

The food of love

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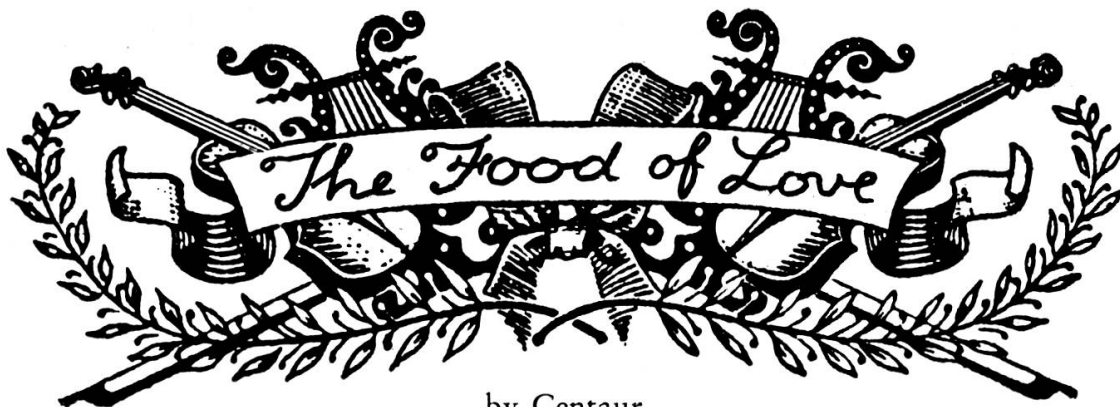
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by Centaur

Ellis Jay jumped a mile, dropping his sandwich and upsetting his carton of milk. The colour flooded into his wan cheeks and he had already pushed in the long drawer as a reflex action before identifying the cause on his desk. He clapped a hand to his chest while regaining his breath, stood up the carton, which fortunately was unopened, and reached for the telephone. «Jay speaking.»

«Hallo, Ellis!» It was Roger's voice, as he had both hoped and feared. «What are you doing to-night?»

«Nothing, why?»

«Good! I've just had a ring from Mark Andrews. He and Red were going to Festival Hall, but he's poorly and Red's working so they've offered us the tickets. I was thinking that as you're in that part of the town you might collect them from Red—can you do that?»

«I don't know where he works.»

«It's a new building—» Roger gave directions for reaching it «—take the lift to the drawing office; I think he's in charge there now. His other name is Mill; you've met him, haven't you?»

Ellis thought he had, once, and after a few closing remarks replaced the handpiece and looked out of the window. Quite a nice day, he decided, fine enough to eat the remaining sandwiches in the open and also to read the paper without anybody seeing him.

He opened the drawer again, scanning the page a moment before folding it up. WOLFENDEN REPORT REJECTED—AGAIN, screamed the main headline. BITTER DEBATE; ANGRY SCENES IN THE HOUSE, ran subsequent heavily-typed lines, followed by smaller headings such as *Impassioned Plea*, *Challenge to National Morality*, *Weakening of Social Fibre* and so on down the page. He was still an outlaw, and the paper was not only rejoicing in the fact but inciting its readers to do the same. Ellis wrapped it around his lunch as he went out.

Friday. That meant Roger would almost certainly ask him to spend the night with him as neither of them worked on Saturdays. Dear Roger, who overlooked his inadequacies and found his pale face and skinny body attractive. Loving Roger, who seemed to have had a host of bed-friends but had given them all up since Ellis had been seeing him. Ellis hungered for his embrace and loved him with all the yearning intensity of first-love in any young man hitherto cut off from the world by shyness and guilt. He loved Roger; but the only way he could demonstrate it now was to break off their association.

Ellis had always known he was different, but kept the secret hidden away, away down; even, as far as he could, from himself. He prayed, he despised himself, he told himself it wasn't true, but there was always that lurking urge. He had been far too ignorant, however, to know exactly he wanted to do and

not nearly enterprising enough to have made the move if he had known, until one night not long after his twenty-first birthday he had been initiated by a strange man who made a pass at him. Afterwards he could hardly believe what he had done, but in a week's time found himself hanging around the same place in the unadmitted hope that the same thing might happen again.

It did happen, although with another man, and the pair were surprised by a third party. His partner instantly fled, while Ellis, his escape blocked, was given full details of what awaited him at the hands of the police unless he parted up with five pounds there and then. Fortunately it was pay-day and the fiver was forthcoming. Badly shaken, Ellis returned home resolving never to expose himself to temptation again. A couple of weeks later he was accosted in the street by the man to whom he had given the money and relieved of a further sum under the same threat. He lived the life of a recluse after that, going out only to work; then one night about a month after the street incident his father answered the doorbell and said there was a Mr. Smith to see Ellis. 'Mr. Smith' greeted him civilly, saying he was short of a few quid as his friends seemed to have been avoiding him lately . . .

By the end of the work he had quit his job and moved to London, where he had no difficulty in finding employment, and about three months ago had met Roger, standing next to him in a queue for concert tickets. The circumstances of their meeting established a certain common ground and they sat together that night not only in the concert hall but in a café afterwards, where they made the first of many appointments for future meetings—which generally ended up in Roger's flat.

Compared with the molehill offence over which 'Mr. Smith' had been blackmailing him, the things Ellis allowed—would have begged—Roger to do to him were mountainous, yet exciting no feelings of guilt. Those two furtive, fumbling encounters with strangers in a dingy urinal had been shameful, but part of a different world altogether.

In Roger's arms was security, and under the pressure of his lips and the reassurances that came from them the shame and the fear were beginning to recede. In Parliament, too, a move was afoot to remove the stigma of outlawry from the only sexual acts in which he was capable of taking part, and as Roger said, with the law amended, public opinion would no doubt undergo a change as well. This seemed reasonable to Ellis, whose own feelings were clouded by the disapprobation of the law: as a naturally law-abiding man he would, he knew, feel easier in his own mind when the ban were lifted. Most of all, though, he looked forward to being able to visit his home town. With legality conferred upon his actions he could at last tell 'Mr. Smith' to go hang and if the man made a nuisance of himself again, report him to the police. All that would result from his seeking their protection as things were, though, would be prosecution for himself (and now most probably for Roger) while his tormentor went scot-free; one saw cases of that in the papers so often. Then one day in a bus he was conscious of an eye upon him, and froze when he realised it belonged to 'Mr. Smith'. The clock went back with a rush. He was an outlaw, a fugitive again; and a lone one as he could never tell Roger of his fears.

He stepped out of the lift into a large, well-lit room. Its single occupant, working in a grey dust-coat at one of five large drawing-boards, looked around for an instant as he approached. «Be with you in a minute.» He turned back and added a few lines to a drawing already a mass of intricate detail, then put down the pencil and held out his hand. «Ellis, is it, and you've come for the tickets? Mark offers them to Roger and gives them to me, Roger accepts and sends you for them; that's what I call co-operation, which is just as it should be!» Red crossed over to a steel locker and from the pocket of a pin-strike suit hanging in it produced two tickets. «Here you are—with our love.»

«Oh! They're a present?» Since leaving home Ellis had not been accustomed to anyone but Roger going out of his way to be kind to him. His spirits rose, momentarily. «Thanks ever so much! I didn't know that.»

«No good wasting them», Red said a trifle gruffly. He was a tall, well-made man with a calm face, cool eyes, and the reputation for speaking his mind. Several of Roger's friends couldn't stand Red, having been put in their places by him, but Roger held him in high esteem. «I've got Mark in bed as Roger will have told you. My assistant's likewise, right at the very worst time, which leaves me with a rushed and terribly important order to do on my own.» He seated himself again on his high stool. «I haven't even had time to read the paper yet!»

Ellis shuddered at the sight of the paper, opened at *the* page, lying where anybody could see it. «What if somebody sees you reading it?»

«Well, what if they do? I consider I've a perfect right to read it—and it's been the sole topic of conversation all the morning between our office boy and the racers, who are both middle-aged women! When it came over in the early news Mark worked out that if you count a life sentence as twentyfive years, he and I are up for about twenty thousand years each in gaol!»

«Yes, that's what sodomy carries», Red's tone would have been the same if he had been explaining his drawing, «extraordinary, isn't it?» He selected another pencil. «You'll excuse me, won't you. Come and see me again in a couple of weeks' time when I can be more sociable.» He looked at Ellis candidly. «I suppose you'll be spending the night with Roger, will you? Call in at our place to-morrow morning and have a cup of coffee with Mark; stay to lunch if you like.»

How could Red be so casual about it? Ellis winced as he began reading the paper after settling himself on a seat in the little square. They proposed abolishing hanging for a trial period, but wouldn't even try a let-up on the homosexuality laws. It was seen fit for criminal lunatics to be let out to kill again, but not for Roger and Ellis, who were neither killers nor lunatics, to be let out of the invisible cage that set them apart from the law-abiding community to which they aspired. He turned to the reports of the speeches, wherein homosexuals were likened to kleptomaniacs, rapists and others. «It's not true!» he murmured desperately, «It isn't true!»

«What's not true?»

Ellis didn't answer the voice from over his shoulder. Milk, sandwiches and paper went flying as he catapulted out of the seat, out of the square into the crowded lunch-time street, dodging down lanes and alleys, jostling, bumping, colliding, until he panted into the office and sat down at his desk trembling all over.

He tried to reason with himself that it might not have been 'Mr. Smith' behind him, or perhaps not even in the bus, but there was an inevitability about it, a kind of poetic unity with his being like he was and the ban not being lifted. Had Roger telephoned, Ellis in such a frame of mind would very likely have begged off the evening's engagement.

Roger did not ring up, however, and as the two stretched their legs during the concert interval Ellis's spirits were higher than for some days. After an exciting opening item they had heard Tschaiowsky's fourth symphony. Fate had menaced the composer with its ominous fanfares; but then, towards the end, Tschaiowsky had simply turned aside from it and the work had finished with hysterical joy and relief. Its optimism had entered Ellis's soul and he felt that he, too, could just turn aside... He would stay the night when Roger asked him, and talk his troubles over in bed.

The second half opened with Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz*. It was funny how the people at the inn became so worked up over the Devil's playing that when the nightingale began to sing they all thought it was the Demon Fiddler again and started dancing frantically! Well, funny in a spooky kind of way. While joining in the applause Ellis skipped through the notes on the last work, about to be given its maiden performance under its composer's direction. They abounded in technicalities, but did not convey much idea of the nature of the work itself. The composer bowed to the welcoming applause, faced the orchestra and lifted his baton.

The opening bars, suggesting that in style the work looked backward rather than forward, introduced a pastoral duet between clarinet and cor anglais. The melody, if a shade luscious, was haunting and nostalgic; it hardly needed the sketchy notes for Ellis to picture two animals grazing in idyllic surroundings, and as the music wrapped him around, to identify himself with them.

The flow of the melody was interrupted by a distant horn-call, then resumed as if the animals had looked up as animals do and then gone back to their grazing; Ellis had a vague feeling of unease. Another fragment of brass, louder this time and followed by an ominous rustling in the strings—after which the two woodwinds again resumed their love-song. Ellis found himself sitting upright. The horns were coming closer, punctuated now by the panicky quacking of the oboe and trills of alarm from the flutes and piccolo. Ellis broke into a sweat and gripped the arms of his seat. Now came the hunting calls again, but close at hand and all pushed up together into an exhilarating gallop, brassy, brilliant and cruel, pounding along towards their quarry, thundering on towards himself. He tried to shut his ears to the din, to think of something else. He looked at Roger, sitting back and letting the music pour over him like a waterfall; his other neighbour was doing the same.

The two woodwinds were now in full flight, but no matter where they turned in their frenzy they were headed off by the bark of a trumpet, the snap of a trombone. Had he been sitting at the end of the row Ellis would have run for it, but they were right in the middle; if it had been a dark cinema he would have gripped Roger's hand or buried his head in Roger's lap, but they were in a brilliantly-lighted hall. He put his hands to his ears to block out the dreadful sound, but it penetrated them as if they had been tissue-paper. At the end of the piece he was soaked in perspiration and his knees were so weak he could hardly follow Roger from the hall.

They hung their coats in the vestibule and as they entered the living-room Roger swept him into his arms and kissed him. Ellis returned the embrace with desperation. It was no good—this would have to be the last.

«Passionate, eh?» Roger laughed and squeezed him tighter before releasing him. «You'll stay the night, of course. Go and make some coffee and toast, love. I promised to give Mark a ring when we got home and tell him all about it.» Roger went into the bedroom.

In the kitchenette Ellis measured out the coffee and set the percolator on the stove to heat. He must go. With 'Mr. Smith' on his trail, to stay would be to bring danger to Roger; and that he must never do. But how to take his leave? Mechanically he reached for the toaster, unwound the flex and plugged it in. He couldn't pick a quarrel with Roger, he didn't know how. He cut some bread and replaced the loaf. Roger would be on the line for a while yet, if Mark were at the other end of it. His voice sounded faintly through the closed door as Ellis tiptoed past.

«... very impressive, really. The brass all came surging along and engulfed the two soloists, and to hear the clarinet squealing away up in the Woody Herman register was rather frightening! The critics'll blast it to hell as second-hand Richard Strauss, but it was extraordinarily gripping, as well as technically bril-

liant. The cor anglais was left all alone and the work ended with something like the opening theme played as an unaccompanied lament. Neither of us spoke a word all the way home.»

«Nice when a present's a success!» Mark's voice came over the wire. «How's Ellis?»

«I don't know, Mark, I'm worried about him. He's jumpy and furtive again like he was when I first met him, and I thought he was getting over that.»

«Could it have anything to do with the bill? I remember your saying he'd set his heart on their passing it.»

«Quite possibly. He's one of those people who tends to take the law at its word, you know. You could never imagine him smuggling, or flogging his income tax return, for instance.»

«Has he ever been in trouble? He sounds scared out of his wits to me. D'you think somebody's blackmailing him, perhaps?»

Roger felt a hot wave pass over him. «If there is, I'll murder them!»

«You sound as if you might, too!» Mark sounded more interested than shocked. «Would you, I wonder, if it came to the point?»

«I would for Ellis.» Roger said without hesitation; he thought for an instant over what he had said and knew he would, or would certainly attempt it, and be damned the consequences.

«Quite! What's one more risk?» Mark echoed when he told him. «I was only saying to Red this morning that what we're due for between us spoils the look of forty thousand years behind bars, so what's another life sentence?»

«What did Red say?»

«'Hurry up and get better, Sweetheart, I'm just rearin' to embark on my next quarter-century!' Why don't you propose to Ellis if you love him, and have him move in with you? You won't regret it! We never have.»

Red and Mark looked like a couple of churchwardens; an eavesdropper would never have believed his ears on hearing Red Mill quoted as making a saucy remark, even in the bedroom. Roger went to chuckle appreciatively, then didn't. «I do love him. I know he's timid, but we can't all be lions and tigers! There's something very sweet about him, Mark. And he pays his taxes and gives a day's work for a day's pay, as Red puts it (I know Red gives about three, but that's beside the point)—what more can you ask?»

This time it was Mark who chuckled. «I don't even ask as much! You'd think Red was conducting the export drive on his own, and for no extra pay that I know of. I could've gone out to-night, really, but he's got his heart set on completing this order on time so I lay low not to make things awkward. It was to be our anniversary treat, you see.»

«What, again? How long have you been together now?»

«Five years. Red was thirty-three last birth—»

«Just a minute.» Roger sniffed. «I can smell burning!» He laid the telephone down and opened the door. «Hey, Ellis, what's happening to the toast? That pop-up thing isn't working!» No answer. «Ellis!» Smoke was coming from the kitchen. «Ellis!»

Roger ran into the smoke-filled kitchen, switching off the toaster as he digested that the room was empty, as was the bathroom. He looked into the vestibule, missing a heartbeat as he saw the coat and scarf were absent. He rushed back to the bedroom. «Mark!» His voice had an edge of panic. «He's gone!»

Ellis closed the door quietly and ran softly downstairs. Halfway to the station he paused, irresolute. Where to? If he went to his room Roger would soon be there to see what the matter was. He must go away, and go now. He

became conscious of the distant roar of traffic as now and then a stray beam from the blazing lights of the big lorries pierced the first traces of mist. The Great West Road! He would go West, then; get a job in Bath or Bristol, or Cardiff, perhaps, write to his landlady, ask her to pack his suitcase and forward it. Hitch-hiking on the motorway was forbidden, but by going in that general direction he might pick up a ride in any of the lanes that fed it; the road by which he stood could be one of them. Dejectedly, he turned his back on the road which had led him to so much happiness and brought him in sight of love and security; and a figure lurking in the shadows moved off in stealthy pursuit.

Replacing the telephone, Roger snatched up his keys and slipped into an old plastic raincoat as he hurried out. Where had Ellis gone—and why, WHY? How little he actually knew of him. The ticket collector would know if he had been through the station; at that hour he might still be waiting there. Rounding a curve he stopped abruptly upon seeing the figure standing at the crossroads, his misery apparent even at a distance, and his heart cried to him. Ellis glanced around quickly and walked down the side-road. He had not seen him. Roger followed: did it matter what he knew about him? You couldn't play the field as long as he had without getting to know love when you saw it. Mark had been right, he would overtake him, bring him home where he belonged and invite him to stay there forever. But where was he going? A fatal impulse made him hang back to find out. The mist was starting to thicken. Up ahead Ellis was passing a policeman on his beat, then came the sudden hee-haw of a siren as he stepped off the pavement almost in front of a patrol-car. As Roger quickened his pace Ellis looked around and saw him. He bolted.

Ellis found his spirits falling with every step he took. Roger's face was before him; Roger's voice spoke to him; Roger's love called him back. But he couldn't go back, and besides . . . He looked around again. The man was following him, nothing surer. It was too misty now to see his features, but 'Mr. Smith' had always worn a plastic mac. He must have followed them from the concert. There could be no turning back now, to expose Roger to further danger. A policeman went sauntering by, but if he knew—or if somebody were to tell him—he could run one in. Ellis shuddered, then leapt into the air in sheer terror as the car siren blasted him from a few feet away, bringing to life the concert piece and the rout of the defenceless. Gaining the other side of the street he looked over his shoulder, only to see his pursuer break into a trot. It was 'Mr. Smith', he had no doubt of it now, and his only escape lay in headlong flight.

He ran around the next corner, and the next, but the running footsteps were coming nearer. The fiend was shouting at him to stop, calling him by name: «El-liss!» 'Mr. Smith' used to pronounce it as if it were spelt with double s. He couldn't hear what he was saying now, because of the noise of the traffic ahead.

Around another corner, and he was half-way down the street before seeing it was a cul-de-sac. The street had been blocked by the new motorway, from whose grass verge its tarred surface was now separated by a flower-bed and a railing. As the hunter bore down upon him Ellis crossed the bed, and borne upon the wings of fear vaulted over the ironwork. Closing a brief gap in the traffic a tanker was rumbling towards him, its lights, though diffused by the mist, throwing every blade of grass into sharp relief.

Ellis's fear left him. He looked calmly at the speeding tanker, then with split-second judgement, leapt to oblivion.

And to the ears of Roger, clinging for support to the railing as he recoiled from the sight of the ghastly thing lying where Ellis had jumped not a moment before, there came, as from far away, the desolate lament of a cor anglais.