

The Mushroom Family

From the Youth's Companion

CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY NY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## NATURE'S PEASANTRY—TOADSTOOLS

Here is what lawyers call a hypothetical question. Provided there were plenty of all other kinds of food to supply the most ravenous appetites; provided all the people of the world, up to this year of our Lord 1890, had never had their attention drawn to the many varieties of potatoes, apples, tomatoes and cauliflowers; and provided those now living were told that most of these vegetables were excellent food, but that a few of them were unwholesome, and a few varieties poisonous, how many of the world's inhabitants would be willing to test any one of them for the first time?

If a vote could be taken upon the question, it is quite safe to answer that but few would make the experiment even if told by an experienced person exactly how to do it. A large majority of those who did would be frightened almost to death after taking the first bite of the best potato in the land.

It is no wonder, then, that when people nowadays are asked to test the most delicate, excellent and nutritious of all foods,—toadstools,—nearly everybody shudders and exclaims:

"Toadstools? Oh, they are poisonous!"

However, there are a few persons who have tried them and think differently. Among them is the writer, who has eaten of over two hundred and sixty varieties.

Nature has her aristocracy,—her high, mighty and kingly ones. So has she her peasantry. As nature's peasantry let us think of the toadstools.

They inhabit all her domains. They attach themselves to her most powerful elements, to her metals, her liquids, her living growths, and to what are often termed her dead ones, wrongly termed dead, for nothing of Nature's ever dies.

Everywhere the toadstool peasantry is at work—tilling, grubbing, cultivating. Its tiny members labor in the yeast that puffs our bread, busy themselves in the ferment of wine, mildew the grape, rust the wheat, blue our shoes, ruin our carpets, festoon our cellars, bracket our fence-posts, dig into apples, rot our potatoes, manufacture our vinegar, change our best timbers to worthless masses of dry rot, pick up decaying offal and vegetable matter, put new life into old bodies, and thus convert them into valuable fertilizers or healthful food.

These tiny fellows we will leave to the microscopist, and ourselves deal with the sturdy, independent, one-legged or no-legged individuals everywhere visible, who might very properly call us two-legged mortals cowards for kicking them.

As with all other peasantry, there is a good class and a bad class. And since we mortals consider our palates and stomachs the very first of our functions to be attended to, we will busy ourselves with those of these classes that are good to eat, and those that are poisonous.

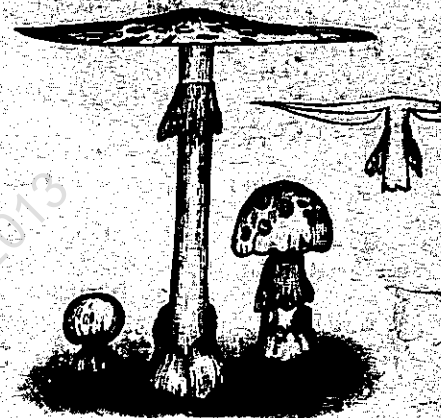
There are edible and non-edible toadstools, but between the non-edible and the poisonous there is a very great distinction to be made. Among the non-edible are the hard, tough, corky growths seen everywhere upon living and dead timber, and many other toadstool growths that quite rival chewing-gum and leather in nutritive qualities. These varieties can do no harm, because no one can eat them.

The special non-edible toadstools to be spoken of here are the poisonous ones.

The toadstool peasantry is headed by the common mushroom, the little-looking, best-looking,

the entire fraternity. His weapons are deadly. He is a terrible destroyer within himself. A piece of him eaten, the size of a pea, is certain death, unless a skilful physician comes to the aid of the victim with hypodermic injections of atropine.

Mark his uniform well! His name is Amanita.



He belongs to the clan *agaricini*, or those having gills under their caps. Here are his never-failing characteristics: a top or cap, round as a bullet when young, then spreading through all the shapes of an opening umbrella. This cap is of various colors,—white shaded with lemon, brown, red, yellow, greenish.

Sometimes a scurf is found upon it, on tufted, wart-like, irregular surface. Gills or plaits are beneath the cap, always white or tinged with yellow. A single stem supports the cap in its centre, and just below the gills the stem has an apron-like ring about it, or a remnant of one. This stem has a bulbous or swollen base, which rests in a socket, partially in or under the ground.

There are numerous other details by which the practised collector can detect this deadly enemy of man, but the ring and the socket must never be disregarded.

Sometimes the socket will remain in the ground when a specimen is plucked from its resting-place, and remain unnoticed. The ring and the bulb will cause the socket to be searched for by the wary. Whenever there is a doubt as to the presence of it, never fail to believe that it was there.

The greatest number of edible fungi are in this gilled clan of *agaricini*. The luscious mushroom is one of them. It is in mistaking the Amanita for the common mushroom that most fatal errors are made.

A few differences in their mode of living are good guides for detection of the evil one. The poisonous Amanita lives in the woods, or along wooded pastures, or where timber has lately grown,—the mushroom never does. The mushroom is found in old sodded pastures, and on or about manure,—the Amanita never is.

Again, the mushroom is either slightly pink, brown or dark purplish on the gills; the Amanita is either white or lemon yellowish. The common mushroom has not a socket at its base.

Every mushroom is a toadstool, and the old saying

The mushroom is good to eat, and a toadstool is poisonous, is a misleading one. None of the traditional charms, such as testing with a silver spoon, will reveal the Amanita or any other poisonous toadstool. Belief in such charms is a certain guide to error.

The only safe rule is altogether to decline eating acquaintance with the Amanita, and all varieties other than it that are not inviting to the eye, smell and careful taste in the spot upon which they grow.

There are many varieties even of the Amanita that are delicious eating, and among the other Agarics far over a hundred accommodating fellows are to be found. But the amateur must search cautiously, first discarding all Amanita, then carefully testing little pieces of the other gilled varieties, cooked slightly over coals or in a buttered pan without seasoning.

It is unfortunate to be compelled to cast a shade of suspicion over the entire toadstool clan, because of the evil character of the few. These charming friends of the writer's have furnished him many a good meal, for which he is profoundly grateful. The study of them is a most delightful one, free from danger when care and ordinary sense are observed. But before saying, "Good, dear little fellows" to his friends now to be told of, it is necessary to hold up the warning finger, and condemn plainly their bad companions.

Colonies of the *agaricini* or gilled clan, purple, red and green-capped fellows, white-gilled and sturdy of stem, are found parading in the early spring and throughout the warm weather under trees in the woods, in fact, almost everywhere upon the ground. A peculiarity of them is that they are extremely snappy, especially in the gills, which crumble upon the slightest touch.

There are the *russula*. Taste a bit of the stem of one. If it is peppery, the taster need not be told to spit it out. The mild varieties have little taste when raw, but are all edible and luscious when stewed like oysters.

On made grounds and dump-heaps, among weeds and ash-piles, grows a gilled variety, opening, after extreme youth, like a Japanese umbrella. It grows in clusters, is white-fleshed and stout, and is found in great quantities in its colonies just after warm rains. This is the *coprinus comatus* or maned toadstool,



named from its dissolving into ink as it grows old, and having a fringe or mane around the edge of its top. Once met with, it cannot be mistaken, and when cooked in any way in which an oyster would be cooked, it is a great delicacy.

A little brown-topped, white-gilled, twisted, tough-stemmed chap is very neighborly in its habits. It grows in rings or patches on lawns and grassy slopes. It is the sprite of the toadstool peasantry—the *marasmius oreades* or Fairy Ring champignon. When it dances about the homestead, as it almost invariably does, it should be greeted kindly, cared for, and eaten as appreciative reward for its accommodating habits and good qualities. When raw it tastes like fresh meat.

Some clan of toadstools have, instead of gills, thousands of minute mouths on a tubular, sponge-like

There are a very marked way of putting titles upon one's tongue to say about them, when they are about to be devoured. Still, many of them are excellent friends, and are ready at most seasons to do palatable favors. These favoring fellows should be accepted only when they are fresh—when slimy, watery or bitter, and after having removed the tubes away from under the caps before cook-

*Boleti* grow on the ground. They have a single stem, and are of every imaginable shade of color. To prepare them for the table, it is only necessary to wash them, and then cook them in any way in which an oyster would be cooked.



A rotund, well-fed, comfortable-looking clan is the puff-ball or *lycoperdon*. To this clan we owe abject apology. It has been miscalled, belied, kicked, condemned. When it is young and fresh, white inside, not watery or changing color when broken, it is never-failing in its toothsome-ness. There is not a single individual of this somewhat ill-used clan that is harmful when eaten, when he passes the rules just given for inspection.



Abounding in the woods, from spring to autumn, will be found tufted masses of all colors, resembling coral, deer's antlers or branched sponges. There are the *clavari* or club-shaped toadstools. The pugnacious members of this clan are as easily masticated as are India-rubber bands or a hash of shoestrings. The tractable are as delicate as macaroni.

There is not a poisonous variety among them. In the four great clans named there are many families objecting strongly to being eaten. Many are tough, watery, slimy, ill-smelling, nauseous. They quarrel with our digestive apparatus just as any other unwholesome or indigestible food does. But with the exception of the Amanita, none of them are known to be deadly in their effects.

By careful study, examination and testing hundreds of pleasant acquaintances can be made among this numerous peasantry of Nature's, and knowledge useful in many ways can be obtained.

Serviceable and ornamental brackets can be made of the large, woody varieties. Bouquets of the most delicate sort, when picturesquely arranged on trays with damp moss, can be built up of them.

Some varieties, when dried carefully, are unrivalled as the most expensive fabrics as dress decorations. The most profitable and enjoyable result is derived from intelligent selection of the spontaneous source of food is so and none more healthful.

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