

Custard's Last Fight

MARTHA'S TWO SUITORS WERE SO ATTRACTIVE THAT SHE
COULDN'T DECIDE, SO SHE PUT THEM THROUGH THEIR
PACES—AND NEARLY WRECKED THE RANCH

By Myron Brinig

THEY called it the Big E Ranch. Martha Emmett inherited the rolling acres this side of the Corn Cob River from her husband, Cal Emmett.

There wasn't a finer fellow in Montana than big, bluff Cal. Everybody swore by him, and that's saying a good deal in a ranching country, where your employees usually swear, but not by you.

Cal was happiest when he was eating, and Martha was most content when she was cooking. That made them an ideally matched couple. Before her marriage, Martha was chief consulting cook to one of the more select hotels in Butte, and she prepared dishes that would have caused the mouth of a lizard to water.

All the big guns who ever stayed at that particular hostelry, from President Roosevelt down, fell in love with Martha's dishes. But Cal Emmett went them all one better. He fell in love with Martha, herself, and brought her out to the Big E as his wife and cook.

Well, after that, nearly everybody west of the Statue of Liberty tried to get invited to the Emmett Ranch, just to taste those epicurean victuals. And nearly everybody of any account was invited, including the Senate, the House of Representatives, great novelists, and stage and screen celebrities.

They all came away praising Martha Emmett—not only her cooking, but her eyes. She had the sort of eyes that drive a man to poetry and—er—lemonade. Her eyes were blue, but with a difference.

There are blue eyes and blue eyes, but hers were the blues that made you think of the Mediterranean, Montana sapphires, the blue grotto of Capri, the sky in Yel-

lowstone Park and thereabouts, and a Maxfield Parrish setting.

"The Lady of the Eyes and Pies," they called Martha. It was extremely difficult to say which were the more beautiful. Both were the *dernier cri*, as they say in Montparnasse, in orbs and pastries.

When Cal Emmett was killed in a railway accident, we all felt mighty sorry for his widow. We remembered how much they had loved one another, what tremendous pals they had been. And their having been married only three years made it all the more tragic.

Martha Emmett refused to leave the ranch after her husband's death, she'd grown so fond of it. She and Cal had been partners in everything.

Mrs. Emmett was perfectly capable of carrying on in her husband's place; so, instead of crying those big, blue eyes out until they were faded, Martha bravely faced the world with a smile, like the thoroughbred that she was.

She rode to round-up with the boys, supervised the shipments of cattle to Omaha, and was a conspicuous figure on the plains, riding her Indian pony, Charlot. The boys worshiped her as a man will adore a goddess, a figure of legend.

A look out of those eyes, plus a big chunk of custard pie, and you were Martha Emmett's slave for several lifetimes.

It got so pleasant around the place that the Big E became known as the Big Eats. The most envied men in Flathead County were those employed on the Big Eats, and there was a long waiting list trying to join on in any capacity.

Lean, dyspeptic ranch hands from the Canadian border to the Texas Panhandle

looked forward to the day when they would work for Martha Emmett. She was constantly receiving letters written in this vein:

DERE MA'AM:

It has kum to mi attenshun that yu are lookin' fur a hand on yore Big Eats Ranch. Fur a long time now I bin bothered terrubel by stummik-trubble doo to bad fude, and my Doc tells me thar is ownly wan cure an' thet's workin' fur yu, Ma'am.

I reckon yu wudn't want me to die, Ma'am, but I xpect to cash in my checks enny day now unless I gits a change of dite.

Now thar's dite an' dite, but thar's ownly wan Martha Emmett which leeds me to take pen in hand, coz she knos how to feed a man proper. Don't be a-scared, Ma'am; I won't eat you pore as I'm a small eater, an' a hell of a hard wurker.

It's akkount my stummik as I sed before, Ma'am, thet I need a change of dite an' I sure hope yu are the same frum the vury bottum of my heart.

After three years of widowhood, it became noticeable that Martha Emmett was being courted by two men. One of them, Don Donohue, her handsome foreman, was a black-haired Irishman, with a weakness for custard pie and the poems of Yeats.

Don had been foreman on the Big Eats when Cal was alive, and he stayed on after his employer's death to help the widow run things. He was an excellent foreman, and it was due to his fine executive ability that the Big Eats showed a tidy profit at the end of every year.

Besides being a lover of poetry and pie, Don was a marvelous rider, and owned several letters from the big movie companies out in Hollywood. They were willing to double his salary if he'd only come out and do stunts for them *à la* Fred Thomson and Jack Holt.

If Don had gone into the pictures, there's little doubt that he would have given some of those marcel waves in California a run for their money. But with Martha Emmett as his boss, the celluloid celebrities had very little attraction for the Irishman. He much preferred playing leads to Martha than kissing the most flaming of the youthful flappers in Hollywood.

And of course he couldn't think of deserting that wonderful custard pie.

The other man in the, so to speak, pie angle was Jud Carpenter, who owned the Rolling C, and was, in a manner of saying, Martha's next-door neighbor. That meant, of course, that he and Martha lived some ten miles apart, but, in this day of swift locomotion, what's ten miles?

Nearly every evening, Jud rolled around in his beautifully polished sedan, that looked as though it had just turned the corner of Park Avenue and Forty-Fifth Street. For the benefit of those who don't know, we'll explain that Park Avenue is a street in New York where the Guggenbilts speak only to the Morganheims and the Morganheims speak only to their personal bootlegger.

Don didn't own a beautifully polished sedan, but he had a white horse called Snowbird that he wouldn't have traded for the whole of Detroit, including the Tiger baseball team. It was a question of taking the air in the sedan or on Snowbird, and Martha had a difficult time making a choice.

When Jud took Martha out in the car, Don consoled himself by reading poems of unrequited love. What happened inside the sedan, no one but Martha and Jud knew, and they never told.

But when Jud's gas-buggy wasn't parked in front of the ranch house, it was Don's turn, and he and Martha would ride off on their magnificent horses. They chose the dim, lovely trails that wound in and out of the Flathead foothills, and what happened during these outings, no one ever knew, and Martha and Don never told. Which is fair enough.

The boys in the bunk house were as excited as if they were courting Martha along with Don and Jud. There were two opposing contingents, one of which favored the foreman, and the other Jud.

"D'ya think he ever, now, kisses her when he takes her out in that rubber-tired palace from Dee-troit?" Sparky Adams asked Pink Pill Pinkham.

"What d'ya mean, kiss?" asked Pink Pill, looking a shade pinker than usual. "The boss ain't no chorus girl to allow any *hombre* to press his suit on her ruby lips.

"Jus' the same, I'm willin' to bet yu thet Jud Carpenter's goin' to be our next boss," Pink Pill went on. "He's got the coin an' a ranch. Yu put the Big Eats an' th' Rolling C together, an' what have yu? Half o' this yere God's country!"

"I'm thinkin'—" began Piccolo Pete.

"Don't overstrain yo'self," interrupted Pink Pill.

"Jus' the same," went on Piccolo, scowling a deep scowl, "I'm thinkin' that Don's goin' to win the best hand at bakin' pies

this treasure State has ever knowed. It's mighty hard to beat an Irishman when it comes to makin' love an' singin' tenor. Look at Jawn McCormack. Look at this yere Don Jew-awn."

"Don Jew-awn was a Greaser, yu pore stovepipe," Sparky Adams sharply corrected Piccolo.

"Wall, I'll tell yu what I'll do," Pink Pill spoke up, heatedly. "I'll lay odds a hundred to one that Jud walks off with the bride an' all the trimmin's."

"G'wan," said Sparky, contemptuously. "Yu was the guy that bet Jack Dempsey would lick this yere lit'rary heavyweight, Gene Tunney."

"Jus' th' same, I'll stick to whut I'm sayin'," persisted Pink Pill. "Is it a bet? A hundred to one Jud leads her to the altar while the organ plays 'Nearer My Gawd to Thee.'"

"Wall, that's certainly what I call the gamblin' sperit," remarked Sparky. "Sure, it's a bet. Only don't say I didn't warn yu to lay off."

"Bettin' on a love affair is as risky a business as crossin' the English Channel. Yu never know when yore Australian crawl is goin' to git all tangled up." Having delivered himself of this bit of timely philosophy, Sparky pursed his lips reflectively, and sat back in his chair.

II

Now, if the truth be told—and the truth must always be told, soon or late—Martha Emmett was just the least bit bewildered. She liked Jud Carpenter well enough, but it didn't seem to her, at the moment, that she liked him better than Don Donohue.

Both men appealed strongly to her; both were handsome, sincere, and manly. It would be nice to marry before Christmas, what with its being so nice to have a man around to dress up like Santa Claus.

It would be pleasing to sit down to Christmas dinner with a husband opposite to pass you things, and praise your culinary art. It would be more than pleasant to smell tobacco in the house again.

Jud smoked rich, black cigars, and Don—as became a lover of poetry—drew on a pipe. Jud used bay rum after shaving, and he smelled thrillingly when he leaned close. And Don used some kind of polish on his hair that looked like shoeblacking, but smelled like lily of the valley.

As she combed her long hair before the

mirror one night in late autumn—she had left her hair unbobbed, because combing it always stimulated her mind—Martha was thinking that there ought to be some way she could prove to herself which man she loved best.

There were the usual schemes clever ladies put to use. She might go to them and confess that she had lost all her money, or she might confess that she had lost her recipe for baking custard pie. She might admit that her years were thirty instead of twenty-six. She might even ask them to give up tobacco, or one thing or another.

All were tests to prove their love, and all had been used by puzzled ladies from the days of Eve to the eve of days. And yet, did any of these tests prove anything, wondered Martha, her mind active under the stimulation of the comb? A man might answer every test and still be found wanting, she concluded, as she slipped into bed.

Martha's last waking thought was of the pie she had baked that very day. She had given a large portion to Don, and an equally generous piece to Jud. Both suitors had smacked their lips and rolled their eyes. Both had been overcome by emotion—the deep, sincere emotion that only delicious pie can call forth from a man's breast.

Martha dreamed she was in the kitchen baking pies—apple, cherry, rhubarb, prune, lemon, pineapple, and apricot pies; pies by the tens, twenties, and thirties; pies that bring a gulp to your throat, an exalted light to your eyes; gorgeous pies, with crusts as crisp and feathery as only the magic of a master hand can create them; delicious, exquisite, voluptuous pies; Rembrandts, Murillos, Leonardo da Vincis of pies.

And the moment each pie was baked, Martha removed it from the oven and placed it in a dish. Two men were in the kitchen murmuring ecstatically at the emergence of each pie. One of these ecstatic onlookers was Jud Carpenter, the other, Don Donohue.

They took turns at eating the pies. First, Jud would swallow a whole pie, then Don would swallow one. It seemed as though Martha would never be done baking, and Jud and Don swallowing. It was the most extraordinary sight since Custer's last fight.

Somehow, the phrase, Custer's Last Fight, got all mixed up with the pies, and Martha heard herself calling: "Custard's

Last Fight! Custard's Last Fight!" over and over again.

But neither Jud nor Don paid the least attention to Martha's cries. They were too busy eating great, crisp circles of pies—cherry, chocolate, strawberry, huckleberry, blueberry, gooseberry, custard pies.

They didn't bother to cut the pies into respectable quarters, or even halves. Hardly. They would lift a pie into their hands, and, *presto!* it had disappeared into the dark corners of their mouths. They were like magicians who vie with one another for the applause of a beautiful audience—in this case, Martha.

Still dreaming, it occurred to Martha that they were having a contest with one another. The man who succeeded in downing the greatest number of pies would be the fortunate bridegroom.

Quite unexpectedly, the dream jumped its track—a habit of dreams—and Martha was marching up the church aisle, leaning on—but on whose arm, exactly?

She looked up to see, but where the face should have been was only a vast blob of pie. "Take off that pie! I know you!" Martha cried in great excitement; but the bridegroom refused to do so.

He insisted on wearing it throughout the ceremony, while the organist pressed juicy chords out of an organ made of soft, white dough. Martha was annoyed that the organ had not been left longer in the oven. It took her several minutes to recall that she was being married.

"But I don't want to marry a pie!" she sobbed in her sleep. "I don't want to. Please, Mr. Minister, I'm marrying a pie; and I'll be sick if you don't let me go!" But the minister went on marrying her just the same, paying not the least attention to her sobs of protest. And when it seemed as though the whole world had become nothing but a great pie, Martha awakened to find the sunlight, like an arrow of gold, shooting at her eyes through the window.

For some minutes, Martha lay back on her pillow, thinking about her strange dream. And then she began to sing, and jumped out of bed to do a barefooted Charleston. She had hit upon a way of choosing a husband.

III

For a whole week, following that dream, Martha Emmett was busy in the kitchen

of the ranch house. Pink Pill Pinkham and Sparky Adams spent their time carrying in bushels of apples, a crate of peaches, buckets of gooseberries, and various other pie ingredients.

Martha thanked them very prettily. Her nose was shiny, but she didn't mind that so much. It was a sacrifice in a good cause.

"By all the pestiferous crows in the co'nfield," swore Pink Pill, "our boss is up to somethin' devilish. I ain't been doin' nuthin' fur a hull week but haulin' fruit into that there kitchen. What's she goin' to do, anyways—invite the complete American Legion to Sunday dinner?"

"Naw, yu pore sliver, she's invitin' only two," replied Sparky. "I'll give yu one guess as to whomsoever them two is."

"Not Jud an' Don?" asked Pink Pill.

"The vury same. No wonder yu're gettin' bald. Yore brains is crowdin' all the hair off'n yore dome."

"Seems like she's makin' a lot o' food fur two mere men," muttered Pink Pill. "A man's only got one stummick, an' thar's times when one's a half dozen too many."

"Yu don't know the ca-pacities of these two pertic'lar stummicks," said Sparky. "Did yu ever see Jud Carpenter eat? A beefsteak is no more 'n a life saver to him, an' as fur pies, he's only got to look at 'em an' they disappear."

"How about Don?" asked Pink Pill. "What's his, now, record?"

"I seen him eat a hull steer at that thar barbecue the Mannings give last year. An' the steer was smothered with a carload of onions. Boy, that *hombre* has more teeth than the Volstead Act."

"Yu mean to say," Pink Pill asked, "that this yere boss o' ourn is goin' to feed 'em pies till they get blue in th' face? Gosh, Sparky, I don't see how a 'uman bein' kin eat more'n three pies at a sittin' an' still live to count the crumbs that's left. He'd git pie-eyed."

"Wall," philosophized Sparky, "pies is pies, an' the one who eats the most of 'em without doin' a flop, is goin' to be the next boss o' the Big Eats, an' all the chattels pertainin' thereto."

"Naw," drawled Pink Pill, yawning prodigiously. "Yu're trying to load me up with bunk, yu fifty-fifth son of a fifty-fifth son of a Mormon."

"Hawnest tu hawnest, I'm utterin' gos-

pel truth," swore Sparky, very much in earnest. "The lady, she likes 'em both, but she kin only marry one, accordin' to the Rev. Hoyle; so she's goin' to pick the one who kin eat the most without enlargin' to Zeppelin size."

"Wall, I'll be—I'll be—" gasped Pink Pill, spinning around on his pivots to walk the other way.

"'N other words," said Sparky, "yu cain't eat yore cake an' have it, too; but ef yu eats yore pie, ol' son, yu're through!"

IV

HAVING baked ten pies a day, of all denominations, including the sweet potato, Martha found that she had seventy pies in readiness for Sunday dinner. She could not but be proud of her feat; certainly no culinary artist outside of a hotel or restaurant had ever contrived so much pastry, of so superior a quality, in such a short space of time.

But the pies were not all. Martha had also created a dinner. It was such a dinner as she, alone of all women, could create, off at the barrier with golden noodle soup, and running down the home stretch with varieties of nuts. The stairs leading up to the judgment seat, speaking metaphorically, were made of pie.

Promptly at two, Don arrived in the kitchen, his black hair plastered down on his well-shaped head so that it shone and shimmered like the helmet of Ulysses before Troy. A few minutes later Jud appeared, dressed for a killing and a feeding.

He gave off a very agreeable odor of bay rum. His clothes were worthy of a Bond Street tailor, and his manner was as sleek and winning as that of a tango instructor in Madrid. We mean Madrid, Spain, and not Madrid, Montana.

The legend that ranchmen array themselves only in chaps or overalls is thus forever K.O'd. They can hold their own with the Prince of Wales.

Upon entering the kitchen, Jud sniffed, and assumed a beatific expression as if he smelled Paradise. "Gosh-um-golly, that food smells good to these nostrils," he told Martha. "An' I'm hungry enough to eat the extra board in the table."

"I'm kind of voracious, myself," put in Don, but a worried wrinkle made its appearance in his usually placid forehead. The night before, he had suffered a slight attack of indigestion, and had not slum-

bered with his accustomed depth and gusto.

"I'm so glad you boys are hungry," giggled Martha. "Both of you are going to eat and eat, and the first who cries, 'Hold, enough!' is not going to be worth two hen's teeth in this home, sweet home."

Having delivered herself of this ultimatum, Martha swung wide the portals that guarded her cupboard, and the seventy pies, like the seventy cymbals of Solomon's dancing girls, were revealed in all their brash glory.

"By the thousand narrow escapes of Houdini!" gasped Don. "What am I now perceivin'?"

"Don't be alarmed," smiled Martha. "They're only pies."

"Only seventy?" asked Jud, moving a broad-palmed hand over his capacious stomach, and emitting ecstatic yum-yums. But they were not genuinely pleasurable yum-yums. They sounded a bit hollow and fearful.

It was quite true that Jud's molars were in first-class, A No. 1 condition. It was moreover, undeniable that Jud could out-eat Babe Ruth and Señor Firpo of Argentina put together.

But who, in this wide world, had ever partaken of more than ten pies at a sitting, and lived to enjoy an after-dinner cigar?

True, Balzac was known to eat fifty lamb chops for luncheon. But Balzac was not only a genius; he was also a Frenchman. The combination has never been known to lower the napkin in times of crises.

Furthermore, there can be no doubt that Don Donohue had once partaken of a roasted steer, a very small steer, to be sure. But a steer, as any one will tell you, is meat, whereas pies are layers of rich fruit corseted in dough. "You don't mean to say," questioned Don, "that them pies are fur the three of us?"

"Two of us. Leave me out, please," laughed Martha, in her most winning way. "Oh, I may have a very small portion of a quarter of one apple pie. But no more! Fat girls went out with the bustle, you know."

"Wall, it does seem like a heap o' pie fur just Jud an' myself," ventured Don, beginning to perspire.

"Gosh-um-golly," pronounced Jud, "why don't yu speak fur yure own self, Don? Pies ain't any more 'n gumdrops

to me. I was born in Boston, an' every little corpuscle in my body is the spirit of a pie thet's passed on."

Don thrust out his chin, and steeled himself to battle. Was he going to let a big bluff like Jud Carpenter get the better of him? He'd be burned in oil if he would! If Jud could swallow pies by the dozen, why, so could he. But what was the, now, gosh-dangled sense of it all, anyway? What was Martha Emmett up to?

"You know," said Martha, rather casually, "I had the most peculiar dream one night last week. It was very strange. I dreamed that I had promised to marry the man who ate the most pies. Wasn't it silly? I had a good laugh over it the next morning, I can tell you."

"Thet sure was a funny dream," murmured Don, beginning to see a bright light. It was such a bright light that he blinked several times. In his stomach he felt that a long line of pies were crouching, ready to spring forward at the report of a pistol, and race for some glorious reward. Lithe, athletic pies, all dressed up in little running trunks. They were fearless, tense pies, full of crust.

"Say, Martha, thet sure was my lucky night when yu had thet there dream," laughed Jud.

But, as his eyes met Don's, a certain telepathic flash of sympathy quivered between the two men. It was as if they were saying to one another, "Wall, it sure looks like a duel to the death, but I'll be damned if I show the yaller streak. Give me pie, or give me death!"

And yet each man harbored a great fear that pie and death might be synonymous terms.

"Well, boys," invited Martha, "be seated, and be careful of your table manners. Play to the rules, and do yourselves proud."

"Martha," asked Don, getting very serious all of a sudden, "do yu mind if I take off this yere, now, coat o' mine? Don't yu feel sort o' warmish?"

"Take it off, if you like, Don," agreed Martha, generously. "But, remember, it's the infighting that will win the battle."

"I guess I'll loosen my belt a notch," said Jud. "Yu don't have any objection, do y', Martha?"

"I hope you've got plenty of notches, Jud," smiled Martha, bringing in the first course, golden soup with noodles.

Don's first glimpse of the soup caused him a certain misunderstanding, so that he breathed great gobs of relief. "Why, I thought we was only goin' to eat pie," he laughed, the wrinkle disappearing from his forehead. "Why didn't yu tell me thet a slice o' pie was goin' to be dessert?"

"Not a slice," corrected Martha. "Many pies—as many pies as there are daisies in yonder meadow. Look, Don, how the brush of the sun tints them into a sea of shimmering gold!"

The wrinkle reappeared in Don's forehead, and his face became very pale. "I see," he whispered, and looked with sickly eye upon the noodles.

"Why, Don, don't you like the soup?" asked Martha, and for a moment it looked as if she were going to cry.

"It's certainly good soup," gurgled Don, while a noodle slipped down the wrong chute. "I—I d-don't know when I ever t-tasted such good s-soup. My! My! It certainly is—"

"Oh-h-h! Dee-licious!" sighed Jud, creating golden waves in the bowl. "This soup is like heaven! Martha, you ought, now, to have a medal pinned on yu fur makin' this yere soup. Um-mmmmm!"

V

MEANWHILE, a considerable gallery of spectators had collected without the arena in which the two immersed gladiators souped with one another for a lady's fair hand.

The gallery included Sparky Adams, Pink Pill Pinkham, Piccolo Pete, and a half dozen or so other hands of the Big Eats. "Glue yore eye on thet," whispered Sparky. "She's bringin' in enough fried chicken to feed a whole brigade of mule-skinners."

"Thet chicken looks like it 'd melt in an iceberg's mouth," opined Pink Pill, gulping loudly, and closing his eyes to blot out the almost unbearable picture.

"It would, if pie wasn't comin' on," snickered Piccolo. "Thar's goin' to be a couple pie-eyed corpses in thar afore yon sun has set."

"Um-mmmmm!" murmured Jud Carpenter, smacking his lips, oblivious of Piccolo's prophecy. "Thet chicken must 'a' led a charmed life. He lays mighty easy in my stummick."

"I hope he lays aigs that hatch," grumbled Don, from across the table. "I don't

wish no harm on yu, Jud, but I hope he lays a hundred aigs, an' each aig hatches triplets."

"Perhaps you boys would like another portion," offered Martha, always the hospitable hostess.

"No! No! Wouldn't think of it, but thank yu just the same!" Jud refused, stirring uneasily in his chair.

"I'll have another portion!" chimed in Don, as blithe and merry as a wedding bell, smiling sardonically across the table at his rival.

"Wall, if Don's goin' to, yu kin count me in too, Martha," interposed Jud, hastily. "Thar's no man goin' to out-chew me when it comes to Martha Emmett's food!"

"Oh, my, yes, there is!" ejaculated Don, hurling defiance out of slightly bulging eyes. "I still got my wisdom teeth, I have. I been savin' 'em for just such an occasion."

"No *hombre* ever out-ate Jud Carpenter without seein' a surgeon afterwards," growled the boss of the Rolling C, and if words were calories, Don would have been slain in that instant.

"Wall, every Napoleon has his, now, Waterloo, Jud," replied Don, attacking his second portion of chicken with great determination, "an' every tummy is bound to have its ache."

"Look at them two bozos eatin' a double portion of chicken, would yu?" mourned Sparky, his nose flat against the window-pane. "An' the funny part of it all is thet in a hour from now they'll be so unconscious they'll never remember how it tasted."

"It's just my luck to fall in love with dames what are always reducin'," whispered Pink Pill, wiping a tear off the bridge of his freckled nose. "From now on, the more they weigh, the harder I rush 'em."

"It looks from here like Don's gettin' a little pale around the gills," observed Piccolo Pete, stealing a glance through the window. "Speakin' as an ex-navy man, I'd say thar's enough ballast in his hold to give him a mighty sinkin' feelin'."

"Jud ain't lookin' none too chipper hisself," interposed Nils Hanson, the Cheyenne Rodeo wizard. "I'd ruther ride Dynamite, the wildest hoss at th' rodeo, than face them thar pies."

"Hey, fellers, she's bringin' in cucumber salad!" yelled Sparky. "An' I'm here to

say thet cucumbers an' pies ain't buddies in no man's country."

After the salad, Don hoped and prayed that there would be a short intermission, so that what had gone before and what was going to follow would not get mixed up in any scandalous goin's on. Unfortunately, his hopes were in vain, for, almost immediately, Martha came in, bearing pies. Her lips were parted in a pearly smile, and her eyes danced with excitement.

Jud surveyed the pastries with a spartan-like grin, and loosened another notch in his belt. He could not help discovering, with considerable alarm, that the last notch had been reached. Well, he would have to trust to luck and the elasticity of his belt. "Cherry is my fav'rite pie," he murmured, and his eyes took on a dreamy expression, but whether from ecstasy or exhaustion, it was impossible to tell.

"I'm kind of stuck on custard, myself," growled Don, helping himself to a generous mouthful of that variety. "Oo-oo! This pie is poetry. Thet's what it is. Poetry!"

"Like the 'Pied Piper,' maybe?" asked Martha, innocently.

"This yere pie is lighter 'n a feather, an' it slides down my epiglottis like a chord slides down the inside of a trombone," murmured Jud, lyrically.

"Bring on more!" cried Don, after he had finished his first pie, and experienced no unpleasant reaction. "Say, I could eat a dozen o' these things!"

"Same here!" seconded Jud. "Bring 'em on! They make the best o' impressions on me. I'm just beginnin' to get my appetite."

Martha brought in the third and fourth pies, which were pineapple, and beheld them vanish like snowflakes under the warm rays of the sun. There followed four more pies, huckleberry and prune.

"Say, I cain't stand much more o' this," gasped Sparky Adams. "It makes me suffer jus' to look at 'em. What number is this?"

"They're on thar third apiece," explained Pink Pill, scratching his red hair in awe. "Do yu happen to notice anything queer about Jud's stummick?"

"It looks swollen to me," solemnly averred Piccolo.

"It looks like he's got the mumps in the wrong place," said Nils Hanson.

There followed eight more pies, rhubarb, apple, lemon, crab apple, chocolate, apri-

cot, mince, and custard. Don was beginning to hang onto the table with a bleary-eyed expression, but he managed a brave smile when the twelfth pie appeared.

As Don continued to gaze down upon it, the pie seemed to enlarge before his eyes, like a balloon being filled with gas. He had lost all count of time. He felt that it must have been years ago when he tasted that first delicious pie.

It had been a relatively insignificant pie, that first one. It had been, as Don recalled, rather a small pie, a harmless pie, dimensionally modest, perhaps six inches in diameter, certainly not larger.

But, in the intervening years, as pie followed pie, the six inches had grown longer and longer, until now, Don felt that the full moon had been placed before him. Wouldn't it be strange, thought Don, if the moon were made of custard pie?

Nevertheless, Don opened his mouth, and shoved rich, yellow custard within, all the while keeping an eye that had grown glassy and swollen upon his rival across the table. Jud, beginning his twelfth pie, looked alarmingly fit.

Perhaps his physiognomy had grown a trifle purplish in hue, but that might be because the afternoon was growing late, and the room fading to darkness. Jud suddenly coughed. "Marvelesh!" he breathed huskily. "Thish ish besz pie I ever tash-tash-ted. 'Sh shertainly schwell pie!"

"First thing we know," said Sparky, "Congress 'll pass a law prohibitin' pie, an' we'll be smugglin' English tarts an' French pastry across this yere, now, Canadian border."

"It certainly does look as how Jud's had one custard pie too many," observed Nils Hanson.

"Say, fellers," said Piccolo, suddenly looking very pallid, "I'm afraid I'm goin' to pass out. I got a funny feelin' in the pit o' my stummick."

"I'm gettin' a little groggy myself," opined Pink Pill. "Everything's gettin' kind o' blurred afore my eyes—"

Piccolo and Pink Pill collapsed simultaneously, and lay with their toes turned upward to the sky. "Oh, look at the little birdies in th' pie," warbled Pink Pill, with a funny grin on his face.

VI

At the beginning of the now historic dinner, Martha had looked with a good deal

of amusement on the pie-eaters; but now that twenty-four of her pastries had been consumed by her adoring, dogged swains, she was inclined to doubt the wisdom of her love test.

It was becoming increasingly plain that both Don and Jud loved her madly, wildly, and that only death could make them haul up the white napkin of surrender.

After the twelfth pie, Martha decided that her test had been a failure. The result was a draw, both suitors having covered themselves with glory.

"No more, boys!" she exclaimed, on the point of tears. "You've both had enough."

"Noshun o' the sort," protested Jud, swaying perilously in his chair. "I'm jus' gettin' shar—started. Eatin' pish ish a' zeashy as rollin' hoopsh—I mean whoops. Ain't had any peash pie yet."

"Bring 'em on, the whole seventy o' them!" persisted Don, stubbornly. "If that pie-eyed Boston bean across the table is game, so am I! We'll finish eatin' pie in hell!"

"Sh-hhh!" and Jud wagged an unsteady index finger in Don's face. "Mushn't be profane before th' fairer shex—sexsh, I mean shexsh."

"But, boys," wept Martha, helplessly, "I don't really think that either of you ought to have any more. I'm afraid—"

"More pish! I wan' more pish!" cried Jud, beating the table with knife and fork. "I'll show tha' Irishman acrosh th' table whosh th' real man in this crowd!"

"Wall, I never knowed any real man who got pickled on pie!" Don taunted.

"You're lyin', Don Donohue! I'll make yu eat them wordsh!" and Jud shook an uncertain fist at the foreman.

"Pies, not words, is what I'm, now, eatin'," retorted Don.

It looked, for a time, as though the two men would come to blows, and Martha, hoping to avert physical warfare, hastened to bring in two more pies. They were of the coconut custard gender.

"Oh, yum, yum, gosh, golly!" called Jud, attacking his thirteenth with great gusto. "Ish thish a lil pie I shee before me? Yash, ish a lil pie, pre'y lil pie, all shtuff' wi' cush'ard!"

Don almost wept at the sight of that coconut-custard pie. Coconut by itself would have been bad enough, but the custard was almost more than he could bear.

However, it would never do to show the white feather at this stage of the game. He felt like a great lump of dough, from his head to his feet. But it was all going to be worth while.

With Martha as his wife, he would be able to look back upon this experience with a great deal of pride and joy. He attacked the pie feverishly, but the more he ate, the larger it got.

Suddenly, all the pies inside him began to hold a mass meeting, demanding shorter hours and less congestion. The pineapples and the custards got into a heated argument, and came to blows; and it was not long before the cherries, prunes, and apricots joined in.

There was a riot, and in an instant everything went black before Don's eyes. He wanted to hold on to the bitter end. He clutched at the tablecloth, and groaned, "I love you!" but it was too late. The pies routed him. He slipped off his chair, and landed on the floor, at Martha's feet.

Jud, finishing his thirteenth pie in triumph, bellowed forth his joy. "He'sh gone! Hoo-ray!" He stood up on his chair, and beat his plate with knife and fork, singing a paean of victory. "I'm goin' right out an' buy lil ring for lil 'gagemen' finger!" he called, and jumped unsteadily to the floor. "We'll be married to-morrer!"

But Martha drew back from him, and, without the least warning, flung herself on her knees at the side of the prostrate Don. Unaware of the tears that coursed down her cheeks, silver rivulets of grief, she lifted the foreman's black head in her lap, and kissed his lips, sticky and blue from huckleberry pie.

"You're not dead, are you, my precious?" she sobbed. "Don, speak to me. I love you! Do you hear, you poor darling? I'm just crazy about you!"

Jud stared at her out of astonished eyes. Here he had won fairly in the duel of pies, expecting to be decorated with her kisses, instead of which she had thrown herself upon the breast of the vanquished!

All these pies in his system had been in vain. The bitterness of defeat lay heavy within him. From that moment onward, Jud Carpenter lost all faith in a woman's word. They said one thing, and meant something else.

How was Jud to know that, nine times out of ten, it is the goat, and not the hero,

who fires the divine spark in a woman's breast? Ah, he might have foreseen! Woman, woman, how are we ever to know you?

"Yu mean to shay, Martha, you're goin' to trus' yureself to him? Him?" begged Jud, growing more miserable with each passing moment. "Are yu goin' to pick a man what cain't even hold pie?"

"Yes!" answered Martha, in tears. "I've just discovered my love for him. It was the way he slipped off the chair. Look at his poor eyes! Help me carry the poor darling into the bedroom. Run for the doctor! Don't stand there like a dummy! Can't you see my heart is breaking?"

Between them, they managed to carry the unconscious foreman into the bedroom. Jud hurried out of the house, only to find every available hand on the Big Eats lying unconscious under the kitchen window. He turned the garden hose on the upturned faces, and Sparky Adams was the first to revive under the stimulus of cold water. "What's th' matter with you!" Jud demanded. "What ails yu?"

"I ate thirteen pies," murmured Sparky, looking dazed. "They was prune, pineapple, crab apple—"

"Run fur a doctor afore I make you eat forty-four more, yu hoppin' son of a grass-hopper!" yelled Jud. "Thar's a man dyin' in thar."

"What's he dyin' from?" asked Sparky, beginning to get his bearings.

"Pie-areeah, yu poor simp!"

VII

DON entertained a rapid convalescence. He had lapsed into unconsciousness a defeated man, but he regained his senses with the wonder of victory in his arms. Was it only a dream, or was it really she who held his hand, and crooned sweet nothings?

"Don," she whispered, "we'll be married just as soon as you're able to talk back to a minister."

"But I—Jud—didn't Jud eat the most pies?" he stammered. "I'm kind o' rattled, Martha. I don't understand."

"A woman's prerogative—" smiled Martha. "But it's you I love. There was something about the way you slipped off the chair—"

DON's face took on a pre-pie glow of health. "I reckon I kin walk now," he laughed weakly, eager to get out of bed. But Martha held him back.

"Dr. Smith says you'd better remain where you are for the next few days," she said, lovingly, but with firmness. "And, Don, will you shut your eyes, and swallow this castor oil? For Martha?"

"I'd take anything fur yu, darlin'," replied Don. "I'd even eat thirteen more pies this vury minute—"

"Please, Don!" she interrupted, horror writ large in her blue eyes. "Don't let's talk about it! I never want to see another pie for the rest of our lives!"

Suddenly they became aware of a third person in the room. Jud looked down upon their happiness, a Jud whose face was the picture of woe, of heartbreak. "I came to congrat'late Don," he explained, wistfully. "How are you?"

That successful swain sat up in bed, and extended a hand to his defeated rival. "Sorry, old man," he murmured; "but if thar's any consolation in bein' the champ pie-eater o' Montana, it's yores."

"Be good to her," Jud whispered, restraining his great grief. "Don't waste her youth over the kitchen stove." He started to leave the room, but when he reached the door he turned about unexpectedly. "Say, Don, I'm thinkin' o' givin' yu a weddin' present—"

"Thet's darn white o' yu, Jud."

"I'm thinkin'," and Jud could hardly

control his voice for the sobs that racked it—"I'm thinkin' o' givin' yu my piebald pony."

Sparky Adams, enriched to the extent of one hundred dollars because of Jud's failure to win Martha, was a happy man as he climbed into his bunk that night. Pink Pill, in the bunk below, was sorrowful over having parted with the hundred that reposed crisply in Sparky's jeans.

"Say, Sparky, what yu goin' to do with thet, now, hundred you won off'n me?" Pink Pill inquired mournfully.

"What am I goin' to do?" repeated Sparky. "Wall, fust o' all, I'm goin' into town an' sit me down at a table in th' Palace Res-too-rant. I'm goin' to eat, thet's what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to eat soup, an' fried chicken, an' cucumber salad, an' chilled melon, an' java, an'—"

"An' p-pie?" asked Pink Pill, naïvely.

Almost instantaneously, some thirty arms reached for Pink Pill where he reposed in his bunk. Some thirty muscular arms lifted him into the air, and held him aloft for a moment in giddy suspense, then shot him dizzily through the open window out into the cold, dark night.

"An' thar yu stay, yu pie-eyed progeny of a Persian puma!" cried a spokesman for the pay roll of the Big Eats.

TO A FIELD MOUSE

FEAR in your little heart—

Ah! God forbid that I should put it there!

Trembling, you think of me

As of some lumbering, blundering deity,

Scattering your tiny paper house apart.

Yet, big as I appear and small as you,

The trifling difference betwixt us two,

What is it—if, as I, you could compare

Me with those dumb, blind gods I have to fear!

O little field mouse, quivering in your nest

With those four tiny marvels at your breast,

Nest you so cleverly wove

From some old verses writ to one I love,

Nest hid securely in the gilded frame

Of the great picture that keeps young her fame,

Her own young face she painted long ago—

My long-lost eyes, and wild young breasts of snow—

How happy would she be could she but know

That you have made your nest,

With those four tender babies at your breast,

Behind her picture . . .

How came it you should choose so safe a place,

Safest in all the world, behind her face?

Richard Leigh