"BURBANKING" THE PURE FOOD LAW

BY E. T. BREWSTER

HAD never been able to understand how so thorough-going a Yankee as Si Perkins could be happy in Chicago. I was not, therefore, surprised to learn he had sold out his canning factory and gone back to the old family place at West Sidon. Perkins' Potted Chicken is no longer on the market; but the edge of Si Perkins' native shrewdness has been by no means dulled by his ten years in the West.

"When that Pure Food law first passed," confided Si, "I didn't pay much attention to it. Reckoned there'd be more interest taken in passing the law than in enforcing it. Thought, too, they'd tackle the big concerns first, and by the time they got round to me, the thing would have blown over. So I kept right on doing business at the old stand, and didn't bother my head about the law.

"That was just where I slipped up. 'Look here,' said I, when the inspector got after me, 'that's the same potted chicken I've been putting up for the last ten years. And by gosh, it's all right. I've eaten it myself'!

"'All that may be,' says the inspector, as cool as you please, 'but the law is most explicit that the contents of every package shall correspond exactly with the label. If you will put something on the outside of your cans to match what you put inside, you may keep on doing business; otherwise you'll have to quit.'

"'Gosh all pumpkins,' says I, 'is that the new law! Go on! Do you suppose I'm going to mark my potted chicken, Si Perkins' Old Reliable Pork Scraps and Corn Meal. Best on the Market! Beware of Substitutes and Take no Other. None Genuine Without Our Signature in Red Ink. No siree, Bob! I'll go out of business first!' And I did. In fact, considering what the law said and what Si Perkins' Old Reliable Potted Chicken was, there wasn't much else I could do. There ain't much money in a business where a week's profits don't no more 'n pay the fines on one day's output.

"Well, I figured it out that this particular legal storm was just about central over the Lake region, and if only I got far enough east, I'd strike fair weather. So I located down on the coast of Maine and started a sardine cannery. Durned if they didn't fine me again because I hadn't guaranteed the contents of every can to be genuine Maine herrings put up in cotton-seed oil.

"So I changed over my outfit and went to putting up salmon in a small way on the quiet, just to keep myself out of the poorhouse while I gave the canning industry a chance to look up a bit. 'Twa'n't any use. After they'd made me give up the usual fines, they took away my whole stock of salmon color, two hundred dollars' worth that I'd just laid in.

"I was just plumb discouraged. 'Now look here,' says I to the inspector that was getting after me, 'I've been persecuted enough. Prosperity ain't going to be with us long, unless the Government learns to stop meddling with business enterprise. Ain't there any way a man can make an honest living in the canning business? Ain't there any kind of original package that don't have to be labeled? Ain't there anything that can't be inspected? Ain't there anything that the public buys at its own risk? Because if there is any such thing, I'm going to manufacture that same.'
"Yes,' says the inspector, 'there's eggs. Find some way of adulterating eggs, and the law can't touch you.'

"By Gum,' says I, 'I will!' So I went to looking up the hen business.

"I allowed that the hen business is run by a set of Rubes, most scandalously ignorant of modern business methods. The hen is nothing but a piece of machinery—an egg-plant, so to speak. All you've got to do to make money out of eggs is to run the business in an up-to-date way. Your hen costs you so much; that's your capital. Your feed costs so much; that's your raw material. Then as the hen gets old, you charge off so much for depreciation of plant. You know how much eggs 'll bring. All you've got to do after that, is to reckon how much you've got to adulterate your product to meet competition. You want to look at the hen as a business proposition; and I swan it makes me sick to see a man raising spring chickens for the market and throwing away the feet. That's what spells ruin out to Chicago. But I wasn't going in for chickens; I was after eggs.

"So far as I could make out, there was no economizing on the shell. That was made out of old bones, and bones are cheap. There wa'n't much chance to save anything on the white neither, it being 88 per cent. water anyway. What costs money to manufacture is the yolk, that has most of the substance and all the taste. Making yolk, I figured, is what takes it out of the hen. I allowed that if I could get hold of an egg that would be all white and no yolk, like seedless oranges and stoneless plums, a hen could turn 'em out about twice as fast as ordinary. Then if they were sold all over the country and went into cold storage, nobody 'd ever know where they came from, and there wouldn't be any dod-ratted inspector coming round to bother me. But of course, I saw this wouldn't work. No yolk, no chick; and if I did get a kind of hen that would lay yolkless eggs there'd be no way of keeping up the breed. You can't raise chickens from cuttings like you can plants. I guessed the only way to reduce the cost of production was to put a lot of white in my eggs and only a little yolk. Something in the line of a bantam yolk in a full-sized white, I guessed would just about hit me.

"I don't think I'd ever come out any-place where, if I hadn't got to reading about that man Burbank out to California. Thinks I, if they can do that sort of things with plants, why can't they do it with animals? They're all living things, and there's the same principles in breeding 'em. Then I heard about a professor out to Western Reserve that had a lamb with hair like a goat. I wrote him about it; but he said that he got it from a farmer that kept goats with his sheep, and they hadn't been able yet to make it happen again. Finally I heard about a young feller down to Harvard College that had been doing some surprising stunts with rabbits and guinea pigs, making them do pretty much anything he wanted 'em to. So I went round to see him.

"'I've been reading,' says I, 'about this Burbank, and how he can make about any kind of plant he wants.'

"'No,' says the young feller, 'he can't do quite that. But if he can find a plant with one good point about it along with a lot of bad ones, he can transfer that good point to some other plant that's got more good points but not that particular one. Unit characters we call them.'

"'Oh, that's it,' says I, 'picks out a good point here and another there and puts 'em all together and makes a new sort of vegetable.'

"'Yes,' says the young feller, 'that's about it.'

"And they tell me you've been doing the same sort of thing with rabbits and such. Taking ears off one breed and fur off another and tails off another, and making a new breed to suit yourself! Sort of Burbanking animals, you might say?'

"'Yes,' says he, 'that's about what I've been doing; but only as a scientific experiment. I haven't made any practical application of my methods.'

"'Well,' says I, 'you jest try making a practical application to the hen, and there's a year's salary in it for you. You just tell them professors of yours that you've got an invitation to put in your summer vacation with your Uncle Silas up on the old farm where you spent your happy boyhood days. Then you take hold and Burbank a bantam yolk into a Plymouth Rock egg. There's just one unit character about the bantam breed that I want, and that's the yolk of its egg.
"Humph!" says he, 'nothing like that has ever been done. But I've done two or three other things that haven't been done before,' says he. 'And science is mighty,' says he. 'And the matter with Harvard College is that it's too academic, and doesn't do enough for the plain people.'

'I don't know how that young feller went to work, any more than I know how Burbank and Biffin do the things they do. All I know is that by the next spring I had near a thousand lady chickens that looked like Proper Plymouth Rocks and Leghorns, and wa'n't by a dum sight. The eggs they laid looked like just ordinary eggs; but when you broke into 'em, you found a measly little bantam yolk about as big as the end of your thumb. The rest was all white—and 88 per cent. water. My wife made me keep some real hens for family use—sort of private stock.

'As near as I could figger it out, one of these imitation hens would lay five eggs on the same feed that a common hen would use up in making four. That meant I'd been able to reduce the cost of production of eggs by 20 per cent., and was getting that much clear profit over what other men was making in the business. Now there's money in eggs anyway, and when you come to add 20 per cent. more by adulterating your product, why you're just laying right out in the sun of prosperity, Mor' n that, the hens laid these little yolks so sort of easy that they didn't need to take a vacation just as eggs began to get high. Kept on laying full tilt right up to Christmas and didn't really let up till along in January. So there's where I scored again.

'Strange, though, how a man ain't satisfied when he's doing well. There I was with a strangle hold on the Pure Food Law, and selling adulterated eggs in defiance of it, and getting back the money I'd paid in fines and more. But I wa'n't content yet. That potted chicken that I used to make kind of haunted me. It sort of riled me to be putting out a product with anything at all in it that it pretended to have. Besides, they'd begun talking about standardizing the sausage, and I knew if they did that it wouldn't be long before they'd be standardizing the egg—and I wanted to be putting by something for the rainy day in the egg business that I felt might be coming my way.

'So I went out to Harvard College once more and saw my zoölogist. He was a professor now and getting famous. Showed me a book he 'd been writing entitled, "An Experimental Attempt to Justify the Weismannian Conception of the Germ Plasm in the Light of Recent Studies in Mendelism." Naturally, I didn't read it through, but there was a lot in it about hens, and the Professor allowed that he'd got the idea while he was working for me.

'Now that's good,' says I, 'and just what I want. But what you need after doing a job like that, is to come up and recuperate on the old farm, and have a nice cosy visit with your Uncle Silas. And while you're there,' says I, 'what's the matter with Burbanking the bantam yolk out of the Perkins hen, and Burbanking into its place the yolk of an English sparrow. If you could do that, I reckon it would give me about two eggs for one; and laying 'em would be so dead easy that the hens would keep it up right through the year.'

'Well,' said the Professor, 'I guess another summer's rest would do me good; only remember that I've been promoted since my last delightful visit with you, and my leisure is worth more than it used to be.'

'Darned if that Professor didn't do the trick as neat as a pin! He hatched me out a lot of chicks; and when those chicks grew up and commenced to lay eggs for themselves, they was as fine, full-sized, nice-looking eggs as you often see—but the yolks wa'n't bigger than a pea. And the hens on a diet of water and bone meal, would lay 'em while you 'd wait. They just rained eggs. Those hens would take a hunk of yolk, such as a common hen would use up on one egg; split it up into twelve parts; dab on twelve whites; wrap 'em up in their shells, and lay the whole dozen while an ordinary hen was cackling once.

'You 'd think I'd made money pretty fast now, wouldn't you, saving half my cost of production, and getting full price for my product? But I didn't. I lost on the Perkins' Improved. There was something the matter with those eggs. Hens laid 'em all right, and I just about got back the money I paid the Professor, when it came time to raise chickens and keep up the breed. I set upwards of five hundred
at once—and what do you suppose they hatched out? Whacking big English sparrows! Not a chicken in the whole blamed lot. The Professor said that was the way with the English sparrow, it was always crowding out other birds. He wrote another book about it, and they made him head of his department; and then swapped him off for a German, so that he got a year abroad and lectured before Emperor William. But that didn't do me any good. That's the way with them Harvard College professors. They ain't practical enough, and they don't keep in touch with the plain people.

"Still, I suppose I ought not to complain I'm the only man in America that's turning out an adulterated egg, and I suppose I hadn't ought to be so durned ambitious."