

**CLASSICS TO GO**

# **MINCE PIE**



**CHRISTOPHER MORLEY**

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## ON FILLING AN INK-WELL

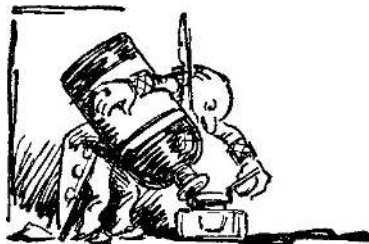
Those who buy their ink in little stone jugs may prefer to do so because the pottle reminds them of cruiskeen lawn or ginger beer (with its wire-bound cork), but they miss a noble delight. Ink should be bought in the tall, blue glass, quart bottle (with the ingenious non-drip spout), and once every three weeks or so, when you fill your ink-well, it is your privilege to elevate the flask against the brightness of a window, and meditate (with a breath of sadness) on the joys and problems that sacred fluid holds in solution.

How blue it shines toward the light! Blue as lupin or larkspur, or cornflower—aye, and even so blue art thou, my scriven, to think how far the written page falls short of the bright ecstasy of thy dream! In the bottle, what magnificence of unpenned stuff lies cool and liquid: what fluency of essay, what fonts of song. As the bottle glints, blue as a squill or a hyacinth, blue as the meadows of Elysium or the eyes of girls loved by young poets, meseems the racing pen might almost gain upon the thoughts that are turning the bend in the road. A jolly throng, those thoughts: I can see them talking and laughing together. But when pen reaches the road's turning, the thoughts are gone far ahead: their delicate figures are silhouettes against the sky.

It is a sacramental matter, this filling the ink-well. Is there a writer, however humble, who has not poured into his writing pot, with the ink, some wistful hopes or prayers for what may emerge from that dark source? Is there not some particular reverence due the ink-well, some form of propitiation to humbug the powers of evil and constraint

that devil the journalist? Satan hovers near the ink-pot. Luther solved the matter by throwing the well itself at the apparition. That savors to me too much of homeopathy. If Satan ever puts his face over my desk, I shall hurl a volume of Harold Bell Wright at him.

But what becomes of the ink-pots of glory? The conduit from which Boswell drew, for Charles Dilly in *The Poultry*, the great river of his Johnson? The well (was it of blue china?) whence flowed *Dream Children: a Revery*? (It was written on folio ledger sheets from the East India House—I saw the manuscript only yesterday in a room at Daylesford, Pennsylvania, where much of the richest ink of the last two centuries is lovingly laid away.) The pot of chuckling fluid where Harry Fielding dipped his pen to tell the history of a certain foundling; the ink-wells of the Café de la Source



on the Boul' Mich'—do they by any chance remember which it was that R.L.S. used? One of the happiest tremors of my life was when I went to that café and called for a bock and writing material, just because R.L.S. had once written letters there. And the ink-well Poe used at that boarding-house in Greenwich Street, New York (April, 1844), when he wrote to his dear Muddy (his mother-in-law) to describe how he and Virginia had reached a haven of square meals. That hopeful letter, so perfect now in pathos—

For breakfast we had excellent-flavored coffee, hot and strong—not very clear and no great deal of cream—veal cutlets, elegant ham and eggs and nice bread

and butter. I never sat down to a more plentiful or a nicer breakfast. I wish you could have seen the eggs—and the great dishes of meat. Sis [his wife] is delighted, and we are both in excellent spirits. She has coughed hardly any and had no night sweat. She is now busy mending my pants, which I tore against a nail. I went out last night and bought a skein of silk, a skein of thread, two buttons, a pair of slippers, and a tin pan for the stove. The fire kept in all night. We have now got four dollars and a half left. To-morrow I am going to try and borrow three dollars, so that I may have a fortnight to go upon. I feel in excellent spirits, and haven't drank a drop—so that I hope soon to get out of trouble.

Yes, let us clear the typewriter off the table: an ink-well is a sacred thing.

Do you ever stop to think, when you see the grimy spattered desks of a public post-office, how many eager or puzzled human hearts have tried, in those dingy little ink-cups, to set themselves right with fortune? What blissful meetings have been appointed, what scribblings of pain and sorrow, out of those founts of common speech. And the ink-wells on hotel counters—does not the public dipping place of the Bellevue Hotel, Boston, win a new dignity in my memory when I know (as I learned lately) that Rupert Brooke registered there in the spring of 1914? I remember, too, a certain pleasant vibration when, signing my name one day in the Bellevue's book, I found Miss Agnes Repplier's autograph a little above on the same page.

Among our younger friends, Vachel Lindsay comes to mind as one who has done honor to the ink-well. His *Apology for the Bottle Volcanic* is in his best flow of secret smiling (save an unfortunate dilution of Riley):

Sometimes I dip my pen and find the bottle full of fire,

The salamanders flying forth I cannot but admire....  
O sad deceiving ink, as bad as liquor in its way—  
All demons of a bottle size have pranced from you to-day,  
And seized my pen for hobby-horse as witches ride a  
broom,  
And left a trail of brimstone words and blots and gobs of  
gloom.  
And yet when I am extra good ... [*here I omit the  
transfusion of Riley*]  
My bottle spreads a rainbow mist, and from the vapor fine  
Ten thousand troops from fairyland come riding in a line.

I suppose it is the mark of a trifling mind, yet I like to hear of the little particulars that surrounded those whose pens struck sparks. It is Boswell that leads us into that habit of thought. I like to know what the author wore, how he sat, what the furniture of his desk and chamber, who cooked his meals for him, and with what appetite he approached them. "The mind soars by an effort to the grand and lofty" (so dipped Hazlitt in some favored ink-bottle)—"it is at home in the groveling, the disagreeable, and the little."

I like to think, as I look along book shelves, that every one of these favorites was born out of an ink-well. I imagine the hopes and visions that thronged the author's mind as he filled his pot and sliced the quill. What various fruits have flowed from those ink-wells of the past: for some, comfort and honor, quiet homes and plenteousness; for others, bitterness and disappointment. I have seen a copy of Poe's poems, published in 1845 by Putnam, inscribed by the author. The volume had been bought for \$2,500. Think what that would have meant to Poe himself.

Some such thoughts as these twinkled in my head as I held up the Pierian bottle against the light, admired the

deep blue of it, and filled my ink-well. And then I took up my pen, which wrote:

## **A GRACE BEFORE WRITING**

### On Filling an Ink-well

This is a sacrament, I think!  
Holding the bottle toward the light,  
As blue as lupin gleams the ink:  
May Truth be with me as I write!

That small dark cistern may afford  
Reunion with some vanished friend,—  
And with this ink I have just poured  
May none but honest words be penned!

# OLD THOUGHTS FOR CHRISTMAS



A new thought for Christmas? Who ever wanted a new thought for Christmas? That man should be shot who would try to brain one. It is an impertinence even to write about Christmas. Christmas is a matter that humanity has taken so deeply to heart that we will not have our festival meddled with by bungling hands. No efficiency expert would dare tell us that Christmas is inefficient; that the clockwork toys will soon be broken; that no one can eat a peppermint cane a yard long; that the curves on our chart of kindness should be ironed out so that the "peak load" of December would be evenly distributed through the year. No sourface dare tell us that we drive postmen and shopgirls into Bolshevism by overtaxing them with our frenzied purchasing or that it is absurd to send to a friend in a steam-heated apartment in a prohibition republic a bright little picture card of a gentleman in Georgian costume drinking ale by a roaring fire of logs. None in his senses, I say, would emit such sophistries, for Christmas is a law unto itself and is not conducted by card-index. Even the



postmen and shopgirls, severe though their labors, would not have matters altered. There is none of us who does not enjoy hardship and bustle that contribute to the happiness of others.

There is an efficiency of the heart that transcends and contradicts that of the head. Things of the spirit differ from things material in that the more you give the more you have. The comedian has an immensely better time than the audience. To modernize the adage, to give is more fun than to receive. Especially if you have wit enough to give to those who don't expect it. Surprise is the most primitive joy of humanity. Surprise is the first reason for a baby's laughter. And at Christmas time, when we are all a little childish I hope, surprise is the flavor of our keenest joys. We all remember the thrill with which we once heard, behind some closed door, the rustle and crackle of paper parcels being tied up. We knew that we were going to be surprised—a delicious refinement and luxuriant seasoning of the emotion!

Christmas, then, conforms to this deeper efficiency of the heart. We are not methodical in kindness; we do not "fill orders" for consignments of affection. We let our kindness ramble and explore; old forgotten friendships pop up in our minds and we mail a card to Harry Hunt, of Minneapolis (from whom we have not heard for half a dozen years), "just to surprise him." A business man who shipped a carload of goods to a customer, just to surprise him, would soon perish of abuse. But no one ever refuses a shipment of kindness, because no one ever feels overstocked with it. It is coin of the realm, current everywhere. And we do not try to measure our kindnesses to the capacity of our friends. Friendship is not measurable in calories. How many times this year have you "turned" your stock of kindness?

It is the gradual approach to the Great Surprise that lends full savor to the experience. It has been thought by some that Christmas would gain in excitement if no one knew when it was to be; if (keeping the festival within the winter months) some public functionary (say, Mr. Burluson) were to announce some unexpected morning, "A week from to-day will be Christmas!" Then what a scurrying and joyful frenzy—what a festooning of shops and mad purchasing of presents! But it would not be half the fun of the slow approach of the familiar date. All through November and December we watch it drawing nearer; we see the shop windows begin to glow with red and green and lively colors; we note the altered demeanor of bellboys and janitors as the Date flows quietly toward us; we pass through the haggard perplexity of "Only Four Days More" when we suddenly realize it is too late to make our shopping the display of lucid affectionate reasoning we had contemplated, and clutch wildly at grotesque tokens—and then (sweetest of all) comes the quiet calmness of Christmas Eve. Then, while we decorate the tree or carry parcels of tissue paper and red ribbon to a carefully prepared list of aunts and godmothers, or reckon up a little pile of bright quarters on the dining-room table in preparation for to-morrow's largesse—then it is that the brief, poignant and precious sweetness of the experience claims us at the full. Then we can see that all our careful wisdom and shrewdness were folly and stupidity; and we can understand the meaning of that Great Surprise—that where we planned wealth we found ourselves poor; that where we thought to be impoverished we were enriched. The world is built upon a lovely plan if we take time to study the blue-prints of the heart.

Humanity must be forgiven much for having invented Christmas. What does it matter that a great poet and philosopher urges "the abandonment of the masculine

pronoun in allusions to the First or Fundamental Energy"? Theology is not saddled upon pronouns; the best doctrine is but three words, God is Love. Love, or kindness, is fundamental energy enough to satisfy any brooder. And Christmas Day means the birth of a child; that is to say, the triumph of life and hope over suffering.

Just for a few hours on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day the stupid, harsh mechanism of the world runs down and we permit ourselves to live according to untrammelled common sense, the unconquerable efficiency of good will. We grant ourselves the complete and selfish pleasure of loving others better than ourselves. How odd it seems, how unnaturally happy we are! We feel there must be some mistake, and rather yearn for the familiar frictions and distresses. Just for a few hours we "purge out of every heart the lurking grudge." We know then that hatred is a form of illness; that suspicion and pride are only fear; that the rascally acts of others are perhaps, in the queer webwork of human relations, due to some calousness of our own. Who knows? Some man may have robbed a bank in Nashville or fired a gun in Louvain because we looked so intolerably smug in Philadelphia!

So at Christmas we tap that vast reservoir of wisdom and strength—call it efficiency or the fundamental energy if you will—Kindness. And our kindness, thank heaven, is not the placid kindness of angels; it is veined with human blood; it is full of absurdities, irritations, frustrations. A man 100 per cent. kind would be intolerable. As a wise teacher said, the milk of human kindness easily curdles into cheese. We like our friends' affections because we know the tincture of mortal acid is in them. We remember the satirist who remarked that to love one's self is the beginning of a lifelong romance. We know this lifelong romance will resume its sway; we shall lose our tempers, be obstinate,

peevish and crank. We shall fidget and fume while waiting our turn in the barber's chair; we shall argue and muddle and mope. And yet, for a few hours, what a happy vision that was! And we turn, on Christmas Eve, to pages which those who speak our tongue immortally associate with the season—the pages of Charles Dickens. Love of humanity endures as long as the thing it loves, and those pages are packed as full of it as a pound cake is full of fruit. A pound cake will keep moist three years; a sponge cake is dry in three days.

And now humanity has its most beautiful and most appropriate Christmas gift—Peace. The Magi of Versailles and Washington having unwound for us the tissue paper and red ribbon (or red tape) from this greatest of all gifts, let us in days to come measure up to what has been born through such anguish and horror. If war is illness and peace is health, let us remember also that health is not merely a blessing to be received intact once and for all. It is not a substance but a condition, to be maintained only by sound régime, self-discipline and simplicity. Let the Wise Men not be too wise; let them remember those other Wise Men who, after their long journey and their sage surmisings, found only a Child. On this evening it serves us nothing to pile up filing cases and rolltop desks toward the stars, for in our city square the Star itself has fallen, and shines upon the Tree.

# CHRISTMAS CARDS

By a stroke of good luck we found a little shop where a large overstock of Christmas cards was selling at two for five. The original 5's and 10's were still penciled on them, and while we were debating whether to rub them off a thought occurred to us. When will artists and printers design us some Christmas cards that will be honest and appropriate to the time we live in? Never was the Day of Peace and Good Will so full of meaning as this year; and never did the little cards, charming as they were, seem so formal, so merely pretty, so devoid of imagination, so inadequate to the festival.

This is an age of strange and stirring beauty, of extraordinary romance and adventure, of new joys and pains. And yet our Christmas artists have nothing more to offer us than the old formalism of Yuletide convention. After a considerable amount of searching in the bazaars we have found not one Christmas card that showed even a glimmering of the true romance, which is to see the beauty or wonder or peril that lies around us. Most of the cards hark back to the stage-coach up to its hubs in snow, or the blue bird, with which Maeterlinck penalized us (what has a blue bird got to do with Christmas?), or the open fireplace and jug of mulled claret. Now these things are merry enough in their way, or they were once upon a time; but we plead for an honest romanticism in Christmas cards that will express something of the entrancing color and circumstance that surround us to-day. Is not a commuter's train, stalled in a drift, far more lively to our hearts than the mythical stage-coach? Or an inter-urban trolley winging its way through the dusk like a casket of golden light? Or

even a country flivver, loaded down with parcels and holly and the Yuletide keg of root beer? Root beer may be but meager flaggonage compared to mulled claret, but at any rate 'tis honest, 'tis actual, 'tis tangible and potable. And where, among all the Christmas cards, is the airplane, that most marvelous and heart-seizing of all our triumphs? Where is the stately apartment house, looming like Gibraltar against a sunset sky? Must we, even at Christmas time, fool ourselves with a picturesqueness that is gone, seeing nothing of what is around us?

It is said that man's material achievements have outrun his imagination; that poets and painters are too puny to grapple with the world as it is. Certainly a visitor from another sphere, looking on our fantastic and exciting civilization, would find little reflection of it in the Christmas card. He would find us clinging desperately to what we have been taught to believe was picturesque and jolly, and afraid to assert that the things of to-day are comely too. Even on the basis of discomfort (an acknowledged criterion of picturesqueness) surely a trolley car jammed with parcel-laden passengers is just as satisfying a spectacle as any stage coach? Surely the steam radiator, if not so lovely as a flame-gilded hearth, is more real to most of us? And instead of the customary picture of shivering subjects of George III held up by a highwayman on Hampstead Heath, why not a deftly delineated sketch of victims in a steam-heated lobby submitting to the plunder of the hat-check bandit? Come, let us be honest! The romance of to-day is as good as any!

Many must have felt this same uneasiness in trying to find Christmas cards that would really say something of what is in their hearts. The sentiment behind the card is as lovely and as true as ever, but the cards themselves are outmoded bottles for the new wine. It seems a cruel thing

to say, but we are impatient with the mottoes and pictures we see in the shops because they are a conventional echo of a beauty that is past. What could be more absurd than to send to a friend in a city apartment a rhyme such as this:

As round the Christmas fire you sit  
And hear the bells with frosty chime,  
Think, friendship that long love has knit  
Grows sweeter still at Christmas time!

If that is sent to the janitor or the elevator boy we have no cavil, for these gentlemen do actually see a fire and hear bells ring; but the apartment tenant hears naught but the hissing of the steam in the radiator, and counts himself lucky to hear that. Why not be honest and say to him:

I hope the janitor has shipped  
You steam, to keep the cold away;  
And if the hallboys have been tipped,  
Then joy be thine on Christmas Day!

We had not meant to introduce this jocular note into our meditation, for we are honestly aggrieved that so many of the Christmas cards hark back to an old tradition that is gone, and never attempt to express any of the romance of to-day. You may protest that Christmas is the oldest thing in the world, which is true; yet it is also new every year, and never newer than now.

# ON UNANSWERING LETTERS



There are a great many people who really believe in answering letters the day they are received, just as there are people who go to the movies at 9 o'clock in the morning; but these people are stunted and queer.

It is a great mistake. Such crass and breathless promptness takes away a great deal of the pleasure of correspondence.

The psychological didoes involved in receiving letters and making up one's mind to answer them are very complex. If the tangled process could be clearly analyzed and its component involutions isolated for inspection we might reach a clearer comprehension of that curious bag of tricks, the efficient Masculine Mind.

Take Bill F., for instance, a man so delightful that even to contemplate his existence puts us in good humor and makes us think well of a world that can exhibit an individual equally comely in mind, body and estate. Every now and then we get a letter from Bill, and immediately we pass into a kind of trance, in which our mind rapidly enunciates the ideas, thoughts, surmises and contradictions that we would like to write to him in reply. We think what fun it would be to sit right down and churn the ink-well,



spreading speculation and cynicism over a number of sheets of foolscap to be wafted Billward.

Sternly we repress the impulse for we know that the shock to Bill of getting so immediate a retort would surely unhinge the well-fitted panels of his intellect.

We add his letter to the large delta of unanswered mail on our desk, taking occasion to turn the mass over once or twice and run through it in a brisk, smiling mood, thinking of all the jolly letters we shall write some day.

After Bill's letter has lain on the pile for a fortnight or so it has been gently silted over by about twenty other pleasantly postponed manuscripts. Coming upon it by chance, we reflect that any specific problems raised by Bill in that manifesto will by this time have settled themselves. And his random speculations upon household management and human destiny will probably have taken a new slant by now, so that to answer his letter in its own tune will not be congruent with his present fevers. We had better bide a wee until we really have something of circumstance to impart.

We wait a week.

By this time a certain sense of shame has begun to invade the privacy of our brain. We feel that to answer that letter now would be an indelicacy. Better to pretend that we never got it. By and by Bill will write again and then we will answer promptly. We put the letter back in the middle of the heap and think what a fine chap Bill is. But he knows we love him, so it doesn't really matter whether we write or not.

Another week passes by, and no further communication from Bill. We wonder whether he does love us as much as we thought. Still—we are too proud to write and ask.

A few days later a new thought strikes us. Perhaps Bill thinks we have died and he is annoyed because he wasn't invited to the funeral. Ought we to wire him? No, because after all we are not dead, and even if he thinks we are, his subsequent relief at hearing the good news of our survival will outweigh his bitterness during the interval. One of these days we will write him a letter that will really express our heart, filled with all the grindings and gear-work of our mind, rich in affection and fallacy. But we had better let it ripen and mellow for a while. Letters, like wines, accumulate bright fumes and bubblings if kept under cork.

Presently we turn over that pile of letters again. We find in the lees of the heap two or three that have gone for six months and can safely be destroyed. Bill is still on our mind, but in a pleasant, dreamy kind of way. He does not ache or twinge us as he did a month ago. It is fine to have old friends like that and keep in touch with them. We wonder how he is and whether he has two children or three. Splendid old Bill!

By this time we have written Bill several letters in imagination and enjoyed doing so, but the matter of sending him an actual letter has begun to pall. The thought no longer has the savor and vivid sparkle it had once. When one feels like that it is unwise to write. Letters should be spontaneous outpourings: they should never be undertaken merely from a sense of duty. We know that Bill wouldn't want to get a letter that was dictated by a feeling of obligation.

Another fortnight or so elapsing, it occurs to us that we have entirely forgotten what Bill said to us in that letter. We take it out and con it over. Delightful fellow! It is full of his own felicitous kinks of whim, though some of it sounds a little old-fashioned by now. It seems a bit stale, has lost some of its freshness and surprise. Better not answer it just

yet, for Christmas will soon be here and we shall have to write then anyway. We wonder, can Bill hold out until Christmas without a letter?

We have been rereading some of those imaginary letters to Bill that have been dancing in our head. They are full of all sorts of fine stuff. If Bill ever gets them he will know how we love him. To use O. Henry's immortal joke, we have days of Damon and Knights of Pythias writing those uninked letters to Bill. A curious thought has come to us. Perhaps it would be better if we never saw Bill again. It is very difficult to talk to a man when you like him so much. It is much easier to write in the sweet fantastic strain. We are so inarticulate when face to face. If Bill comes to town we will leave word that we have gone away. Good old Bill! He will always be a precious memory.

A few days later a sudden frenzy sweeps over us, and though we have many pressing matters on hand, we mobilize pen and paper and literary shock troops and prepare to hurl several battalions at Bill. But, strangely enough, our utterance seems stilted and stiff. We have nothing to say. *My dear Bill, we begin, it seems a long time since we heard from you. Why don't you write? We still love you, in spite of all your shortcomings.*

That doesn't seem very cordial. We muse over the pen and nothing comes. Bursting with affection, we are unable to say a word.

Just then the phone rings. "Hello?" we say.

It is Bill, come to town unexpectedly.

"Good old fish!" we cry, ecstatic. "Meet you at the corner of Tenth and Chestnut in five minutes."

We tear up the unfinished letter. Bill will never know how much we love him. Perhaps it is just as well. It is very embarrassing to have your friends know how you feel about them. When we meet him we will be a little bit on our guard. It would not be well to be betrayed into any extravagance of cordiality.

And perhaps a not altogether false little story could be written about a man who never visited those most dear to him, because it panged him so to say good-bye when he had to leave.