

How to Know and How to Find the Best Mushrooms



Coprinus Comatus

By Eloise Roorback

ONE of the many good things that the United States department of agriculture is doing is the sending out of bulletins relating to our edible and poisonous mushrooms.

Meadows and open woods offer us the choicest of foods, but we pass their gifts by, either because our eyes are unseeing or because, having no knowledge, we are afraid of them.

But when our Uncle Samuel takes the trouble to describe in simple language some of the common varieties we would be foolish indeed not to take advantage of his instruction.

If man's efforts to grow food fail now and then there is always nature's unfailing crop of wholesome mushrooms to fall back upon. And there is nothing more delicious or nourishing.

No fruit or vegetable can gratify our love of beauty more fully or give us greater romance in the gathering.

There are several kinds of fungi far superior in flavor and delicacy to the ordinary field mushroom or agaricus campestris, which is the one generally seen in our markets.

All through the Santa Cruz mountains are pounds and pounds of delicious food going to waste because knowledge concerning fungi is scarce. It is, of course, most important that we be cautious, but a due amount of common sense, coupled with careful study, ought to be safeguard enough.

One of the easiest varieties to distinguish and one that is said to have no poisonous counterpart is the coprinus comatus. The common name, if so little known a thing has a common name, is horsehair mushroom—comatus meaning "hairy" and therefore suggesting the name.

Grows in the Open Woods

It grows in the open woods, along the roadside or at the edge of pastures, sometimes in groups, sometimes singly. When in condition to eat it is pure white, shaggy soft hairs tipped with brown hanging unevenly around, with pink gills. It is cylindrical in shape, with an average height of five to six inches, though I have seen them fully 10 and 12 inches high. It has a little bald head, of a soft light brown color generally. The stem is pure white, hollow, and has a little ring or collar of white, unattached, somewhere up or down its length. Sometimes it is caught by a fine thread near the top; sometimes it is broken and hanging quite loosely near the base.

Nothing cleaner or daintier looking can be imagined than a colony of these white closed umbrellas that look as if a party of fairies had stuck their hands in the ground and were just round the corner waiting for us to get out of sight before claiming their property. They never unfold until their edible stage has passed, when they begin to show that peculiar faculty of all coprinus, that of turning black and melting away; deliquescing is the proper name for this process. The black ink-like fluid drips from the expanded edge, staining the grass or ground or mushroom that is near it.

So, remembering that this mushroom is almost pure white (just browned a little on top and along the tips of shaggy hairs), gills pink or flesh color; that it is cylindrical in shape, only expanding when the edible stage is over; noting also that the stem is hollow, and making sure that it is growing in a clean place, you can begin a hunt for a most appetizing treat.

After the first rains, when the ground is well soaked, you can begin to search for them. Go into the open woods, where the light and shade is about equal, and very likely you will find them alongside the path or the old wood road that you walk on. It requires a trained eye to find the first mushroom.

You stand still and look carefully at the ground and see nothing but leaves or pebbles or clods of earth or patches of grass. Some expert points out one little brown, leaf-like spot and you see then it is not a leaf, but a mushroom. Looking closer, more seem to jump into sight. It is as if a magic veil had been removed and you wonder why you could not have seen them before.

I have looked at a plot of ground, seeing nothing that I was looking for—then a little variation in shape or the color of a leaf would catch my attention. It is the mushroom I am searching for, and so, knife in hand, I go down on my knees and dig it up. Next to it is another, next to that another, then a whole clump, and soon a whole basket is filled from a few feet of ground that I was just about to give up as impossible. The hunters tell us that when they are looking for deer they see only deer. So when we look for mushrooms we do not see the leaves, sticks or stones so much, but only mushrooms catch our eye.

A Delicious Method

There are many ways to cook these mushrooms. Here is one way to prepare coprinus comatus: Wash carefully under a hydrant, so that the dirt

particles are removed from the gills. Break into small sections, using the stem as well as the top. Put a small piece of butter in the frying pan and when hot throw in the broken mushrooms. Cover with lid and let simmer or fry slowly. When tender (in perhaps 15 minutes) put in enough milk to cover well and thicken with flour and butter. Add salt. This is one of the best ways of preparing them, but they can be cooked with beefsteak, broiled, fried or baked.

Coprinus comatus, horsehair or shaggy mane mushroom:

Cap or pileus—White. Tips of shaggy hairs light brown. Cylindrical in shape when young, expanding into bell shape when older and melting away in inky manner. Average height of perfect specimen, five or six inches.

Stem or stipe—White, hollow.

Ring—Generally unattached, though sometimes hanging by a hair near top of stem; sometimes laying on ground at base of stem.

Gills—White or tinged with pink when young, turning black when old. Spores—Black, elliptical.

Flesh—Delicate, dainty, nutty flavor somewhat. One of the finest of all the mushrooms.

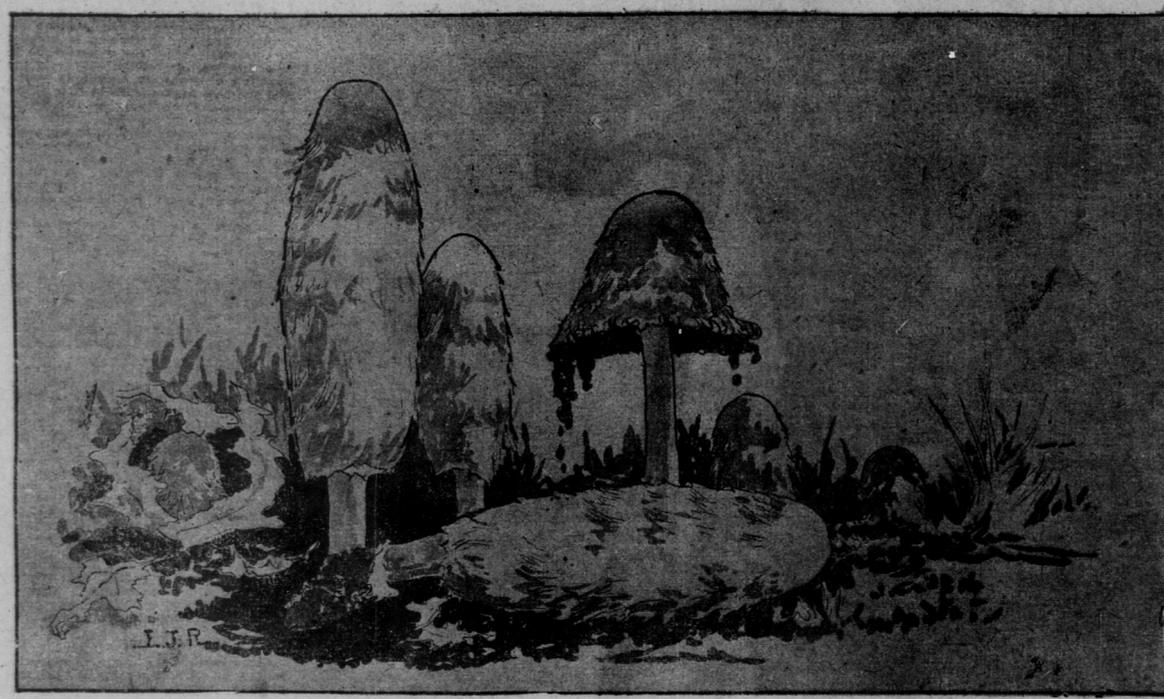
Time—Fall, after first rain.

Habitat—Open woods, by roadsides, along cleared trails or edge of pastures.

Authorities consulted—Various bulletins issued by United States department of agriculture; Nina L. Marshall, "The Mushroom Book"; William H. Gibson, "Edible Toadstools and Mushrooms."



CROWN SECTION
a - GILLS
b - RING
c - HOLLOW STEM



Hamilton Gibson tells of making a very good ink from the coprinus and writing or drawing with it. At least one can take a little stick and scrawl its own name with its own ink over the smooth ground. This strange manner of melting away makes it of special interest to students, though it is not so fine from the standpoint of mere beauty.

This is one of the black spored species and it disseminates its spores in this inky manner.

Limelight on the Gentle Art of Getting Up

By Will Scarlet

IVES of great men all remind us that biographers have sweat blood in their efforts to tell even the most trivial details concerning the persons of whom they wrote. As a consequence we today possess the delectable information that Tennyson reveled in mutton chops; that Nero used a green diamond as a monocle; that Washington joined the Masons; that Landor once worked up an appetite by throwing his cook out of the window. Certainly, the biographers have done themselves proud.

Biographers are singularly reticent on this point. They don't seem to know—at any rate they don't choose to tell us—how their heroes and their heroines began the day. From one point of view, to be sure, they are perfectly justified. How a man tumbles—or crawls—out of bed is, after all, that man's private business and as such should be hidden from the unhallowed gaze of a curious world. But the letters a man writes are likewise strictly private and yet biographers make no scruple of editing and publishing the most confidential correspondence of great men. The letters, they tell us, are of interest because they throw a sidelight on character. But does not the way in which a man vacates his pillow likewise throw a sidelight on character? Of course it does, and a clear white light at that. After all a man may be posing when he writes a letter; he cannot be posing when he wakes up. For this reason and others it is by far more educational to know the details of Abelard's arising than to learn by heart all the nice things he was wont to write to lady Heloise.

Jamie Boswell is rightly regarded as the prince of biographers, and he occupies his pedestal chiefly because he tells us what we all crave to know—when and how the great Dr. Johnson was wont to disengage himself from the arms of Morpheus. The gruff old lexicographer used to rise early—in the afternoon. He went to bed at 4 in the morning and dreamed dreams emanating from numerous serves of stewed kidneys and countless "dishes" of potatoes. His waking hour was impressive in the extreme. Boswell himself could not do it justice. How the author of "Rasselas" must have twisted and groaned and snorted! It is not generally known that Buffon, the French naturalist, is the autobiographer par excellence; but he is. The reason is obvious. He gives a charmingly detailed description of his manner of getting up. Buffon, it appears, was the victim of good intentions. Each night he resolved to rise with the sun, and each morning the sun got so far ahead of him that he abandoned the attempt. Something had to be done. He called his valet

"Joseph," said the naturalist, "I want to get up early."
"Yes, monsieur."
"And I want you to call me early."
"Yes, monsieur."
"And if I don't wake up, call me again."
"Yes, monsieur."
"And if I don't move, come in and shake me."
"Yes, monsieur."
"And if I don't get up right away, well—you make me."
"Yes, monsieur."
Joseph was bowing himself out of the room when Buffon called him back.
"And Joseph."
"Yes, monsieur."
"If you succeed I'll give you a handful of francs."

Next morning the valet, alert and cheerful, rapped gently at his master's door. No response. He rapped loudly. Silence still. He entered and called out that it was time to be stirring. Nothing stirred. Then he took Buffon by the shoulders and shook him gently but firmly. Buffon grunted and told Joseph to let him alone and go prospecting in a strange country. Joseph gave up in despair. The next day a handful of francs is something not to be despised. Joseph got an inspiration. Like a flash he reached over, tore the bedclothes from about his master's head and hung them over the foot of the bed. Then, grabbing up the pitcher of water that stood on the washstand, he emptied it deftly all over the bed and dashed for the door.

He dashed not a moment too soon. The dripping naturalist took a flying leap, landed in the middle of the floor, and started after the terrorized valet. The chase lasted several minutes. Buffon fell upon Joseph, pounded away with both fists and kicked as effectively as he could with bare feet.

An hour later the bell rang in Buffon's study. Joseph answered it not without trepidation. The master held out a handful of glittering francs. "Here, you scoundrel! You've earned your money."
Getting up is really a fine art. This fact was unconsciously recognized by a friend of mine whom I once accompanied on a fortnight's hunting trip. We camped in the open, so those of us who chanced to be awake had the opportunity of observing how Smith was wont to shake off this downy sleep. His elaborate preparations began the evening before. He selected double blankets, extra long, and stretched them out in a single row. Then he began at his feet and wound and wound those blankets around him till he bore a striking resemblance to an Egyptian mummy. Thus arrayed, he would execute a stage fall and sleep the sleep of the just. One might think Smith could just as well turn in like a Christian; but Smith knew what he was doing.

When, some few minutes later, he came chattering up the hill he said absolutely nothing about the effect of a sudden surprise on his constitution. Just what he did say is immaterial and irrelevant.

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard," the Wise Man sweetly advises us, "and learn wisdom." Truly an excellent bit of counsel. But would you learn the gentle art of getting up? Then seek knowledge from the family cat. See, yonder, there is Ebony asleep in the sun. Call his name and place that saucer of milk temptingly near. Then stand aside and observe his feline majesty in the supreme act of the day.

Ebony deliberately stretches his fore legs, then his hind legs, then all his legs together. He repeats this delightful operation several times, for wise is he in his generation and quick to see the advantage of some simple physical exercise. He seems to have fallen asleep again; but no! He thinks his eyes slowly and luxuriously at least a score of times and then opens his mouth to its capacity and yawns. Oh, ye that would master the gentle art of getting up, observe well the manner of Ebony's yawning. There is nothing half-hearted, nothing conventional about that yawn. It is all embracing. So massive and tangible is it that Ebony must have improvised it at the very tip of his gently undulating sable tail. And now Ebony grunts placidly—it is surely a relief to get that yawn out of his system—and slowly, very slowly, rises to his feet. He gravely sniffs the morning air, suddenly spies that saucer of milk, and the rest is business.

The Earthquake And the Spinster

By Frederick W. Ely

IN these days of "reconstruction," when the word is upon everybody's lips and we are all so intensely interested in the rebuilding of our beloved city, I think it would not be at all amiss to consider the wonderful work of "reconstruction" that has been going on in the lives of some, ever since the morning of the "great disaster." We certainly got an awful shaking up that morning, and some of the people I know were shaken out of the habits of a lifetime and somehow or other have never been able to regain them. I have time and space for but one illustration, and while it may all sound like a fable I can vouch for the truth of every word, and consideration for the feelings of the prim spinster alone prevents my giving you the evidence.

This "bachelor woman" was born in the early days of San Francisco, how early I have never had the courage to inquire. Her family was fairly well to do and after completing her education she settled down at home to wait for the man who never came. Being an only child, petted and humored, she gradually acquired very selfish habits, loved to be waited upon and was very fond of sympathy; often she would remain in bed for days at a time, feigning illness, simply for the pleasure of being waited upon and sympathized with. This habit grew upon her until for 20 years before the "fire" she had never left her bed and had never seen a human being excepting her mother and physician, her father having died several years previously; so "dinky" was she that she could not tolerate the sound of a stranger's voice. The physician claimed that there was no evidence of any disease, either mental or physical, but as her mother found it much easier to humor than oppose her she was allowed to have her own way. Her meals were brought to her bedside and often she would have to be fed. She was utterly helpless.

This condition of affairs, went on, as I have said, for 20 years. The morning of the earthquake she was sleeping peacefully, little dreaming that the day held in store for her, nor that this was to be the morning of her "resurrection." The first shake brought their chimney down and sent it crashing through the roof into the room where Miss Prudence was sleeping. With a bound and a scream she was out of bed, huddled into some clothing, rushed into her mother's room, assisted her to dress and then made her way out into the street. There she got acquainted with her neighbors, made her mother comfortable and laid plans for possible emergencies. That night she and her mother camped out in the back yard. The next morning, feeling confident that they would soon have to leave the old home, Miss Prudence pulled herself together and for once became the head of the family. She gathered together all the small articles of value and buried them, made up a bundle of clothing and bedding and thus laden made her way with her mother to Fort Mason and later on to the Presidio, where she lived for two weeks in a tent, doing everything for herself and mother, even standing for hours at a time in the "bread line" waiting for rations. When conditions became more settled she rented a little flat, still doing her own work. Then when the insurance money came in she hustled around, consulted architects and carpenters and soon had her house under way. A short time ago it was completely finished and her mother now occupies a much more beautiful home than the one destroyed by fire. She has also several lists under course of construction, attending to all the little details herself. Her cheeks are rosy, her eyes bright and her step buoyant. She frequents the theater and occasionally the skating rink. She is often seen taking a spin in an auto with a smart looking sea captain and the early days of the new year will see her safely launched upon the sea of matrimony.

Was not the earthquake a blessing to such as she and is not this masterpiece of reconstruction worth a passing notice?

A Fiendish Tree Found in Sumatra

By Burton Jackson Wyman

WONDERFUL indeed are the things of nature which scientific research and exploration are bringing to light. One of the most wonderful, and undoubtedly the most terrible of all the things which have been discovered, at least so far as the vegetable kingdom is concerned, is a tree commonly known among botanists as the "devil tree." Strange though it may seem, this tree devours living creatures, such as birds, small wild animals and in a few instances, if reports of explorers who have seen the tree be true, even human beings have been its victims.

When it is full grown the devil tree, which is shaped like a huge pine-apple, is from 12 to 15 feet in height and measures about 12 feet in circumference at its base. The leaves, which are from 15 to 18 inches wide and nearly 20 inches thick, are of a dark greenish color and hang from the top of the tree, their tips touching the ground, giving the whole tree the appearance of the folds of a closed umbrella. Just above the portion of the trunk where the leaves shoot out are two round discs growing one over the other. From these discs a sweet juice is constantly exuding. It is this juice that lures the victims to the tree. One drop is said to be sufficient to cause immediate intoxication.

Around these plates, or discs, are set long, green tendrils, resembling the long arms of the cuttle fish. When inactive, as they always are unless disturbed by the touch of a foreign body, the tendrils hang limply toward the ground, to all appearance as harmless as the ivy which clings to the oak. But let any living creature, a bird, mouse, or whatever it may be, come in contact with them, instantly these long, snakelike arms are set in motion and before the victim—having already tasted of the juice and become intoxicated—is able to make its escape, it is entangled and firmly held. But this is not the only action which takes place while the tendrils are holding the victim in their grasp. No sooner is the creature caught within the snare than these great boardlike leaves begin to rise until at last they stand upright, forming a mighty press. Little by little life is crushed out of the victim. Still the pressure increases, causing the body to be ground into a pulp. It is this that the purpose of the tree is accomplished. As one might drink the liquid from crushed fruit, so this terrible monster of the vegetable world, through the suckers that cover the long tendrils, gathers up the crushed mass of its victim.

As long as there is a particle of the creature's body left upon which to feed, the leaves remain in their upright position; but the moment the suckers have finished their work and there is no longer anything but bones and feathers, if a bird be its prey, the leaves relax and fall back to their original position, permitting what is left in their grasp to drop back to the ground at the base of the tree. It was in these piles of bones that a skeleton of a human being was found, thus showing how powerful are the leaves of this fiendish tree.

The devil tree, so far as is known at the present time, is found only in the island of Sumatra, in Australia and in Mexico. The one which was discovered in Mexico only a short time ago impressed upon the botanist who found it that all he had read as to the habits of this species of trees was true. After watching it for a number of days and seeing it devour a large bird, he thought that for a personal experiment he would touch one of the tendrils. Much to his surprise he found that before his finger could be withdrawn, the tip of the arm was wrapped around his finger so securely that it took all the strength he possessed to wrench it from the viselike grip in which it was held. In doing so, however, all the flesh was torn from the bone. All the while he was in the clutches of this one tendril, the other arms were reaching out as far as possible in an effort to wrap themselves around his body.

