THE AUSTERITY KITCHEN
BY CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

Where the alimentary is elementary.

Turkey Day in the Land of the Garuda

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTNER

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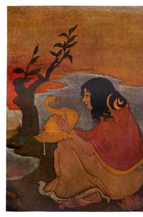


Illustrations from Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists (1914)

"If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions, I should point to India." — Max Mueller

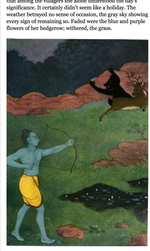
No visions of turkey cutlets, mashed potatoes, jellied cranberries, rum punch or pumpkin pie danced in Arley Isabel Munson's head one Thanksgiving morning at the turn of the last century. Rather, her day's duties filled her thoughts as she rose before dawn in a small Indian village.

Her arrival there marked the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. As a child, Munson once glimpsed in a mission book an illustration of a Hindu mother tossing her infant into a crocodile's waiting jaws. The picture so shook her that she vowed one day to practice medicine in India. "I must become a doctor," she would tell whoever would listen, "so that I might save these babies." Her medical school courses she passed with flying colors. Chemistry, gross anatomy, surgery — nothing proved too difficult. Her residency's end saw her wielding a expert scalpel. At no time during her studies did she listen to those who questioned her judgment. "Why would you leave the splendid opportunities of your own country for the danger of a far-off land?," family and friends repeatedly asked. In response she would smile, shrug and answer in the tongue of her eventual adopted land, "Kismet! Adrushtam! It's my destiny."

"Doctors are men who prescribe medicines of which they know little, to cure diseases of which they know less, in human beings of whom they know nothing." — Voltaire

As destiny would have it, Munson settled in a two-room bungalow overlooking a blue lake dotted with white and yellow lotus. And it was there she awoke the morning of her first Thanksgiving in India. As she lay in bed noting her many responsibilities she remarked to herself how strange it was that among the villagers she alone understood the day's significance. It certainly didn't seem like a holiday. The weather betrayed no sense of occasion, the gray sky showing every sign of remaining so. Faded were the blue and purple flowers of her bougainvillea; withered, the grass.

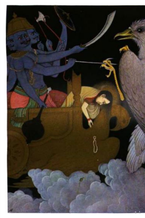
According to Buddhist symbolism, the white lotus, which is found at the heart of the Garbhadhatu Mandala, represents total mental purity and spiritual perfection.



"Where the Indus rolls his foam / Wild and free / By the distant torrid zones, Think of me" — From Thomas Bardolph Carter's *Hours of Illness, Poems* (1870)

Undaunted by the somber morning, Munson dressed, ate a light breakfast and set about her rounds. Thanksgiving for her patients was a day like any other, after all — and a busy one at that. She paid her first visit to the home of a woman who, believing that Western nurses practiced human sacrifice, refused hospital treatment for fear of becoming the next victim. Unable to convince her otherwise, Munson simply left with her a packet of medicine and wished her speedy recovery.

"None have gone away and tarried / Strangely long by some strange woes; / Some have turned to bone; we carried / Some unto the pine-girt grove; / They'll come no more as joyous leave / To take Thanksgiving turkey." — G. P. Lathrop, "Thanksgiving Turkey" (1877)

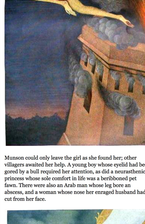


"Gold is the power which drives the wheel," colonial administrator Sir Anthony Musgrave opined, "but it is not the 'wheel of circulation itself.'"

Scarcely had Munson exited her first patient's home than an older Brahmin man rushed to her with tears in his eyes. "Come quickly," he begged, "my wife is dying." She hurried with the man to his home, wherein she discovered a girl not more than thirteen years of age lying on a mud floor, her faced twisted in pain, her eyes encircled by deep shadows. As thin as an ascetic, the girl upon noticing the doctor groped for her, the many gold bracelets around her arm shimmering in the hut's wan light.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1896 the American Society in London enjoyed a dinner of turkey with cranberry sauce, *perdreaux rôti, salade de laitue, haricots verts panachés, petits fours, poires bourdaloue and pumpkin pie,* among other things. Afterwards they made a toast and sang "God Save the Queen."

Munson recognized at once that the child bride presented an incurable case. Whatever medicine she prescribed would work only to ease the girl's pain. The girl's mother, scarcely more than a child herself, seemed to understand this, even as she drew her sari over her mouth to stifle sobs. To console her, five gray-haired Brahmin widows stood by. A group of men milled about in silence. A young boy, the girl's cousin, leaned against a pillar. The room had a funereal air. Only a small altar tucked away in a corner against a dirty whitewashed wall betrayed any hope the family might cherish for the girl's recovery. There stood a crudely fashioned red idol surrounded by offerings of fruit, vegetables and small, burning lamps. The idol's head wore a halo of cheap advertising cards and photographs of English celebrities clipped from colored magazines.



Munson could only leave the girl as she found her; other villagers awaited her help. A young boy whose eyelid had been gored by a bull required her attention, as did a neurasthenic princess whose sole comfort in life was a beribboned pet fawn. There were also an Arab man whose leg bore an abscess, and a woman whose nose her enraged husband had cut from her face.

No turkey found its way into Munson's meal that evening, the bird is unknown in India. The peacock, perhaps the nearest equivalent, was an alternative. When Munson inquired into the method of peacock cultivation, she learned that once the birds are rounded up, their captors sew shut their eyes to prevent them from finding their way home to the forest.

This particular November day kept Munson so busy that not until evening did she return home, where at half past seven she sat down to a small Thanksgiving dinner of jugged goat with *tahka, kulwun* curry and native vegetables. She picked at her meal wistfully, thinking for the first time of the pies, casseroles and meats that her loved ones stateside had likely enjoyed, and of their laughter and conviviality, too.

But that night, as she lay alone in her cot, she breathed air heavy with the scent of roses and watched as outside her window India's big bright moon rose over the horizon. It seemed a friendlier, more tender moon than the one that shone on her native country. And with this thought she fell into a dreamless sleep, forgetting all about the strange, piquant loneliness of a holiday spent abroad.

Recipe for "Captain J. A Currie Powder" from The Salad's Cookery Book (1870): "One ounce and a half of cardamoms, six ounces of coriander seed, three ounces of black pepper, one ounce of cayenne, one ounce and a half of cummin seed, three ounces of pale turmeric, one ounce of cloves, one ounce of cinnamon, and one ounce of fenugreek."

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