

THE BUTCHER'S BILL.

By LINO.

There is consternation among housekeepers. Meat is going up in price—has already gone up. Butter, milk, and eggs are dearer, yet the same allowances must cover the week's bills. What is to be done? Economise! "I have economised all I can," exclaims the harassed housewife. "I can't feed the family on beans and macaroni." Without having vegetarian meals, there still remains something to be done. And the first step is to learn to cook. With that knowledge everything is possible—without it, nothing.

Learning cooking too often means learning how to make and ice a few cakes, how to make a trifle, a fondue, and, may be, even a soufflé or an omelet. These accomplishments are little more than frills in the ordinary kitchen, and bear close resemblance to the capabilities of the singer who sings songs in a foreign language, with no knowledge of the language itself.

Learning cooking should mean as thorough an acquaintance with prices, with economies, with making things dovetail, as with the various materials and condiments themselves. The Australian housewife has earned a deservedly world-wide reputation for extravagance in culinary matters. She is too often content to run through such a menu as the following:—Chops for breakfast, cold beef for lunch, roast mutton for dinner; rump steak for breakfast, hash for lunch, boiled mutton for dinner; sausages for breakfast, cold mutton for lunch, roast beef for dinner, and so on. At the end of the week, contemplating an enormous butcher's bill, she exclaims bitterly, "What am I to do? We must have meat. The boys won't eat anything else, and I simply can't afford it; yet we waste nothing." By wasting nothing she means that she never throws away cold meat. Quite what housekeepers of this type are going to do through the coming winter it is impossible to say, unless they are willing to learn cooking from a competent and economical teacher; otherwise they may be forced to put their families on half-rations, with occasional meals of haricot beans and rice. It is cheaper to cook well than badly, cheaper to have four or five courses in the place of two or three. There will be much more serving and washing up, but the saving will be pronounced. But, again, it is repeated, the housewife must herself know how to cook that she may teach her servants.

In speaking to an accomplished housekeeper, who has the smartest little dinners possible, and whose butcher's bills for all that are delightfully small, she related an experience that befell her the other day. "I received a telegram saying that two friends were coming to dinner with me. I had intended going out to dinner myself, as, save for the servant, I was alone in the house. In the safe were two small chops, a slice of beef, and four tomatoes. I had only one hour before me, and this was the material for dinner. I sent out for a pound of Murray cod, a 6d. tin of cream, and 2lb. of pears. I put the chops on to stew and to make a little stock, their ultimate fate with the assistance of the slice of beef, being rissoles. The cod was put on to boil, and with the tomatoes, some milk, cream, and necessary flavouring, I made tomato soup. The result was very fair, though I say it myself. The tomato soup was followed by fish creams; the rissoles, piled on mashed potatoes, had a gravy made of the stock well flavoured. Mind, I have taught my servant how to fry. And that is an accomplishment which is so rare in Australia as to be almost non-existent. Therefore those rissoles, egg and bread crumbed, with correct seasoning, were really good. A joint, of course, was out of the question, so we concluded our meal with stewed pears, rice, whipped cream, and, of course, cheese and coffee. I doubt if the whole thing cost more than half-a-crown. When one can cater at that price, there is still hope even if beef is 9d. and chops 6d. a pound."

"But," exclaims an impatient housewife, "what use would it be for me to set a little dinner like that before my four hungry boys, my hungry self, and my hungry husband?"

Certainly in such a case a menu like the above is useless; but here lies the secret of economy, for all that. Have a joint for the piece de resistance, but take the edge off the big appetites with a good soup and an entree. Soup is one of the cheapest things possible, and may be delicious; it is by no means necessary for it to be the wretched Julienne, which nowadays is only coloured and flavoured with the memory of bygone richness and glory. Nor does a consomme suggest anything good, for it is, as a rule, first cousin to the stodgy white sauce poured over cauliflower. It is quite within reason to make excellent soups, each with an identity of its own, at the smallest possible cost. A good white soup is one which owes its existence to the stock in which yesterday's fish was boiled. It has had the head and other fragments returned to it, has been reboiled, strained, milk cream and flavouring have been added, and it is excellent. Hare soup is made from the remains of jugged hare, with brown stock added. All kinds of vegetable soups, not forgetting pea soup, which, when well made, is excellent. After

a good soup, chicken soufflé—which, though made of a 4d. rabbit, no one suspects when whipped to a cream. Then roast beef and plenty of vegetables, and the six big appetites will surely be sufficiently dulled not to need a very large helping; or, at any rate, not a second one. Afterwards sweets of some description. The following day the sirloin will appear cold, following artichoke soup and devilled kidneys. It will be surprising if that sirloin does not put in an appearance on the third day in the form of rissoles or such like.

Another point. Let every housewife learn how to make a curry. Too often one meets a dreadful hybrid, whose father is hash and its mother stew, differing from them in that it is a pallid yellow-green in colour, its indiarubber-like body floating in a sea of thick yellow liquid, through whose surface peer flaccid rings of onion. That is not curry, even if it does owe a small debt to the curry-powder bottle. Nor is the dull gluey mass plopped round it worthy of the name of rice. A true curry is not difficult to make, but it requires brains—human brains—and when it is made and sent to the table, with a loose pile of snowy rice on a dish beside it, it is a fascinating thing. A wise housewife boils a large quantity of rice—a really good curry needs it. One of the great points about curry is that it is satisfying; it is too rich to eat very much of.

In England, though meat is always very dear, one finds households where the income is a small one, but where, for all that, the meals betray no meanness, nor even economy. The English housewife has learnt a lesson which Australians would do well to take to heart,—that cheap things are not necessarily nasty. There are all manners of good dishes waiting to be made out of what may be described as odds and ends. In England more attention is paid to vegetables; they become quite a feature at any and every dinner-table, and it is more than worth while to pay attention to the various ways of preparing vegetables for the table. There are other ways of cooking even a cabbage than boiling it. As for rabbits, which we have always with us, they lend themselves most satisfactorily to all sorts of dishes. Not only stewed, fricasseed, turned into chicken, made into scallop, soufflé, or pie, the rabbit is also useful for stock, for the basis of any dish for which white meat is required. And with the big white Murray cod, or even a barracouta, there need never be any trouble about a cheap breakfast dish or entree.

In cooking, as in everything else, if a thing is done well it is a success, therefore to attain success in economy of cooking never let the store-room run out of essences, flavourings, sauces, and chutneys; they are the backbone of made dishes, and the cook who endeavours to "do without things" invariably fails in the end, and rouses an unprofitable and annoying discussion of the merits of such and such a dish, paterfamilias probably forbidding its reappearance at any time if he happens to be in a bad humour, and all that it lacked maybe was a flavouring or a sauce.

Economy, therefore, must deal in what are in the trade known as "smalls," in rabbits, fish, vegetables, and fruit. It must have a well-stocked store-room, it must know how to cook, and, in its cooking, learn how to fry. There will be no need to live on beans and rice if more attention is paid to meals in the matter of soups and made dishes, and the necessary joint can make its appearance, and last two or even three days, instead of only one, as at present.