

from EATING MAMMALS

"I have a rather unusual dinner ahead of me," Mulligan said. "Tonight, I will be eating furniture."

I looked at him, but quickly diverted my stare; I realised that I was in the company of a madman.

"I am," he continued, "an eating specialist, although, if I say so myself, of a rather exclusive kind. Not an attraction, in the normal sense. My performances are entirely private affairs. But perhaps you have seen something of my profession, or heard of it at least?"

I assured him that I had not, shaking my head vigorously.

"And in the pub, or at the fair, have you never seen men competing to be the fastest with a yard of ale, to the delight of all around? And have you never heard of the great pie-eating competitions, of tripe-swallowing and the like?"

I had to admit that I had.

"Well," he said, turning his palms upwards humbly, "every profession has its amateurs, its quaint traditions and its side-street hobbyists. And every profession has also its experts, its virtuosi, its aristocrats. I, if I may be so bold as to say so, am of the latter category: a gentleman eater."

And thus he began a narrative which took us across the great oceans, to places and society which, even in the depths of despair during the War, I had hardly dreamt existed.

He recounted incredible tales of things which he had consumed, of churns of milk in Belgian monasteries, a grilled lion's paw in Baghdad, sinkfuls of pasta ("Tubes, my boy, the biggest possible! Pound for pound they look more!"); of a forty-five chitterling marathon in Brittany, ten kilos of roast cod in Bilbao, seven pickled mice for a bet in Marrakech. He spoke of those fine clients who sought a little extra zest

to their dinner parties in Rome, Kabul, Delhi, London, Frankfurt, inviting him to their holiday entertainments in Goa, Rimini, Monte Carlo and Thessaloniki. On a visit to Tokyo he had consumed so much sushi that, in listening to him, one felt as if one were floating on a sea of raw fish; in Constantinople his ability to finish off an entire roast goat in little over half a day had so enthused one of the dignitaries privileged enough to witness the spectacle that Mulligan was presented not only with a belly dancer for the night, but was invited to extract and keep the bulging ruby which adorned her navel. Along the Magreb he had sucked the eyes out of more dead animals than he cared to remember, and the glittering rewards for such fripperies were staggering indeed. To crumbling European castles he had travelled, there to gorge on whatever his noble amphitryon decreed: seventeen pairs of bull's testicles at the table of the Duke of Alba in Salamanca; inconceivable quantities of sausage for any number of gibbering, neurotic central-European counts; regular sojourns to the seats of the Dukes of Argyle, Dumfriesshire and sundry other Scottish lairds, each one desperate that Mulligan improve upon some or other haggis-eating record, or simply curious to know how quickly their national dish could disappear down the throat of one man. For a time he was in huge demand in the USA, where he set a string of records for chicken and ribs throughout the Southern States; he amazed the Romanian Jews in New York with his evident partiality for ridding any restaurant of all its chopped liver and the relish with which he glugged down whole pitchers of schmaltz as if it were... well, metaphors are hardly appropriate; the Ashkenazim wouldn't have him, but he didn't mind, there were plenty of other sects, plenty of other religions, to astound; he even did a promotion for the pro-prohibition Methodists, drinking the body weight of a six-year-old child in lemonade, presumably to illustrate that purity and excess can coexist. In one particularly prolific

afternoon's work notched up a record of sixty-two hot dogs (even before Babe Ruth's achievement) at a public demonstration sponsored by Wurtz's Wieners, a Chicago sausage company owned by one of those immigrants who really wants you to mispronounce his name.

On he went, and as the list became more and more preposterous, my astonishment and incredulity grew in equal measure. This man, I told myself, was not only mad but also a great fabulist. However, I must tell you, before we go any further, that The Great Michael Mulligan was, in recounting these stories, very far from invention, for the truth was that he had eaten things far more extraordinary, more extraordinary indeed than he dared mention.

**This extract is a condensed version of the opening pages of the novella 'Eating Mammals', as read by the author for a Perennial/HarperCollins recording.**