



The Wonderful Christmas Pudding

By William R. Lighton

When, as a bride, Anne Powell went out to share her husband's life on the ranch at Rodriguez, she was a thorough stranger to the big West and its ways. It was a far remove from her old home in the New Hampshire hills to the new, for Rodriguez Springs lie beyond the Datils, and the peaks of the Datils rise beyond the wide, bare Plains of San Augustin, where New Mexico touches elbows with Arizona, in the sunlit silence of the Southwestern desert. She had a queen's welcome from the five men employed upon the ranch—a young Englishman, a swarthy Mexican, and three others who, in the manner of the frontier, had come from nowhere in particular and were at home "wherever their hats were off." They were a fine, hardy lot, bravely fighting out their destiny in that remote corner. It was plain that they had exerted themselves to make the place fit for her coming; it was no less plain how difficult their life had been, wanting a woman's hand to smooth the roughness. When they assembled at the first meal of her cooking, and she offered to speak a few words in appreciation of what they had done for her reception, one of them interrupted her with a speech.

"Don't say nothin' about it," he urged. "We're sure glad to see you. There ain't been a woman inside the house in four years till you come. We've had to rustle our own grub for so long, an' do for ourselves, you'd have been welcome if you was black, instead of—, stead of—." No doubt he intended a compliment, but upon his unaccustomed tongue it tailed off into an impotent stammer. The Englishman cut in heartlessly:

"You get Billy's meaning, Ma'am? He means he'll try to overlook your not being black, so long as he doesn't have to do his share of the cooking any more."

"Yes, that's what I mean," said the confused Billy.

A day or two afterward, while busy with her work in the kitchen, a door swung shut before the wind, and she asked the Mexican to secure it in its place. He brought from the yard a round, gray, boulder-like weight that served the purpose well. When Billy came to his dinner he eyed the fragment with a laugh.

"Hello, Old Ironsides!" he cried, as if in greeting to a friend. When Mrs. Powell glanced up from her task she saw him sitting upon the doorstep, holding the weight in his lap, fingering it almost caressingly.

"Say," he said presently, "I'll bet you don't know what this is you're misusin' so shameful."

"No," she agreed. "Juan brought it in. What is it?"

"It's a puddin'," he answered.

"A pudding-stone?" she queried. "I didn't notice. There was a lot of that on the farm, back in New Hampshire." The Englishman had come up and stood leaning lightly against the door-

frame. Her misunderstanding made him laugh with keen enjoyment.

"Pudding-stone!" he echoed. "That's rich. It wasn't meant for that, though. That's our last year's Christmas pudding. Billy, here, made it."

"Yes," Billy retorted, "an' Johnny Bull her told me how. You know what an accomplice is? Well, that's him." And after a short interval: "Say, Mrs. Powell, have you ever et spotted-pup?"

"Goodness, no!" she answered. "You don't mean to say you boys have been eating dog!"

"It ain't dog," he returned. "It's rice, with dried currants in it. It's a fine puddin', too, till you've et it regular, every dinner-time, for three or four years; then it does get kind o' tedious. I can make it as good as any man in the country; but the boys begun to get pretty much wore out with it, an' Johnny said he'd teach me how to make a mess o' Christmas puddin', English style. Well, this here's it! She looks English, don't she?" he asked with a grin. "Now you know why

them Johnny Bulls has all got big front teeth; it's because they're brought up to gnaw on such kind of victuals."

The Englishman's handsome teeth shone as he smiled in unaffected good humor. "The trouble was that Billy didn't use judgment," he said. "He tried to make that pudding by main brute strength, when he ought to have known that it needs some intelligence besides—some special genius."

"I reckon it sure does," Billy remarked. He fondled the lump for a little time, turning it over and over upon his knees. "I always will think she had the makin' of a good puddin' in her," he said by-and-by. "I put into her some of pretty near everything in New Mexico—black-strap, an' squawberries, an' bear's marrow, an' yaller currants, an' dried mescal—everything the boys fetched in—everything except bakin'-powder. I know that's what she needed. But Johnny wouldn't let me put none in. I'll leave it to you,

Ma'am: wouldn't she have been bound to have rose some if I had?"

Agasp with laughter she could only nod.

"Of course, she would!" he cried. "I've cooked long enough to know that anything with flour in it has got to swell, or it's no use. Anyway, I got her mixed up an' ready, after a while. I didn't have no sack to put her in, an' I tied her up in a piece o' deerskin an' biled her for two whole days. That ought to have been enough. She certainly had all the chance any fair-minded puddin' could ask for swellin' an' showin' her strength; but she didn't seem to come up none—not a mite. I got sick o' seein' her an' smellin' her after the second day, an' took her out. That was a whole month before Christmas. Johnny said she'd ought to be kind o' cured some before she was et, an' I laid her out on the roof o' the bunk-house, where she could enjoy the sun. She sure got cured! I reckon mebbe she wasn't used to this climate, an' it was pretty hard on her. I forgot all about her, an' when I wanted her I had to hunt for her half a day; an' then I dug her out of a big snowdrift, where she'd fell off the roof. I had to peel the hide off her with a chisel. Johnny said we'd ought to have the right kind of sauce to burn on her, to kind o' cheer her up an' put her in the right kind o' mind for Christmas; but we didn't have nothin' but some o' that Mexican mescal-drink. I let her soak in that overnight; but the stuff wouldn't burn."

He checked his recital for a moment, holding his handiwork at arm's length, regarding it with the utmost gravity, though his hearers were tearful with their mirth.

"She's been layin' around outdoors for quite a spell," he said, "an' got bleached out a lot, an' kind o' aged an' tired so you can't rightly judge what she was like when she was young an' at herself. She was sure about the darkest-complected puddin' I 'most ever seen. I mistrusted her a whole lot when I'd got one good, square look at her; she looked that mean-dispositioned. While I was gettin' dinner I worried a little chunk loose from her, to taste, an' I like to never got it cleaned off my teeth. Even English couldn't make her go; we couldn't, none of us. We kept her for an ornament for a while, till one day she rolled off the table an' like to broke my foot, an' then I throwed her out, an' she's been knockin' round an' kind o' shiftn' for herself ever since."

The Englishman broke into the narrative. "We had an old magpie around the place those days—a fine old fellow that we'd made a pet of. The day that pudding was thrown out he found it and pecked a little bit off of it. We'd never suspected that he could talk; but when he'd got the taste in his mouth he screamed, 'Judas Priest! What have I done?' And the next morning we found him dead."

"That's a lie," Billy commented.



UNDER THE MISTLETOE.
From the picture by Beatrice Offor.