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# On Monopolies, Fine Dining and Feeding the Masses in California's First Gilded Age

"Earth & Table" Law Reporter



Every generation tackles old problems anew. Abject homelessness, “radicalized” socialists, tyrant capitalists, gilded-age life-styles and monopolistic practices may seem like current news, but they

were omnipresent in the first Gilded Age in California, circa the 1890s.

A “naturalistic” writer, Frank Norris, surveyed this landscape through his novel *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901). Its themes revolve around the railroad systems’ ability to exercise cartel control over California ranchers and farmers by the late 19th century. While some of *The Octopus*’s story lines are hackneyed and musty well over a century later, it vividly describes what people ate and drank in detail—a tribute to Norris’s reportorial talents.

Out of this stratified social maelstrom, the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 emerged. Its simple and elegant formulation—declaring illegal every contract, combination or conspiracy in restraint of trade—is arguably the most important innovation in United States law regulating commerce. Its initial justification can be found in the very foodstuffs that Americans ate—or could not eat—before the turn of the 20th century.

### *The “Man with a Hoe”*

“At the Salon of 1863, *Man with a Hoe* caused a storm of controversy. The man in the picture was considered brutish and frightening by Parisian

bourgeoisie. The Industrial Revolution had caused a steady exodus from French farms, and *Man with a Hoe* was interpreted as a socialist protest about the peasant's plight. Though his paintings were judged in political terms, Millet declared that he was neither a socialist nor an agitator."<sup>[1]</sup>

Jean-François Millet's masterpiece, *L'homme à la houe*, takes center stage in *The Octopus*. That painting hangs in the salon of a fictional wealthy industrialist family, the Cedarquists, probably alongside other Barbizon School paintings by Corot or Daubigny.

In real life, *Man with a Hoe* was owned by Mrs. Will H. Crocker. She heralds from one of the "Big Four" California families whose powerhouse fortunes financed the construction of magnificent Nob Hill mansions. Jointly, they owned the Central Pacific Railroad, the western portion of America's first intercontinental railroad. Leland Stanford, Collis Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker preferred to be known as "The Associates."

The Hopkins mansion on Nob Hill—long since consumed by fire and supplanted by a hotel bearing its name—is the fictional setting for the most sumptuous dinner recorded in *The Octopus*. Through Presley, the novel's primary narrator—a "radicalized" poet—you occupy a catbird's seat at a dinner party with the Gerard's, a railroad baron family living large in America's first gilded age. To understand the significance of that meal in Presley's mind's eye, a short historical diversion sets the table.

To stoke westward expansion, the U.S.A. doled out government land grants in checkerboard fashion to settlers and railroads (backed by Wall Street financiers). Routes west into California and its vast central plains and valleys, irrigated from the snowfalls of the Sierras, are a coveted hallowed ground. Alfred Bierstadt's *View of Donner Lake* captures the prevailing idyll, a new Garden of Eden.<sup>[2]</sup> The Central Pacific Railroad already traverses Donner Pass when Bierstadt's painting is commissioned by Collis Huntington in 1871 and completed two years later.

Settlers quickly arrive to claim the land grant sections reserved for them. Before rail lines are built, railroad companies encourage these pioneers to take advantage of their alternating sections as well. Circulars offer attractive prices down the line for those who purchase the railroad's plots of land, with assurances that ranchers and farmers won't be assessed a higher price based on any of their own capital improvements. Once suckered into these arrangements, railroads renege and extract monopoly prices—as only true monopolists can, per Economics 101. When the dust settles, railroads seem to have everybody over a barrel.

*What is the "Octopus"*

In the opening chapter of *The Octopus*, a single locomotive roars down the railroad line separating the sprawling Quien Sabe Rancho from its neighbor, El Rancho De Los Muertos, even more spacious. Nearby Presley is on a quixotic rambling journey by bike and on foot through this then San Joaquin wheat farming region. While circumnavigating the territory, he's been self-absorbed trying to compose an epic poem he calls the *Song of the West*. His romantic visions butt up against brutish reality. As he's crossing between ranch boundaries, he meets the Octopus face-to-face:

He had only time to jump back upon the embankment when, with a quivering of all the earth, a locomotive, single, unattached, shot by him with a roar, filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks; its enormous eye, Cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance, shooting by in a sudden crash of confused thunder; filling the night with the terrific clamour of its iron hoofs.

This is his nemesis, a mortal enemy. The Octopus plows wantonly through an errant herd of sheep that had wandered out onto the railroad tracks through a breach in a wire fence line. The sheep are a convenient metaphor for the slaughter of innocents at the hands of this soulless Force "with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil."

The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. To the right and left, all the width of the right of way, the little bodies had been flung; backs were snapped against fence posts; brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in, the bodies hung suspended. Under foot it was terrible.

Presley, threatened with consumption (tuberculosis), is living at the Home ranch of the great Los Muertos Rancho. He took up a standing invitation from his friends, the Derrick family, in order to recuperate in the "dry, even climate of the San Joaquin." His stay is indefinite. He's thirty and earned graduate and postgraduate degrees with high honors from an Eastern college, where he devoted himself to the passionate study of literature, especially poetry. He's generally the spectator of activities in *The Octopus*, its most curious bystander.

Presley's freedom to wander away the whiles brings you into proximity of food service on both a mundane and gargantuan scale. Breakfasts in homes of all social strata are composed of the classic trio: eggs, bacon or ham, and coffee. A "breakfast without orange juice is like a day without sunshine" wouldn't penetrate American popular culture for another 70 years or so later.

Whenever Presley passes through the old Spanish mission town of Guadalajara during one of his jaunts around the vast neighboring wheat ranches, he'll usually stop by Solotari's, a restaurant along the Plaza of

this moribund community. He'll order a "Mexican dinner—an omelette in Spanish-Mexican style, frijoles and tortillas, a salad, and a glass of white wine." The frijoles will be in an earthen pot set in the middle of the table. Presley may end up drinking mescal with old-timers, to hear Spanish tales of Los Muertos.

### *A 19th Century Working Class Diet*

A glimpse into the diets of the working class populace is preserved in amber through Norris's descriptions of colossal country feasts—a typical ploughmen's dinner after returning from the fields, supper served at a barn dance, and a barbecue following the gruesome roundup and slaughter of jack rabbits because they are considered pests after their natural predators were exterminated.

These gorge-fests all share a biblical, "feeding of the five thousand" aura. This is in keeping with Norris's epic literary visions. He intends *The Octopus* to be the first in a trilogy of novels covering "the idea of this huge Niagara of wheat rolling from West to East." As Norris relates to his mentor William Dean Howells:

I think there is a great chance for somebody to do some great work with the West and California as a background, and which will be at the same time thoroughly American. My Idea is to write three novels around the one subject of Wheat. First, a study of California (the producer), second, a study of Chicago (the distributor) third, a study of Europe (the consumer) . . . I think a big Epic trilogy *could* be made out of such a subject, that at the same time would be modern and distinctly American.

Norris's study of California wheat industry reaches full fruition, but his second novel, *The Pit*, is in serialization when he abruptly dies from the consequences of a ruptured appendix in 1902. Like many of his generation, Norris held a dim view of the medical profession at the turn of the century. You pick your poison; the cure or the affliction. Having dealt with a "weak stomach" all his life, Norris would rather roll the dice than go under the knife.

Nothing less than a full passage of ploughmen eating dinner written in Norris-style will better illustrate food consumed by the masses:

It was between six and seven o'clock. The half-hundred men of the gang threw themselves upon the supper the Chinese cooks had set out in the shed of the eating-house, long as a bowling alley, unpainted, crude, the seats, benches, the table covered with oilcloth. Overhead a half-dozen kerosene lamps flared and smoked.

The table was taken as if by assault; the clatter of iron knives upon the tin plates was as the reverberation of hail upon a metal roof. The ploughmen

rinsed their throats with great draughts of wine, and, their elbows wide, their foreheads flushed, resumed the attack upon the beef and bread, eating as though they would never have enough. All up and down the long table, where the kerosene lamps reflected themselves deep in the oilcloth cover, one heard the incessant sounds of mastication, and saw the uninterrupted movement of great jaws. At every moment one or another of the men demanded a fresh portion of beef, another pint of wine, another half-loaf of bread. For upwards of an hour the gang ate. It was no longer a supper. It was a veritable barbecue, a crude and primitive feasting, barbaric, homeric.

To set up an opposition between salt-of-the-earth workers earning their keep against the diabolical railroad owners, Norris bases the novel's plot on the true story of a May 1880 shootout between a California settler's league and federal marshals and railroad officials carrying out an eviction order. It happens after a rancher's household belongings are tossed out unceremoniously onto a road and his home taken over by a railroad shill. Seven men are killed, six of them settlers. It's known as the Mussel Slough Massacre or Tragedy, in much the same way that it's either the Easter Rebellion or Uprising of 1920 in Ireland, depending upon one's polarizing point of view.

### *Barn Dance Food and Entertainment*

Barn dances are the great elixir of 19th century rural life. In the harness room of newly built barn, a grand party opens among the first arriving men with punch being "fertilized" with whiskey. "The first round of this drink had been welcomed with a salvo of cheers." A square dance is soon underway, with the leader of the City Band calling the figures. When the late evening meal is served, it is monumental. The tables of food are arranged around three sides of the barn.

[They are] loaded down with cold roasts of beef, cold chickens and cold ducks, mountains of sandwiches, pitchers of milk and lemonade, entire cheeses, bowls of olives, plates of oranges and nuts. The advent of this supper was received with a volley of applause. The musicians played a quick step. The company threw themselves upon the food with a great scraping of chairs and a vast rustle of muslins, tarletans, and organdies, soon the clatter of the dishes was a veritable uproar. The tables were taken by assault. One ate whatever was nearest at hand, some even beginning with oranges and nuts and ending with beef and chicken. At the end the paper caps were brought on, together with ice cream. All up and down the tables the pulled "crackers" snapped continually like the discharge of innumerable tiny rifles. The caps of tissue paper were put on—"Phrygian Bonnets," "Magicians' Caps," "Liberty Caps"; the young girls

looked across the table at their vis-à-vis with bursts of laughter and vigorous clapping of the hands.

During the barn dance, the wheat farmers are hand delivered a letter from the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad informing them that they can now purchase the railroad sections they have been occupying for over tenfold the amount originally offered in promotional circulars. If they don't buy the land now, anybody else can come in and scoop it up for that price.

The timing of this announcement could not be worse from the wheat ranchers' perspective. After two years of drought, low crop yields and losses, they finally have a banner crop of wheat emerging from the ground. The railroad's offer seeks to squeeze blood out of a turnip. The barn dance ends with a pit in every rancher and farmer's stomach.

### *A Slaughter of Rabbits*

The Pacific and Southwestern Railroad takes tactical advantage of the next time everyone who works the land is preoccupied with an annual mass roundup of jack rabbits. The working families spread across the land to create a soldier's line of humans. They slowly march forward with the aim of forcing rabbits—already starting to jump and scurry in the distance as they perceive the impending rumble—into a fenced corral. There, they'll be slaughtered in the thousands by men, torn apart limb by limb by dogs let into the fray. Most participants can't stand to watch this bloodbath. A barbecue for one and all is the main attraction.

Two entire "beeves" are being roasted about a quarter mile away from the site of the jack rabbit massacre. Underneath the shade of live oaks next to a creek, bottles are uncorked and oilcloths spread out over the ground. Men light their pipes and cigars and women seize the opportunity to nurse babies. After dinner, there are games of strength, "a footrace of young girls under seventeen" and a "fat men's race." The younger fellows compete in a running broad jump, a standing high jump, a shot put throw, a "hop, skip, and step" event, and wrestling. Presley is delighted with the entire scene of mass consumption.

By now everyone was eating. It was the feeding of the People, elemental, gross, a great appeasing of appetite, an enormous quenching of thirst. Quarters of beef, roasts, ribs, shoulders, haunches were consumed, loaves of bread by the thousands disappeared, whole barrels of wine went down the dry and dusty throats of the multitude. Conversation lagged while the People ate, while hunger was appeased. Everybody had his fill. One ate for the sake of eating, resolved that there should be nothing left, considering it a matter of pride to exhibit a clean plate.

The fun and games are cut short when the ranchers learn that one of their own, Annixter (who lives on a steady diet of prunes) and his newlywed wife Hilma, have just had all of their possessions dumped out in front of their home.

Presley witnesses the confrontation between ranchers and the railroad's long arm of the law. Some of his best rancher friends are shot and killed in a confusing melee, escalated by a trigger-happy farmhand named Hooven. Because of his German ancestry and broken English, he's called *Bismarck* by his neighbors. When he mistakenly believes that one of his fellow league members is being roughed up, he shouts, "*Hoch, der Kaiser! Hoch, der Vaterland!*" After those exclamations, Hooven "dropped to one knee, and sighting his rifle carefully, fired into the group of men surrounding the buggy. Instantly the revolvers and rifles seemed to go off of themselves."

### ***An Epic Poem, "The Toilers," Goes Viral***

The railroad's subjugation of the People revolts Presley and turns him into (temporarily) a socialist anarchist. He distills all of his piss and vinegar and veneration for the working class into an epic poem he calls *The Toilers*, modeled after Millet's *Man with a Hoe* that he'd seen when visiting his relatives, the Cedarquists. He abandons the stalled-out *Song of the West*.

When *The Toilers* is published in the Sunday supplement in a San Francisco newspaper, it goes viral. It's picked up in New York, Boston and Chicago papers. Out of nowhere, Presley becomes an 1890s cause célèbre.

You won't be exposed to any actual verses of the *The Toilers* in the novel, however. That's because it is an artifice derived from a previously published poetic tribute to Millet by Edwin Markham called *The Man with the Hoe*.<sup>[3]</sup> The opening stanza of that famous poem echoes a theme of degeneracy, an outgrowth of Social Darwinism, which increasingly held sway in intellectual circles.

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans  
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,  
The emptiness of ages in his face,  
And on his back the burden of the world.  
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,  
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,  
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?

Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?

Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?

Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?

To avenge the murder of his friends and neighbors, Presley learns pipe-bomb making skills from a local saloon keeper named Caraher. Earlier, he had overheard Caraher ranting and railing against the Railroad Trust to Dyke, a black-listed railroad engineer who's just been taken to the cleaners by the P and S.W over freight rates for bringing his bumper crop of hops to market. Instead of eking out any profit, he's lost his shirt.

Caraher eyes a convert in the making. He had become an anarchist revolutionary after his wife "had been accidentally killed by Pinkertons during a 'demonstration' of strikers." Presley does not blame Caraher for becoming a "red."

"Do you blame us now," [Caraher] cried, "us others, the Reds? Ah yes, it's all very well for your middle class to preach moderation. I could do it, too. You could do it, too, if your belly was fed, if your property was safe, if your wife had not been murdered, if your children were not starving. Easy enough then to preach law-abiding methods, legal redress, and all such rot. But how about *us*?" he vociferated. "Ah yes, I'm a loud-mouthed rum-seller, ain't I? I'm a wild-eyed striker, ain't I? I'm a bloodthirsty anarchist, ain't I? Wait till you've seen your wife brought home to you with the face you used to kiss smashed in by a horse's hoof—killed by the Trust, as it happened to me. Then talk about moderation! \* \* \* There's one thing only [the Railroad Trust] listens to, one thing it is frightened of—the people with dynamite in their hands—six inches of plugged gaspipe. *That* talks."

Presley's foray into anarchy is a short-lived, showy dud. He sneaks up on the house of the P and S.W. railroad's most reviled representative, S. Behrman. It is surrounded by a grove of live oak and eucalyptus trees. The plugged gas pipe bomb he hurls through an open window of a dining room shatters glass, but leaves S. Behrman untouched, unharmed.

Presley makes a miraculous getaway. No one remotely suspects that he'd be the culprit. The railroad had so many enemies. He lays low for a month and then heads to San Francisco to see Cedarquist, his wealthy capitalist relative. He'd like to take passage on one of his ships embarking to India loaded with wheat.

Cedarquist can arrange it and also invites him to dinner later in the week. As he's strolling through San Francisco, Presley notices a sign for the P and S.W.'s head office. On a whim, he decides to pay a call on the president, Mr. Shelgrim. Surprisingly enough, he agrees to meet him,

unscheduled. When they start discussing Presley's epic poem, Shelgrim startles him by asking why he wasted his time since Millet's masterpiece left nothing more to be said. Shelgrim patronizes Presley:

"You might just as well have kept quiet. There's only one best way to say anything. And what has made the picture of *The Toilers* great is that the artist said in it the *best* that could be said on the subject." "I had never looked at it in just that light," observed Presley. He was confused, all at sea, embarrassed.

Presley expects to meet an ogre, and is instead rebuffed by an astute art critic. The comment parallels Norris's own abandonment of the epic poem in favor of the novel form. He is trying to distance himself from the first book he ever published, *Yvernelle* (1892), a medieval romance written in a grand poetic style with octosyllabic couplets.

### *A Gilded Age Feast*

After leaving Shelgrim's office, Presley lands in the belly of the beast once again. Cedarquist had mistakenly invited him to dinner on an evening when they had already been invited to a small dinner party at the Gerard's, one of Pacific and Southwestern Railroad's powerful vice-presidents. Mrs. Cedarquist has finagled his invitation. The Gerard's daughter Honora is leaving for Europe; and it's supposed to be a rather informal affair. Mrs. Cedarquist can't help noting that Honora is the "prettiest little thing, and will she be rich? Millions, I would not dare to say how many." When he hears where he's about to dine, Presley's fists clench so abruptly he almost splits his white gloves.

While their horse drawn carriage is taking them to the Gerard's mansion, *The Octopus* interleaves the homeless wanderings of Mrs. Hooven and her two daughters. After her husband had been shot and killed, she and her daughters left the Los Muertos ranch. The older daughter, Minna, gets separated from her mother and younger sister Hilda after she returns from an unsuccessful day of seeking work. When she arrives at their boarding house, she learns that they've been evicted for not paying rent.

Minna searches for her mom and little sister high and low, but can't find them. After being outside two nights, cold and famished, Minna prostitutes herself rather than starve or freeze to death. Mrs. Hooven and Hilda join the "*via dolorosa* of the destitute, that *chemin de la croix* [way of the cross] of the homeless." The "mile after mile of granite pavement that *must be, must be* traversed."

Meanwhile, Presley and the Cedarquists are being dropped off at the doorstep of the Gerard's. Norris most likely used the Hopkins mansion as his setting for this dinner party. Hopkins had built the house in the 1870s,

but by 1893 it was being used as a school and gallery for the San Francisco Art Association.<sup>[4]</sup> *The Octopus's* lengthy interior description of the dining room matches that found in the museum's official catalog.<sup>[5]</sup>

This gilded age dinner is inspired (in part) by a newspaper account of a banquet at the mansion of John Miller, who was once employed by the Central Pacific Railroad. He enjoyed many fine things—with the help of embezzled railroad money. (Miller later commits suicide when the source of his deep pockets is discovered.) Norris pasted the newspaper account of the dinner party into his working *Octopus* notebook:

The banquet was a notable one. All the great railroad magnates were there. The wines were of the rarest vintages. The service was irreproachable, the viands fit for a Roman orgy—in the days of the decadence. The magnates clinked glasses with John Miller. They responded to toasts with flattering allusions to his ability and faithful service. They complimented him on his home, its furnishings, his pictures, statuary, servants, his dinner.

In a confused daze, Presley allows one of the footmen to relieve him of his coat and hat. He's soon greeted by Mrs. Gerard as "our new poet of whom we are all so proud" and is escorting Honora to the dining room table. Raw Blue Point oysters are the first course, paired with a cool Haut Sauterne. Cravings for these robust oysters originated in New York City in the early 1800s after they were discovered in the waters near the town of Blue Point on Long Island's Great South Bay. The Haut Sauterne is probably a semi-sweet white wine. Mrs. Gerard leans over to Presley and murmurs:

"Mr. Presley, do you find that Sauterne too cold? I always believe it is so *bourgeois* to keep such a delicate wine as Sauterne on ice, and to ice Bordeaux or Burgundy—oh, it is nothing short of a crime."

The Gerard's own a vineyard in southern France. Mr. Gerard turns up his nose at California wines. A pale-faced, languid, aesthete guest, Julian Lambert, recognizes the Haut Sauterne bouquet as coming from their vineyard. Lambert's fine taste draws Presley's ire. Lambert "stroved to maintain the attitude of [a] *fin gourmet*, unable to refrain from comment upon the courses as they succeeded one another."

Although it's not mentioned in the novel, the progression of courses is mostly lifted straight out of a banquet organized by Sir Morton Peto that took place at Delmonico's Restaurant in Manhattan on October 30, 1865. It is reproduced as a "celebrated menu" in a cookbook by Chef Alessandro Filippini that Norris clearly used to develop the Gerard's dinner party menu, *The Delmonico Cook Book: How to Buy Food, How to Cook It and How to Serve It* (1890).

Norris's choice of menu is brilliant, a stroke of genius. Peto is an early English railway entrepreneur and millionaire. Peto toasts to the glories and possibilities of the "Railway System of America." A *New York Times* review the next day regales the commoners with a breathless tribute to this dinner party-to-end-all-dinner parties:

Our distinguished English visitor, Sir MORTON PETO, last evening reciprocated, and most generously, the courtesies of his New-York friends, (and also his Western friends, as far as they could be assembled in this city,) by a splendid entertainment at Delmonico's, Fourteenth-street. The sumptuous richness and elegance of this banquet, we feel free to say, has never been exceeded in this country. We doubt, indeed, whether so complete, so elaborate, and so delightful a dinner was ever served to a party so large as 250 guests in New-York. [October 31, 1865.]

At Peto's dinner, *huîtres (oysters)* are served with a *Barsac* wine, one of the five communes within the Sauternes wine region of France. At the Gerard's fictional dinner, the particular pairing of Blue Point oysters with a Haut Sauterne is from a sample New Year's Day menu described early in Delmonico's cookbook.

For the soup course, *purée à la Derby* is served along with *hors d'oeuvres*, consisting of ortolan patties and "a tiny sandwich made of browned toast and thin slices of ham sprinkled over Parmesan cheese." Mrs. Gerard makes sure everyone knows that the wine is Xeres, an 1815 vintage. The soup and the wine duplicate that served at Peto's dinner, while the ortolan patties are perhaps drawn from the next page's appetizer, *canapés de filets d'ortolans*, served at an 1863 Ball for the Russian Fleet.

Eating ortolan bunting songbirds is now banned in France, where that rite of gastronomic passage originated. Xeres wine is better known as sherry. The 1815 vintage must have displayed an amazing *goût de terroir*, an indelible trace memory in discerning palates of a bygone era.

The fish course consists of "*grenadins* of bass and small salmon, the latter stuffed and cooked in white wine and mushroom liquor." For Peto's farewell tribute, this course includes *Saumon à la Rothschild* and *Grenadins de Bass, New York*. The salmon dish is one of Antonin Carême's sublime contributions to gastronomic history of the world. He developed it while working for James Rothschild (Baron de Rothschild).

Carême "died at 50, 'burnt out by the flame of genius, and the charcoal of the roasting-spit' (Laurent Tailade), but having realized his dream: 'To publish a complete book on the state of my profession in our times.'"<sup>[6]</sup> He's dubbed the "Lamartine of the kitchen range," after Alphonse de Lamartine, an acclaimed French writer, poet and politician. A *grenadin* dish is commonly associated with veal, but if that same technique is

applied to a more delicate bass filet, it'll usually be interlarded with the "best larding bacon and then grilled (broiled), fried and even braised."<sup>[7]</sup>

While dining through the fish course, Mrs. Gerard plays a cat-and-mouse game with Presley, shaming him (*throwing shade* in today's parlance) for "*The Toilers*, I mean, What a sermon you read us, you dreadful young man. I felt that I ought at once to 'sell all that I have and give it to the poor.' \* \* \* Just because of that poem Mrs. Cedarquist and I have started a movement to send a whole shipload of wheat to the starving people in India. Now you horrid *réactionnaire*, are you satisfied?" "I am very glad," murmured Presley. They all find his comments to be clever, brilliant, epigrammatic.

The fish course ends with Mrs. Gerard interrupting her daughter's conversation with the languid aesthete Lambert, in French: "Honora, *entends-tu, ma chérie, l'esprit de notre jeune Lamartine.*" ("Do you hear, my darling, the spirit of our young Lamartine?") A *Steinberger Cabinet*, a very fashionable and expensive Rhine wine, is paired with this course in Peto's 1865 dinner. None is mentioned around the Gerard's table.

Norris selects Londonderry pheasants (*Faisons à la Londonderry*), escallops of duck (*Escallops de Canards, en Bigarade*) and *Risollettes à la Pompadour* from Peto's celebrated dinner for repurposing as the Gerard's entrée courses. The risollettes dish is named after Jeanne Poisson, Marquis de Pompadour, Louis VX's mistress. "Like many other courtesans of the period, she was very interested in cookery."<sup>[8]</sup> Classically, this stuffed puff pastry dish would be filled with a salpicon of pickled tongue, truffles, and mushrooms cooked in butter, bound with a very thick demi-glace sauce. The sealed circles would be deep fried to a golden brown and perhaps served with fried parsley. Château Latour is poured, as in Peto's feast.

While the entrée courses are being served and consumed, young Lambert and Mr. Gerard reminisce about duck-shooting expeditions, Presley's cousin Beatrice disputes the merits of a Scotch collie, and Mrs. Cedarquist and Mrs. Gerard discuss a novel—probably one of the most popular of the 1890s, Max Nordau's *Degeneration*—a "strange mingling of psychology, degeneracy, and analysis of erotic conditions." Stepping back, one can view the dining room scene with authorial omniscience:

The entire table was a vague glow of white napery, delicate china, and glass as brilliant as crystal. Behind the guests the serving-men came and went, filling the glasses continually, changing the covers, serving the entrées, managing the dinner without interruption, confusion, or the slightest unnecessary noise.

The snootiness of the uber-wealthy is on full display when talk turns to the stuffed artichokes and asparagus. Mrs. Cedarquist praises the asparagus as "so delicate, such an exquisite flavor. How *do* you manage?" Mrs. Gerard explains their provenance:

We get all our asparagus from the southern part of the State, from one particular ranch . . . . We order it by wire and get it only twenty hours after cutting. My husband sees to it that it is put on a special train. It stops at this ranch just to take on our asparagus. Extravagant, isn't it, but I simply cannot eat asparagus that has been cut more than a day. \* \* \* [Imagine] eating ordinary market asparagus that has been fingered by Heaven knows how many hands.

For dessert, the company is treated to a *Moscovite fouetté*, another Peto menu item. It is a "wonderful preparation of alternate layers of biscuit glacés, ice cream, and candied chestnuts." Young Lambert raises his glass of Madeira and offers the "Railroad King" his "best compliments for a delightful dinner."

None of this sits well with Presley at all. He's burning with rage inside as the death of his friends scrolls through his mind. The dainty women, "all these fine ladies with their small fingers and slender necks, suddenly were transfigured in his tortured mind into harpies tearing human flesh." They are being "fattened on the blood of the People, on the blood of men who had been killed at the ditch. It was a half ludicrous, half-horrible 'dog-eat-dog' cannibalism."

\* \* \* \*

We leave Presley, and his terrible Social Darwinian visions, as he departs on the *Swanhilda*. He's berthed above a massive load of wheat destined for famine relief in India. The great harvest of Los Muertos (taken over by the railroad) is rolling "like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas" to feed the starving masses. Wheat, "wrapped in Nirvanic calm" remains "indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves." As they recede from Presley's point of view, California's coast range appears "vague and bluish above the waste of tumbling waters."

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[1] The *Man with a Hoe* can be viewed online at the J. Paul Getty Museum website, which provides the quoted description of Millet's painting. See <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/760/jean-francois-millet-man-with-a-hoe-french-1860-1862/>.

[2] Alfred Bierstadt's painting *View of Donner Lake* can be accessed at <https://art.famsf.org/albert-bierstadt/view-donner-lake-california-198454>.

[3] The entire Edwin Markham poem entitled *The Man with the Hoe* can be accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Man\\_with\\_the\\_Hoe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_with_the_Hoe).

[5] See D. Graham, *The Fiction of Frank Norris: The Aesthetic Context* (1978), p. 116.

[6] *Larousse Gastronomique* (1988), pp. 194-95.

[7] *Id.*, p. 529.

[8] *Id.*, p. 823.