

Buttered Side Down

Buttered Side Down by Edna Ferber is a captivating collection of short stories that humorously and poignantly explore the unpredictable twists of ordinary lives and human resilience.

PART. I -Buttered Side Down

"BUTTERED SIDE DOWN" opens with a bold statement about the allure of New York as the quintessential setting for magazine stories, then promptly shifts gear, revealing the narrative will not bow to this cliché. Instead, it transports us to Chicago, specifically to the Nottingham curtain district, an area characterized by its ubiquitous "Rooms With or Without Board" signs, smoke-stained curtains, and a strong favor for dishes like creamed cabbage over finer delicacies. Here, we meet Gertie, a diligent department store clerk who resides in a boarding house, highlighting her nightly beauty regime, a task performed more out of routine and necessity than desire.

Gertie's life is a blend of mundanity and aspiration, underscored by her dedication to maintaining her appearance despite the exhaustion from standing all day. The narrative reveals her inner monologue, filled with a weary recognition of her own solitude in the bustling city, contrasting sharply with her nostalgic memories of Beloit, Wisconsin, where personal connections seemed more tangible. The chapter delves into Gertie's late-night emotional breakdown, interrupted by the Kid Next Door, introducing a moment of unexpected human connection through the thin boarding house walls. Their exchange, initially centered around an offer of brandy as a cure for Gertie's sobs, evolves into a shared confession of loneliness and displacement.

The conversation between Gertie and Gus (the Kid Next Door) transitions from their rooms to a quiet nocturnal meeting on the front stoop, where they exchange stories of their small-town origins, the disillusionment with city life, and the harsh reality of their unglamorous jobs. Gus's empathy towards Gertie's situation and his candid disclosure of his own struggles foster a bond formed not only from shared experiences but also from a mutual understanding of each other's vulnerabilities. This encounter, humble yet profound, offers a glimpse into the human need for connection, understanding, and a sense of belonging.

Their dialogue, sprinkled with humor and candid reflections, covers the complexities of adjusting to city life, the invisibility amidst the urban sprawl, and the poignant yearning for the familiarity and identity they left behind in their respective small towns. The chapter closes with these two characters finding solace in each other's company, hinting at the potential for companionship and perhaps a shared resilience against the backdrop of the impersonal city.

PART. II -Buttered Side Down

"The Man Who Came Back" from "Buttered Side Down" delves into the life of Ted Terrill, who struggles with his past as a convict. After serving time for embezzling bank funds in a failed speculation, Ted returns home with the intent to leave immediately after visiting his mother's grave. His prison term had been unconventional—no prison pallor or shorn hair for him, thanks to the reformative approach of his prison's superintendent. His involvement in sports and the lack of typical convict features allowed him to blend back into society more seamlessly than most.

Once home, Ted's attempt to escape his past is thwarted by his innate sense of belonging and the unforeseen kindness of Jo Haley, the owner of the Haley House, who offers him a job. Despite Ted's reservations, influenced by a desire to start anew where his past is unknown, he accepts the job, motivated by Jo's straightforward offer and the lack of compelling alternatives.

In his new role, Ted faces ostracization and suspicion from the community and his colleagues, with the exception of Birdie Callahan, a waitress at Haley House, who becomes a friend and confidante. Birdie's support and the respect of Jo Haley offer Ted glimmers of hope and acceptance. However, his stability is challenged when a shortage in the accounts is discovered, and Ted is again under a cloud of suspicion for theft.

The narrative takes a dramatic turn when Birdie reveals the true culprit is Minnie Wenzel, another employee engaged to marry into wealth, who stole the missing funds to buy extravagant clothing for her wedding. Her confession and the subsequent uncovering of her deceit by Jo Haley and Birdie shift the blame away from Ted, vindicating him.

Through the motif of redemption and the power of community, the chapter illustrates the complexities of human nature, the difficulty of overcoming past mistakes, and the importance of trust and support in enabling individuals to reinvent themselves. Birdie's loyalty and the opportunity provided by Jo highlight the transformative impact of second chances, underscoring the narrative's central theme: it's possible to come back from disgrace, but the journey requires both internal resolve and the faith of others.

PART. III -Buttered Side Down

"The chapter from 'Buttered Side Down' titled 'What She Wore' delves into the complexities of dressing characters in literature, focusing on the protagonist, Sophy Epstein. Sophy, a young, underpaid shoe clerk in a downtown loft, dons a provocatively tight and sleazy black dress, much to the internal disapproval of the protagonist. This attire showcases her societal and economic struggles, symbolizing her rebellion against the plight of overwork and underpayment prevalent among women of her standing.

Sophy's attire not only reveals her financial constraints but also her defiance against societal norms, especially evident in her interaction with Louie, a fellow shoe clerk from Oskaloosa, Iowa, whose traditional and conservative outlook contrasts sharply with Sophy's city-hardened cynicism. Louie, inexperienced in the ways of the city, is taken aback by Sophy's dress, which reflects her personality and life's hardships. His attempts to convince Sophy to adopt a more conservative attire are met with resistance, as her dress serves as armor in her battle for respect and survival in the harsh urban environment.

The narrative highlights the disparity between the protagonist's and Sophy's backgrounds and values, showcasing their differing responses to urban life's challenges. Sophy's low-cut dress becomes a focal point of the story, representing the broader societal issues of class disparity, gender expectations, and the struggle for identity and respect. It serves as a symbol of her individuality, defiance, and the societal pressures that shape the personas of those living on the economic fringes.

The chapter concludes with a sense of realization and change for both characters. Louie secures a better job through a chance encounter, suggesting a turn in his fortunes, while Sophy remains bound by her circumstances, her attire a constant reminder of her struggle and resilience. The chapter skillfully uses fashion as a narrative device to explore themes of poverty, gender norms, and the search for dignity in a relentless urban landscape."

PART. IV -Buttered Side Down

In "A Bush League Hero" from "Buttered Side Down," Edna Ferber tells the story of Ivy Keller, a recent homecomer from a select school for young ladies, who soon finds herself infatuated with Rudie Schlachweiler, a local baseball pitcher. Ivy's transformation from an uninterested homebody into a devout baseball fan serves as the backdrop for a tale that explores themes of hero worship, young love, and the eventual confrontation with reality.

Rudie Schlachweiler, lauded in his small town both for his pitching abilities and his appealing looks, captures Ivy's heart. Their romance is woven through the seasons of baseball, with Ivy's passion for the game, and particularly for Rudie, deepening as the summer progresses. Despite her initial lack of interest, Ivy soon cannot imagine her life without the excitement of the baseball games or the presence of Rudie. Her days soon revolve entirely around the sport and her burgeoning relationship with him.

However, the relationship is viewed with skepticism by Ivy's parents, particularly her father, who sees a baseball player as an unsuitable match for his daughter. This skepticism is rooted in the social standing of athletes within their community and the transient, insecure nature of a career in sports. Ivy's father forces her to agree to a break from Rudie, insisting that if their feelings are genuine, they will withstand a separation.

The climax of the story occurs when Ivy and her father visit Rudie in Slatersville, Ohio, expecting him to be pursuing a prominent baseball career. Instead, they find him working in a shoe store, his aspirations of playing in the major leagues apparently abandoned. This confrontation with reality forces Ivy to reevaluate her feelings and the nature of her attraction to Rudie. Despite her initial heartbreak, she realizes that her love for Rudie was more about the thrill of baseball and the excitement of being in love than about Rudie himself as a person.

Six months later, with the insight of time and distance, Ivy acknowledges that Rudie's pitching was indeed flawed and that her infatuation was perhaps misguided. The story concludes with her casting aside her romantic notions in favor of a more pragmatic outlook on life and love.

Ferber uses the backdrop of baseball to explore the nature of small-town life, the dynamics of father-daughter relationships, and the journey from youthful idealism to mature understanding. "A Bush League Hero" is not just a story about baseball; it is a coming-of-age tale that mirrors the bittersweet realities of growing up and the sobering truths that often accompany our most cherished dreams.

PART. V -Buttered Side Down

In "The Kitchen Side of the Door," the grandeur of New Year's Eve in New York contrasts sharply with the gritty reality behind the scenes in the kitchen of the Newest Hotel. Amidst the chaotic celebrations marked by debauchery and excess among the rich and glamorous, Miss Gussie Fink, the kitchen's checker, stands as a beacon of order and diligence. Despite the surrounding decadence, including a Russian Grand Duke look-alike enjoying champagne from a lady's slipper, and other guests indulging in the hotel's extravagant offerings, Miss Fink remains focused on her duty. Her job entails verifying the content of the waiters' trays, ensuring everything served is accounted for.

Amid this night of revelry, the divide between public opulence and private sorrow is starkly evident. Miss Fink, once engaged in a flirtation with Heiny, now a waiter turned Henri, experiences the pang of their ended relationship. Henri's new status as a waiter has elevated him from the kitchen to the dining room, straining their romance. The scorn and envy of their coworkers add to Miss Fink's woes.

The story reveals the harsh realities and human dramas unfolding away from the guests' view. In the kitchen, Miss Fink's integrity and no-nonsense attitude keep the staff in check, much to the chagrin of some, like Tony the Crook, a waiter known for his devious ways.

As midnight strikes and celebrations peak, Miss Fink's world collides with the outside glamour when she is asked to assist in the hotel's bar. There, she encounters tales of Henri's service to a lavish party indulging in expensive champagne, marking his complete transformation and distancing from her world.

However, the night takes a sobering turn when a drunken woman from Henri's table collapses, revealing the ugly aftermath of the night's excess. In this moment, the facade of Henri's new life cracks, allowing him to see the genuine, unblemished kindness and simplicity in Miss Fink, contrasting sharply with the tainted glamour he has been serving. This incident realigns their relationship, as they find solace in their shared escape to the normalcy and simplicity of a humble meal at Joey's, finding comfort in each other's company away from the pretense of their New Year's Eve roles.

This chapter highlights the contrasts between appearance and reality, the superficial versus the meaningful, and ultimately, the return to genuine connections and values amidst the superficiality of societal celebrations.

PART. VI -Buttered Side Down

In "One of the Old Girls" from "Buttered Side Down," we meet Effie Bauer, an accomplished and prosperous department store employee well-versed in the latest trends in fashion and personal adornment. Despite her professional success, Effie's personal life has not followed the conventional path of early marriage and family; she has remained single into middle age, not out of choice, but due to a lack of opportunity in her younger years. Effie is portrayed as a capable and independent woman, yet one who harbors a hidden longing for domestic bliss and companionship.

Gabe I. Marks, a regular visitor to Chicago and an admirer of Effie, proposes marriage during one of their dinner dates, marking their twenty-fifth outing together. Initially, Effie rejects his proposal, citing financial stability and a life of independence as reasons she cannot embrace a late-in-life marriage starting from economic scratch. Despite her professional achievement and self-sufficiency, a serious illness—typhoid—leads Effie to reassess her life's priorities, recognizing the value of companionship and intimacy over material success and autonomy.

After her recovery, Gabe renews his proposal, and Effie, moved by her realization and Gabe's steadfast interest, accepts. This change signifies a shift in Effie's values, acknowledging that the emotional fulfillment of a loving relationship can outweigh the accolades of career success and financial independence. Their story concludes on an optimistic note, with Effie's return to work marked by a renewed sense of self and a hopeful future shared with Gabe.

This narrative subtly critiques societal expectations of women, highlighting the pressures to conform to specific roles and timelines. Through Effie's character, the chapter explores themes of loneliness, change, and the enduring human need for connection, irrespective of age or societal norms.

PART. VII -Buttered Side Down

"Maymeys from Cuba," part of Edna Ferber's "Buttered Side Down," unfolds the tale of Jennie, a young, unemployed, and famished woman in Chicago during wintertime. Jennie stares longingly at exotic fruits in a grocer's window, where affluent delicacies like peaches, grapes, and a curious item labeled "maymeys from Cuba" ignite in her a mix of desire and indignation. As hunger gnaws at her, Jennie reflects on the absurdity of such luxuries amidst her own dire need.

Her journey from the mesmerizing window display moves to a deeper exploration of urban desolation and hunger. Jennie's attempt at seeking employment or assistance is met with indifference or suspicion,

emphasizing the city's callousness towards its needy. Ferber describes Jennie's desperate wanderings through Chicago's eateries and food shops, her longing intensified by the sights and smells of food she cannot afford.

Jennie eventually finds herself in a department store's grocery section, surrounded by an array of delicacies. She barely sustains herself by cunningly sampling bits of cheese and sausage from different counters, avoiding detection by pretending interest in purchasing. The narrative sways between Jennie's dire situation and brief, illusory moments of relief through her small deceptions.

Her plight escalates in the store's Scottish bakery section, where, driven by desperation, she attempts to steal a scone, only to be caught. The public humiliation and her subsequent collapse under the weight of hunger and shame bring the story to its climax. In a poignant twist, a bystander mishears Jennie's faint murmur about "maymeys from Cuba," interpreting it as a personal identity revelation: that Jennie claims to be "Mamie from Cuba," hinting at the tragicomic misunderstanding of her real circumstances.

Through Jennie's story, Ferber critiques the stark economic inequalities and societal indifference to poverty, underscored by the irony of exotic fruit symbolizing both the zenith of luxury and the nadir of Jennie's despair. The narrative captures the essence of struggle and the human condition amidst the backdrop of a bustling, indifferent city.

PART. VIII -Buttered Side Down

In "The Leading Lady" from "Buttered Side Down", the story unfolds with the lead actress of a small touring play, engulfed in the solitude and monotony of her itinerant life, finding herself overwhelmed by loneliness in a dingy hotel room. Unlike the glamorous weeping seen on stage, her tears reveal the raw despair of her isolation, surrounded by the stale and depressing ambiance of her temporary lodgings. Her emotional breakdown is a poignant testament to the grueling reality behind the glittering facade of theatrical life, especially as contrasted with the mundane, fly-specked, and gaudily decorated environment she currently inhabits.

In a moment of resolute uplift from her despair, she notices a placard offering mundane services that hotels typically offer, pressing the call button in a bid for some human connection. This simple act invites Pearlie Schultz, a stenographer with a homely and comforting demeanor, into her life. Pearlie is presented as the antithesis of what one might expect in a savior; she is not the glamorous confidante associated with the leading lady's usual world—instead, she is ordinary, sensible, and deeply human.

Their interaction reveals the deep-seated need for genuine human connection and feminine camaraderie that the leading lady craves amidst the transient and artificial nature of her profession. Through a shared exploration of domestic joys, like discussing corset-cover patterns, they form an immediate and profound bond. This connection is a lifeline for the leading lady, pulling her from the brink of despair.

The narrative culminates in an escape to a local strawberry social, a setting far removed from the glitz of the theater. Here, against the backdrop of this innocent and communal festivity, the leading lady finds not only solace but also an unexpected joy in simple, sincere interactions. Pearlie's introduction of the leading lady to the townsfolk as her friend underscores themes of authenticity and acceptance. Contrary to her stage persona, she is embraced for her true self, further symbolizing the healing power of genuine relationships.

With deft emotional insight, the story illustrates the contrast between the opulence of stage life and the authenticity of small-town camaraderie. It's a celebration of unpretentious human connections, offering a testament to the old adage that sometimes, in seeking to comfort another, we find solace for ourselves. The leading lady's journey from despair to delight embodies a universal longing for belonging, showcasing the transformative power of kindness and community.

PART. IX -Buttered Side Down

In the bustling and diverse essence of South Clark Street, Chicago, marked by its eclectic mix of cultures and faces, lives Tony, the unique newsboy with a stand that seems to bridge the global divide. Tony sells newspapers from every conceivable place, making his stand a cornerstone for those yearning for a slice of home, wherever that may be. He is a testament to the fact that, despite his rough exterior, the heart of the community pulses through the tales shared and the papers sold.

The story unfolds with two seemingly different individuals, drawn unknowingly towards Tony's stand, each in search of a connection to their distant homelands through the familiar pages of their local newspapers. The elegant, city-hardened woman seeks the Kewaskum Courier, revealing her origins in a small Wisconsin town. In contrast, the man, with his unassuming manner and a longing in his eyes, asks for the London Times, hinting at his roots in England's tradition-rich soil.

Their simultaneous arrival at Tony's stand becomes a serendipitous meeting, each revealing through their choice of newspaper and subsequent conversation a deep-seated homesickness and a yearning to reconnect with their roots. Despite their outward differences, they find common ground in their shared desire to return to their hometowns, a longing amplified by the discovery of familiar news in the papers they hold.

This chance encounter leads to an honest exchange, peeling back the layers of bravado and city-slick veneer to reveal the vulnerabilities and simple human desires underneath. The story they each share is a journey of realization. The woman recounts her brief and disillusioning visit back to Kewaskum, realizing that while places remain static, people change, growing beyond the confines of their origins. The man shares a similar revelation, his return to England clashing with his now ingrained American sensibilities and lifestyle.

In a poignant conclusion, they part ways, not as strangers but as individuals touched by the understanding that homesickness is a universal sentiment, challenging yet illuminative. Their stories intertwine at Tony's news stand, a place that serves not just newspapers but doses of nostalgia, feeding the soul's craving for connection and belonging. They leave with a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of where home truly is, not in the geographical sense but in the spaces where they feel most needed, most alive.

Tony, the astute observer and unlikely catalyst for this heartfelt encounter, remains at his stand, a beacon for those adrift in the vast city, reminding us that sometimes, the journey back home is not to reclaim the past but to understand our place in the present.

PART. X -Buttered Side Down

He put his arm about her ample waist with its unlovely bulges, and pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that was neither perfunctory nor eager, but was, somehow, grateful.

Millie Whitcomb, of fancy goods and notions at Bascom's, inspired me with her comment on my last story's too-beautiful heroine, suggesting I write about an ugly girl instead. Millie, adorned in her lavender and gray, conjures images of elegant simplicity, contrasting sharply with the usual depiction of sales clerks. Her insight leads me to ponder realistic characters, steering clear of the clichéd transformation of plain Janes into stunning beauties by the novel's end. Thus, I choose Pearlie Schultz as my protagonist, a truly homely heroine, encompassing all that society deems unattractive, including her excessive weight. Unlike the conventional misfits who blossom unexpectedly, Pearlie remains unaltered in appearance throughout, challenging the narrative norms.

Pearlie's life, filled with unrequited yearnings and solitary musings in the shadow of societal beauty standards, paints a poignant picture. Her extraordinary culinary skills offer a stark contradiction to her personal life, highlighting the complex layers of human experience overlooked by superficial judgments. Her daily routine, marked by a mundane job and the pursuit of personal improvement through diet and exercise, speaks volumes of her inner struggles. Despite the lack of romantic attention, she finds solace in her family's affection and her passion for cooking, proving that fulfillment can come from sources beyond physical attractiveness.

The encounter with Sam Miller, a traveling salesman coping with the loneliness of his profession, opens a new chapter in Pearlie's life. Their shared sense of isolation and longing for home comforts breeds a unique companionship. Sam, engaged and deeply in love, finds in Pearlie a confidante and a reminder of the simple, yet profound pleasures of life. Pearlie's invitation to Sam for a homemade meal becomes a transformative experience for him, renewing his appreciation for genuine human connections and the art of cooking. Their final parting under the cover of darkness, where Pearlie requests a kiss, not for romance but for the experience itself, encapsulates the essence of Pearlie's journey. It's a bold act of self-assertion and a poignant closure to her longing for normalcy in a world that often overlooks the beauty within the homely.

PART. XI -Buttered Side Down

In "Sun Dried," Mary Louise, an aspiring writer and former teacher from Escanaba, Michigan, grapples with the challenges of city life in New York and her quest to break into the magazine world. The chapter opens with a universal moment of realization for many women—the sudden need to wash their hair. This seemingly mundane act sets the stage for Mary Louise's day as she temporarily abandons her struggling story, where her hero frustratingly remains lifeless, to attend to her personal care.

Amidst her routine, she finds herself combating the frustration of her hair washing ritual, notably hindered by the lack of a backyard—a luxury she reminisces about from her country living. Seeking solace and a makeshift solution, she ventures to the roof with parsley in hand, hoping to capture the essence of the pastoral life she misses. There, she encounters a cynical, collarless young man who disrupts her solitude and challenges her aspirations.

Their banter reveals Mary Louise's journey; she left her teaching career and the familiar comforts of home fueled by a dream to write, armed only with her savings and determination. Despite her efforts and the harsh reality of rejection letters, her spirit remains unbroken, as she vows to persevere until her dream is realized.

The young man, initially dismissive, finds himself drawn into Mary Louise's world, her straightforward charm, and the authenticity of her rural experiences. He advises her to draw inspiration from her roots and write about the simple, genuine moments of life, drastically different from the urban New York she struggles to grasp. His suggestion to focus on her strengths and the genuine simplicity of her past, coupled with his curious inquiry about her hair washing routine, leaves Mary Louise pondering the importance of maintaining her identity while adapting to her new environment.

This encounter, a blend of whimsy and realism, encapsulates the theme of the chapter: the clash between rural innocence and urban savvy, the persistence in the face of rejection, and the unexpected guidance that alters Mary Louise's perspective on her work and offers a glimmer of hope for her aspirations in the bustling city.

PART. XII -Buttered Side Down

Where the Car Turns at 18th tells the poignant story of Eddie Houghton, a young man from a small town whose life is transformed and ultimately destroyed by his decision to join the Navy. Inspired by a vivid billboard and the persuasive pitch of a recruiting officer, Eddie leaves his idyllic small-town life, filled with soda fountains, high school achievements, and a loving mother, for the promise of adventure, travel, and manhood offered by the Navy. However, the grim realities of military life, including the harsh companions he meets, clash violently with his sheltered upbringing and values.

Despite trying to adapt, Eddie becomes disillusioned with the life he finds himself in. The story progresses from the light-hearted beginnings of a young man's ambition and the town's innocent farewells to the dark end of Eddie's journey. His inability to reconcile the Navy's brutal world with his own clean, simple life back home leads to his desertion and tragic suicide. When Eddie's mother and the town learn of his fate, they are forced to confront the loss of the young man whose potential had once seemed boundless.

The narrative captures the stark contrast between small-town America's innocence and the harsh realities of the wider world, exploring themes of disillusionment, the loss of innocence, and the devastating impact of war and military life on young men like Eddie. Through Eddie's story, the narrative critiques the romanticized view of military service and the unpreparedness of young recruits for the mental and physical toll it exacts. The emotional resonance of the story lies in its depiction of Eddie's transformation from a beloved town figure into a victim of circumstances far beyond his control, symbolizing the loss of a generation's innocence.