

# A proper meal— at the proper time

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ETHEL MANNIN

THE PRISONER on remand had written me that, in reply to my kind inquiry as to what I might bring him when I visited him, the following were permitted: cigarettes, periodicals, books, food. But as to the food, he wrote, it had to be a complete meal; that is to say, sandwiches, for example, would not be permitted, but a roast chicken would—not, he hastened to add, that he was suggesting I should bring that; cigarettes and some good reading were what he really longed for, and if I could possibly manage a pair of socks . . . and a pound of sugar.

I went shopping for him on the way to the prison and got him 100 cigarettes, which I reckoned should last him up to the time of his trial, three Conrads in a uniform edition, very nice, a couple of pairs of socks, a pound of sugar, and half a roast chicken.

After being sent to the wrong part of the prison and then marched back again by an officer who seemed to think it was all my fault I was then taken by another officer to the right part. Here I waited for 20 minutes because there were apparently two remand prisoners of the same name and they'd gone first after the wrong one. I was asked if I was the prisoner's wife. I said no, just a friend. After all he did

burgle my house seven years ago and we'd been in touch all through his preventive detention, and if that doesn't add up to friendship what does?

The prisoner, the right one, was finally produced, looking as spruce as he'd always been, even "inside," but this time slightly abashed at being in trouble again. It was a couple of housebreaking jobs again, it seemed, just like last time. He seemed depressed, both at his fall from grace after only a few months of freedom, and at the prospect of probably another long stretch. To cheer him a little I told him I'd brought him all the things he'd asked for, including the socks and sugar and half a roast chicken. He said it was good of me and I was inclined to agree. I was not allowed to give him the things in person but told to leave them at the office on my way out.

At the office by the enormous iron gates they sent me back across the yard and along a corridor to the food room. The officer in charge commanded me, brusquely, to "turn 'em out," and I handed him the three Conrads to start off with.

"He can't have those," he declared.

"He's on remand," I explained. "He's allowed books."

"Only paper-backs," he said, and picked up the sugar.

"What's this? Sugar?"

"He asked me to bring it."

"He can buy it for himself. Socks? Is he wearing his own clothes?"

"He's on remand," I repeated.

He looked doubtfully at the socks, dangling them, then pitched them into the basket along with the cigarettes and the two double-decker Sundays.

"That the lot?"

"There's half a roast chicken," I said, indicating it.

"He can't have that. It's not on a plate. It has to be a proper meal — on a plate."

I said, "I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

He looked at me, pityingly.

"Yer know what a proper meal is, don't yer? A bit of cold meat isn't a proper meal, is it? It 'as to 'ave things to go with it, don't it?"

The penny dropped. Meat and two veg., of course. Anything else, fish and chips, eggs and bacon, cold chicken and salad, was *improper*. See Regulation XYZ, Form 1146(a).

"Yes, of course," I said. "I see what you mean. If I go out and buy a plate and some potato salad and tomatoes, would that do?"

He pushed the half-chicken in its greaseproof paper back to me across the counter.

"*Things to go with it, and on a plate,*" he repeated, in the italicised tones of one dealing with an imbecile or a foreigner.

I put the chicken back into my bag and went back along the corridor and across the yard and

waited at the office for the small gate, let into one of the two great gates, to be unlocked.

Then out again into the roaring street and an icy wind and a search in a strange district for a shop that would sell me a plate, a delicatessen at which to buy the potato salad, and a greengrocer's. I found all three eventually, after passing innumerable cheap-furniture shops, sweet shops, dress shops, hair-dressers', every kind of shop except the kind I was looking for. The wind harassed and the traffic roared and everything seemed difficult and hostile. It all took quite a time, but in the end all was achieved, and in the road leading up to the prison I stopped by a wall and got out the plate, put the chicken on it, and a few of the tomatoes, emptied the carton of potato salad on to the other side of the plate, covered it all with the greaseproof paper in which the chicken had been wrapped, and then holding the plate pressed against my side in an effort to prevent the wind whipping off the paper, steered a difficult course for the main gates of the prison. A huge van was just entering and I followed in behind it. I was well on the way to the food room when I was called back. I explained that I had come back with a proper meal, on a plate, as instructed. For a prisoner on remand.

"You're too late," the officer said, harshly. "The time for bringing meals is ha'pass ten in the morning. Ha'pass ten to eleven. The food room is closed now. You must come *at the proper time.*"

He whipped a leaflet off a table just inside the office.

"This'll explain to yer."

*No. 1146(a) Relatives and Friends,  
Notes for the Guidance of. Untried  
prisoners, meals supplied to.*

All the same it didn't say anything about a plate, though if I'd known I could have taken a bottle of stout as well, with the proper meal at the proper time.

In giving permission to reproduce the above, Miss Mannin writes:

"All the dialogue is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but the ending of the article is fantasy for I didn't in fact go out and buy the plate and the things-to-go-with, though I had suggested to the officer in charge of the Food Room that I should do this: to which he replied that *ar-pass* ten was the Proper Time for handing in a Proper Meal. It is one thing, I feel to indulge in a little fantasy to round off a newspaper story, but another thing when the story is reproduced in a Journal probably read by the very officers concerned—both those at the office and the officer in charge of the Food Room would know that I didn't in fact come back, but just sighed and said it would be easier to take the chicken home and eat it myself—which I did . . ."

"At the time" (she adds) "I could have cried with frustration and exasperation, but afterwards I thought it really rather funny, especially the demand 'didn't I know what a Proper Meal was' so that I found myself thinking of the many *improper* meals I'd had . . ."

Incidentally, the prisoner in question had burgled Miss Mannin's home in 1953 and received 7 years

P.D. for his pains. The late Mr. Reginald Reynolds (Miss Mannin's husband) kept in touch with the man and after his death Miss Mannin herself continued to take an interest in the burglar. When he was discharged she helped to get him a job and in April of this year, when he was again in trouble, she went to the Middlesex Sessions and spoke for him.

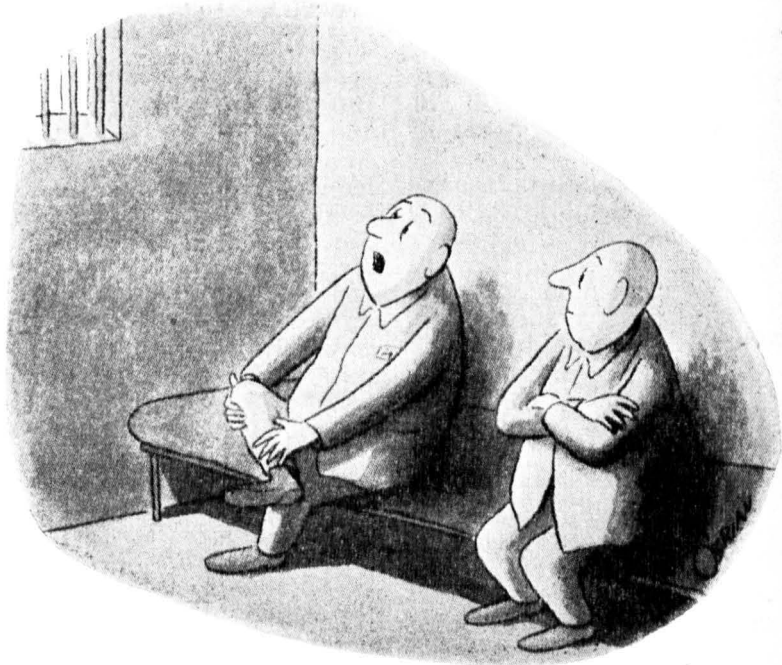
Earlier in the story, the burglar, when told he had burgled an author's home, was very distressed and told Mr. Reynolds that had he known he would have "refrained" being an author himself, having published a book before the war. One of the things he stole was a suit belonging to Mr. Reynolds which had been an Irish tweed given him by his wife. On hearing this the prisoner, then in Parkhurst and having received a little money from his mother's estate, sent Miss Mannin ten pounds to buy another length of tweed. When Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds visited the man, Mr. Reynolds wore the new suit and said, "If you ever go wrong again I won't want to wear it", to which the burglar replied "In that case you can wear it till it drops off you!" When Mr. Reynolds died, his wife had the suit remodelled into one for herself and she received the same assurance from the burglar—but "Alas",—says Miss Mannin.

The story ended in April when the burglar was placed on probation for three years (he had been expecting 14 years P.D.) and Miss Mannin found herself in the headlines—"Ethel Mannin and the Old Lag," "Novelist. Pleads for Man who Robbed Her," etc. She concludes her letter with some caustic comment on the "trash press."

Mr. Reginald Reynolds, a Quaker, wrote a weekly satirical poem in the *New Statesman* and among his other works was the autobiographical *My Life and Crimes* wherein is the story of how he spent a week in Exeter Prison during the war, on principle, rather than pay a fine for riding a bicycle without a light on a bright moonlight winter's morning. A few weeks later the Governor was visiting Mr. Reynolds in hospital (outside). This time Mr. Reynolds had been riding a bicycle (with a light) and come a cropper. This story is also told by Miss

Mannin in her autobiography *Brief Voices*.

Both Miss Mannin and Mr. Reynolds have maintained an interest in prison matters; he compiled an anthology of Prison Literature some years ago while she, who started her literary life on the old theatrical paper *The Pelican* in 1918, is probably as well known for *Common Sense and the Adolescent* (1931) as for her fiction, travel, memoirs and children's books. She has been a visitor at Aylesbury, Holloway, Brixton, Wandsworth, Parkhurst, Exeter.



*"It was just a small branch bank. My wife  
and I have simple tastes."*

Drawing by O'Brian.

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*"We've uncovered a whole mass of new evidence, Wilkins. Unfortunately, it proves conclusively that you're guilty."*

Drawing by Whitney Darrow, Jr.  
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