ceiling. I "guyed" my chief culinary utensils. Still during furious oscillations of the boat the pots would roll off their holes, and though prevented from falling, some of them as suspended by these wires would swing like so many pendulums, around and and fro over the area of that stove.

That was the busiest year of my life. I was the first one up in the morning, and the last, save the watch, to turn in at night. In this dry goods box of a kitchen I had daily to prepare a breakfast for seven men in the cabin, and another for eleven in the forecastle, a dinner for the cabin and another for the forecastle; likewise supper for the same. It was my business to set the aristocratic cabin table, clear it off and wash the dishes three times daily. I had to serve out the tea and coffee to the eleven men forward. The cabin expected hot biscuit for breakfast, and frequently pie and pudding for dinner. Above all men must the sea cook not only have a place for everything and everything in its place, but he must have everything stowed and wedged in its place. You

must wash up your tea things, sometimes holding on to the deck with your toes, and the washtub with one hand, and wedging each plate, so soon as wiped, into a corner, so that it slide not away and smash. And even then the entire dish washing apparatus, yourself included, slides gently across the deck to leeward. You can't leave a fork, or a stove cover, or lid lifted lying about indifferently but what it slides and sneaks away with the roll of the vessel to some secret crevice, and is long lost. When your best dinner is cooked in rough weather, it is a time of trial, terror and tribulation to bestow it safely on the cabin table. You must harbor your kindling and matches as sacredly as the ancients kept their household gods, for if not, on stormy mornings, with the drift flying over the deck and everything wet and clammy with the water surcharged air of the sea, your breakfast will be hours late through inability to kindle a fire, whereas the cook catches it from that potentate of the sea, "the old man," and all the mates raise their voices and cry with empty stomachs, "Let him be accursed."

One great trial with me lay in the difficulty of distinguishing fresh water from salt—I mean by the eye. We sea cooks use salt water to boil beef and potatoes in; or rather to boil beef and pork and steam the potatoes. So I usually had a pail of salt water and one of fresh standing by the galley door. Sometimes these got mixed up. I always found this out after making salt water coffee, but then it was too late. They were particular, especially in the cabin, and did not like salt water coffee. On any strictly disciplined vessel the cook, for such an offense, would have been compelled to drink a quart or so of his own coffee, but some merciful cherub aloft always interfered and got me out of bad scrapes. Another annoyance was the loss of spoons and forks thrown accidentally overboard as I flung away my soup and grease clouded dishwater. It was indeed bitter when, as occupied in these daily washings, I allowed my mind to drift to other and brighter scenes, to see the glitter of a spoon or fork in the air or sinking in the deep blue sea, and then to reflect that already there were not enough spoons to go around, or forks either. Our storeroom was the cabin. Among other articles there was a keg of molasses. One evening after draining a quantity I neglected to close the faucet tightly. Molasses, therefore, oozed over the cabin floor all night. The cabin was a freshet of molasses. Very early in the morning the captain, getting out of his bunk, jumped both stocking feet into the saccharine deluge. Some men will swear as vigorously in a foot-bath of molasses as they would in one of coal-tar. He did. It was a very black day for me, and life generally seemed joyless and uninviting, but I cooked on.

The Henry was full of mice. These little creatures would obtrude themselves in my dough wet up for fresh bread over night, become bemired and die therein. Once a mouse thus dead was unconsciously rolled up in a biscuit, baked with it, and served smoking hot for the morning's meal aft. It was, as it were, an involuntary meat pie. Of course the cabin grumbled; but they would grumble at anything. They were as particular about their food as an habitude of Delmonico's. I wish now at times I had saved that biscuit to add to my collection of odds and endibles. Still even the biscuit proved but an episode in my career. I cooked on, and those I served stood aghast, not knowing what would come next.

After five months of self training I graduated on pies. I studied and wrought out the making of pies unassisted and untaught. Mine were sea mince pies; material, salt beef soaked to freshness and boiled tender, dried apples and molasses. The cabin pronounced them good. This was one of the few feathers in my culinary cap. Of course, their goodness was relative. On shore such a pie would be scorned. But on a long sea voyage almost any combination of flour, dried fruit and sugar will pass. Indeed, the appetite, rendered more vigorous and perhaps appreciative by long deprivation from luxuries, will take not kindly to dried apples alone. The changes in the weekly bill of fare at sea run something thus: Sundays and Thursdays are "duff days;" Tuesday, bean day; Friday, codfish and potato day; some vessels have one or two special days for pork; salt beef, hardtack, tea and coffee are fluids and solids to fall back on every day. I dreaded the making of duff, or flour puddings, to the end of the voyage. Rarely did I attain success with them.

A duff is a quantity of flour and yeast, or yeast powder, mixed, tied up in a bag and boiled until it is light. Plum duff argues the insertion of a quantity of raisins. Plain duff is duff without raisins. But the proper cooking of a duff is rather a delicate matter. If it boils too long the flour settles into a hard, putty like mass, whereunto there is neither sponginess, lightness, nor that porousness which delights the heart of cook when he takes his duff from the seething caldron. If the duff does not boil long enough, the interior is still a paste. If a duff stops boiling for ever so few minutes, great damage results. And sometimes duff won't do properly, anyway. Mine were generally of the hardened species, and the plums evinced a tendency to hold mass meetings at the bottom. Twice the hands forward rebelled at my duffs, and their committee on culinary grievances bore them off to the door of the cabin and deposited them there unbroken and uneaten for the "Old Man's" inspection. Which public demonstration I witnessed from my galley door, and when the duff delegation had retired, I emerged, and swiftly and silently bore that duff away before the Old Man had finished his dinner below. It is a hard ordeal thus to feel one's self the subject of such an outbreak of popular indignation. But my sympathies now are all with the sailors. A spoiled duff is a great misfortune in the forecastle of a whaler, where neither pie nor cake nor any other delicacy, save boiled flour and molasses sauce, come from month's end to month's end.

PRENTICE MULFORD.

ON COOKING WHALE

Whale in Sausage Not Gastronomically Inviting.

LOG BOOK OF PRENTICE MULFORD

Shark's Meat—Social Position of the Sea Cook—A Useful, but Not Always Honored, Member of Society—Mexican Butter and Sugar Fiends.

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V.



WAS an experimental cook, and once or twice, while cutting in whale, tried them with whale meat. The flesh lying under the blubber somewhat resembles beef in color, and is so tender as easily to be torn apart by the hands. But whale meat is not docile under culinary treatment. Gastronomically, it has an individuality of its own, which will keep on asserting itself, no matter how much spice and pepper is put upon it. It is a wild, untamed steed. I prodded it to my guests in the guise of sausages, but when the meal was over the sausages were there still. It can't be done. Shark can. Shark's is a sweat meat, much resembling that of the swordfish, but no man will ever eat a whale, at least an old one. The calves might conduct themselves better in the frying pan. We had many about us whose mothers we had killed, but we never thought of frying them. When a whaler is trying out oil, she is blackened with the greasy soot arising from the burning blubber scrapes from stem to stern. It falls like a storm of black snowflakes. They sift into the crevices. Of all this my cookery got its full share. It tinged my bread and even my pies with a funeral tinge of blackness. The deck at such times was covered with "horse pieces" up to the top of the bulwarks. "Horse pieces" are chunks of blubber a foot or so in length, that being one stage of their reduction to the size necessary for the try-pots. I have introduced them here for the purpose of remarking that on my passage to and fro, from galley to cabin, while engaged in laying the cloth and arranging our services of gold plate and Sevres wear, I had to clamber, wade, climb and sometimes, in my white necktie and swallow-tail coat, actually crawl over the greasy mass with the silver tureen full of "consomme" or "soup Julien" while I held the gilt-edged and enamelled menu between my teeth. Those were trying-out times for a maritime head butler.

The cook socially does not rank high at sea. He stands very near the bottom round of the ladder. He is the subject of many jests and low comparisons. This should not be. The cook should rank next or near to the captain. It is the cook who prepares the material which shall put mental and physical strength into human bodies. He is, in fact, a chemist, who carries on the last external processes with meat, flour and vegetables necessary to prepare them for their invisible and still more wonderful treatment in the laboratory which every man and woman possesses—the stomach—whereby these raw materials are converted not only into blood, bone, nerve, sinew and muscle, but into thoughts. A good cook may help materially to make good poetry. An indigestible beefsteak, fried in grease to leather, may, in the stomach of a general, lose a battle on which shall depend the fate of nations. A good cook might have won the battle. Of course, he would receive no credit therefor, save the conviction in his own culinary soul, that his beefsteak properly and quickly broiled was thus enabled to digest itself properly in the stomach of the general, and thereby transmit to and through the general's organism that amount of nerve force and vigor, which, acting upon the brain, caused all his intelligence and talent to attain its maximum, and thereby conquer his adversary. That's what a cook may do. This would be a far better and happier world were there more really good cooks on land and sea. And when all cooks are Blots or Soyers, then will we have a society to be proud of.

While whaling in Marguerita bay, we "kedged" the Henry about one hundred miles inland, where the whales abounded. In so keding it was necessary to stake out at low water portions of the channel daily, when it ran a mere creek through an expanse of hard sand, sometimes a mile from either shore. At high water all that would be covered to a depth of six or seven feet. The Henry grounded at each ebb, and often keeled over at an angle of forty-five. From our bulwarks it was often possible to jump on dry ground. This keeling over process, twice repeated every twenty-four hours, was particularly hard on the cook, for the inconvenience resulting from such a forty-five degree angle of inclination extended to all things within his province. My stove worked badly at the angle of forty-five. The kettle could be but half filled, and only boiled where the water was shallowest inside. The cabin table could only be set at an angle of forty-five.

So that while the guests on the upper side had great difficulty in preventing themselves from slipping off their seats on and over that table, those on the lower side had equal difficulty in keeping themselves up to a convenient feeding distance.

Capt. Reynolds, at the head of the board, had a hard lot in the endeavor to maintain his dignity and sitting perpendicular at the same time on the then permanent and not popular angle of forty-five. But I, steward, butler, cook and cabin boy, bore the hardest tribulation of all in carrying my dishes across the deck, down the cabin stairs, and arranging them on a table at an angle of forty-five. Of course, at this time the rack used in rough weather to prevent plates and platters from slipping off was brought into permanent use.

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In former days while narrating the events of this voyage, which I have done some thousands of times, I used to say "we whaled." But I never whaled, never went in the boats, never pulled an oar. I had other fish to fry in the galley, and now that I commence to realize what a conscience is, I mention this for truth's sake as well as to give variety to the story. We were boarded occasionally by a few Mexicans. There was one melancholy looking Don Somebody who seemed always in a chronic state of corn husk cigarette. When not smoking he was rolling them; when not rolling or smoking he was lighting them. He and his companions were persons of some importance, for which reason Capt. Reynolds tendered them the hospitalities of the Henry, and would ask them to whatever meal was nearest ready.

These two Mexicans had enormous stowage for grub. They resembled the gulls. They also seemed unfathomable. There was no filling them. What they did at table they did with all their might, and when they finished, especially when eating by themselves, as they frequently did, there was literally nothing left. "Nothing" in this case meant something. It meant in addition to bread, meat and potatoes, every scrap of butter on the butter plate and every grain of sugar in the sugar bowl. I didn't take the hint the first time they ate with us, deeming the entire absence of butter and sugar at the end of the repast to be owing to my placing a small amount on the table. The second time they came on board I remedied this. But on inspection after they had finished I found left only an empty butter plate and sugar bowl. It was so at the third trial. Butter and sugar seem to be regarded as delicacies by the natives of Lower California. Nor do they seem to comprehend the real mission and import of butter and sugar on the table. They regarded both these articles as regular dishes, and scooped them in. On discovering this, after a consultation with the captain, I put them on allowance. These two men would have eaten up all our butter and sugar in four weeks.

However, it was comparatively a slight toll they levied on us for carrying off their whale oil, seal and abalone. We were miles within their legal boundaries taking away the wealth of their waters. Twelve other American whalers lay in Marguerita bay that season. It was practically an invasion, only the Mexicans didn't seem to know they were invaded, or didn't care if they did know. So long as they had plenty of butter and sugar on coming on board and the blubber stripped carcasses which came on shore they seemed satisfied. These carcasses they cut open when stranded and extracted the fat about the heart, which, on being fried out, would yield from one to four barrels of oil and about three miles of solid stench. They borrowed from us the vessels wherewith to boil this fat. I was ordered to loan them all the pots, pans and kettles which could be spared from my culinary laboratory. They never returned them, and I was very glad they did not. No amount of scouring would ever have rid them of the odor of decomposed Leviathan. We left them a dozen or so iron vessels the richer. A Mexican, at least on that coast, with a kettle is looked up to as a man of wealth. Beyond scrapes, cigarette lighters, sardines and bivalves, the gang of natives on shore had few other possessions. They seemed brilliant examples of contented poverty. The individual Mexican is a more independent being than the citizen of our own boasted "independent" nation. His wants are ten times less.

Some mercantile hopes are hanging on the seafarers and seafarers. The few we saw wanted calicoes of gay and diverse patterns. The men will eat butter and sugar, but whether they will buy these articles remains to be proved. Perhaps furniture sets of polished and painted horses' skulls might tempt some of the more aesthetic in the matter of household adornment to purchase, if put at a reasonable rate. Such are the conclusions a man regarding the probabilities of trade with Mexico, at least the fragment of Mexico I saw from my galley. If we wanted any service of them they talked dollars at a very high figure. But they never alighted. They showed no anxiety to tempt a bargain or an engagement. They went on just as ever, full to the brim of genuine sangfroid, eternally rolling, lighting, and smoking their cigarettes, and looking as if they felt themselves a superior race, and knew it all, and didn't want to know any more, until we asked them to eat. Then they seemed in no hurry, but clambered lazily down the cabin stairs and lazily set to work to find the bottom of every dish on the table, including the sugar dish and butter plate. I learned on that voyage the true significance of the term "greaser,"

PRENTICE MULFORD.

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