

George Augustus Sala

The Tyranny of Pie

Pie—the national scourge and the national glory, the quintessentially American obsession that has worked its way into countless song titles and proverbial expressions—finds an appropriate chronicler in George Augustus Sala (1828–1895), a prolific British journalist who brought a colorful and bombastic style to his coverage of the American scene.



Almost everything that I behold in this wonderful country bears traces of improvement and reform—everything except Pie. The national manners have become softened—the men folk chew less, expectorate less, curse less; *the newspapers are not half so scurrilous as our own**; the Art idea is becoming rapidly developed; culture is made more and more manifest; even “intensity” in æsthetics is beginning to be heard of and Agnosticism and other “isms” too numerous to mention find exponents in “Society,” and the one absorbing and sickening topic of conversation is no longer the Almighty Dollar—but to the tyranny of Pie there is no surcease. It is a Fetish. It is Bohwani. It is the Mexican carnage god Huitchlipotchli, continually demanding fresh victims. It is Moloch. Men may come and men may go; the Grant “Boom” may be succeeded by the Garfield “Boom;” but Pie goes on for ever. The tramp and the scallawag, in pants of looped and windowed raggedness, hunger for Pie, and impetuously demand nickel cents wherewith to purchase it; and the President of the United States, amid the chastened splendour of the White House, can enjoy no more festive fare. The day before we left New York one of the ripest scholars, the most influential journalists (on

*The modern American press seems to me to offend only against good taste in their omnivorous appetite of interviewing celebrated or notorious individuals (and the interviewing nuisance has become common enough in England), and in their fondness for filling their columns with brief personalities sometimes very quaint, but usually almost childishly frivolous and quite harmless.

the Democratic side) the brightest wits and most genial companions in the States lunched with us. He would drink naught but Château Yquem; but he partook twice, and in amazing profusion of Pumpkin Pie. They gave me Pie at the Brevoort, and I am now fresh from the consumption of Pie at the Mount Vernon, Baltimore. Two more aristocratic hotels are not to be found on this continent. I battled strongly against this dyspepsia-dealing pastry at first; but a mulatto waiter held me with his glittering eye, and I yielded as though I had been a two-years child. The worst of this dreadful pie—be it of apple, of pumpkin, of mulberry, or of cranberry—is that it is so very nice. It is made delusively flat and thin, so that you can cut it into conveniently-sized triangular wedges, which slip down easily. Pardon this digression; but Pie really forms as important a factor in American civilisation as the *pot-au-feu* does in France. There is no dish at home by which we nationally stand or fall. The “roast beef of Old England” sounds very well to the strains of Mr. Dan Godfrey’s band at a dinner at the Freemason’s Tavern; but sirloin of beef is fourteen pence a pound, and there are hundreds of thousands of labouring English people who never taste roast beef from year’s end to year’s end—save when they happen to get into gaol or into the workhouse at Christmastide.