

# The Great Tradition

By J. D. Beresford

It was as far back as 1861 that Virginia Marvell made her first marmalade. She was only twenty-three then. She and John had been married five months.

“Splendid,” said John when he tasted it. “Splendid; ever so much better than that bought stuff.”

The pucker of wistful anxiety in Virginia’s forehead was instantly smoothed away. “It’s much cheaper, of course,” she said, with bright eyes.

“Splendid!” repeated John with emphasis, and he went over and kissed her.

In ’62 the verdict was less enthusiastically pronounced.

“Mm,” said John. “Mm.... Yes? Not quite so good as last year’s.”

“I’m afraid the oranges were not quite ripe,” said Virginia absently. “Was that baby crying?”

The first failure occurred in ’65. Something went wrong altogether that year. John, too, was rather worried about business matters, and perhaps he said more than he need have said. Anyhow, John, the younger, aged three and a half, seemed able to deal with the marmalade that his father had declared “uneatable.”

When John and Virginia made up their quarrel, however, John said, “Ah! well, you spoilt me at first, you know. That first marmalade you made in ’62. . . . Eh? wonderful stuff. Don’t you remember?”

Up to that time the successive samples of Virginia’s skill had been tested by a comparison with the great year of ’61. After this another standard was gradually adopted.

When little John went back to school in ’76, with three pots of that year’s manufacture in his school-box, his father said to him, “Good stuff, that—eh, Johnnie?—but you should have tasted the marmalade your mother made in the year after we were married. She’s never done as well as that again.”

By the time littlest John, of the third generation, had made his appearance, Virginia and the original John had quite made up their minds that that first make of marmalade was due either to a special freak of nature, some strange growth of miraculous oranges, or to some transcendent, if ephemeral, inspiration vouchsafed to Virginia.

Little John, who was now doing well in business on his own account, accepted the story of the wonderful ’61 without a tremor of doubt. He had been brought up in the great tradition.

He could no more have questioned that tradition than he could have questioned the authority of the Thirty-nine Articles.

John and Virginia had other children, and littlest John was but the first of many others of the third generation. Among them all, the marmalade of ’61 was regarded as an important fact of the family history.

At some Christmas reunion in the old house little John would pass a reflective hand over his bald head and say, “Ah, I should like to have tasted that, but you and father ate it all up before I was born, eh, mother?” And dear old Virginia would bridle a little and put her cap straight, and old John would get prolix and have to be suppressed.

Then one day a miracle really did come to pass. For in 1910, after the youngest Virginia had had her first lesson in the great art of making marmalade, and when that bright-eyed young woman had mounted on a chair to reach the topmost shelf of the old store-cupboard, she espied a

dim shape lurking in the furthest obscurity. She dared an exploration, and discovered an old-fashioned stone jar. "Why, here's a pot left over from last year," she said.

The youngest Virginia carried the old pot to the light. "Why," she exclaimed breathlessly, "why! it's . . . Grandma, it's . . . it's a pot of the 'Old Sixty-one' "

"Well, to be sure, there, there, well I never," quavered old Virginia, still seeking her spectacles. "I always did say that we were a pot short; but what with your father being born, and one thing and another . . ."

They decided to make it a great occasion.

All the family were pressingly invited.

The big dining-room was full to overflowing, and old John, still in possession of many of his faculties, was brought in and seated in the big arm-chair.

He wanted to make a speech; but young John intervened, and as he was a member of Parliament it certainly seemed probable that he would be better able to do justice to so great an occasion.

Then the marmalade was opened. It was crystallised into a solid lump, but everyone was given a little to taste. There was just enough to go round.

Old John said "Ah!" and wandered off into reminiscences to which no one listened.

Old Virginia, shaking and bridling, her cap all on one side, mouthed and mumbled, her face one wrinkled pucker of smiling gratification. . . .

"Mm," said young John, M.P. "Mm. It's been kept too long. It's got spoiled."