OF PEASE PORRIDGE, FAT HENS, PIES, AND MORE
by Joanne Keaton

Hey! Diddle, diddle! Have you seen any of your favorite nursery-rhyme characters around lately? Study their diets in Mother Goose, and you'll soon see why they disappeared long ago.

Consider the famous pease porridge. Although a cereal made from meal of peas sounds a little disgusting, it probably was hearty and nutritious. Yes, it could have been healthful, but recall that it was nine days old. There was no way to refrigerate leftovers in those times, and so that porridge actually sat in the pot at room temperature for a week and two days. How many people got sick after eating the stuff?

Remember the dish that was set before King? It was a pie baked with four and twenty blackbirds. Imagine all those beaks scratching the King's esophagus on the way down. Certainly the feathers would have tickled his tummy, and perhaps they'd have caused him to laugh until he cried (or died). If the beaks and feathers didn't get him, there were diseases he could have gotten from the dirty birds.

Handy-Spandy, Jack-a-Dandy had one of our earliest cases of sugar-induced hyperactivity; after he bought his plum cake and sugar candy at the grocer's, he came out with a hop, hop, hop, they say. Handy-Spandy was not alone in being intrigued by merchants' sweet wares. A vendor called out to Smiling Girls and Rosy Boys to buy his monkeys made of gingerbread and his sugar horses painted red. Even barbershops pushed sweets, as in the sticks of candy for you and me and Sister Mandy. And dumb as he was, Simple Simon knew that the pieman's offering tasted good, and he attempted to get a freebie.

Sugar was important in child rearing. A mother said, "Hush baby, my doll, I pray you, don't cry," and then offered the kid a custard or a tart if he would shut up. the naughty kittens lost their mittens, and as punishment they got no pie. Another youngster, Jacky, received only mustard when he cried — the treats were saved for a day when he was very good. Perhaps the bad children were the healthiest.

Adult royalty also had a sweet tooth. The Knave of Hearts went down in history as a thief when he took tarts made by a queen of the same suit. While her husband was in the counting house counting all his money, another queen couldn't resist smearing her staff-of-life bread with honey.

Jack Sprat might have been a man for the 1080's, but his wife probably expired young for she would eat no lean. Curly Locks likely got old and fat early; her ardent swain promised her strawberries if she would marry him, but he planned to load them down with sugar and cream.
Don’t feel sorry for Humpty Dumpty because all the King’s horse and all
the King’s men couldn’t put him together again. Even if they had the tools
of modern medicine at their command, repairing Humpty would have been
only a temporary reprieve. That big egg was just full of cholesterol.

Fat was a desired food element in nursery-rhyme days. “One, Two,
Buckle My Shoe” talks of a good fat hen. We are happily advised in another
rhyme that the geese were getting fat as Christmas approached. No one
wanted to eat a scrawny bird.

We aren’t sure if Peter Piper actually ate his whole peck of pickled
peppers but, pray tell, what else was he going to do with them? It’s not
difficult to picture Peter’s distress after such an orgy — if he didn’t die, he
was probably hoping he would.

Curds and whey are given a bad reputation by Mother Goose. You may
not be fond of that combination, but I think that we’ll agree that its not in the
junk food category. When Little Miss Muffet sat down to the repast, the
sugar-loving author decided to have the young lady scared away by a
spider. Wouldn’t that be enough to tout any child off of curds and whey?

Water is another of the rare good items for human ingestion mentioned
in the little verses. Too bad it is portrayed in such a negative way: When Jack
and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, he fell down and broke his
crown. This may have been enough to turn Jill on to harder drinks.

Is it any wonder the dish ran away with the spoon?