

The Royal Dainties of Fairies

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Afternoon tea is by far the most fairy-like of meals. Some would even treasure it over other worldly riches; a refreshing respite for man's frenzied pursuits; a celestial solace for the weariness of life; some with more serious enthusiasm would even render teatime as drifting into the realities of fairyland or childhood's gilded visions of heaven and Eden. In the case of those who, based on a bunch of clinical facts, would regard teatime as a purely light meal prescribed for, say, a spinning-stomach lunch or, in more dramatic instances, for the sinking feeling that some women are thought to be liable to, especially at four in the afternoon. The latter simply undermine the poetical, chivalrous and historical elements that afternoon tea embraces; that is, the brewing tea-waves gliding in the vast confines of china cups; the crusades led in the quest for the grail of wood-berry jams and autumnal confitures; the unwritten records of ripe gleams of setting suns shrouded by the nimbs of freshly-baked scones.

ON TEA MAKING

As *I wandered lonely as a cloud* down the fells of the Lake District, I came haply to a lost village bordering the waters of Windermere. I have no recollections whatsoever of some other occasion on which the effect of a place had struck me so poetically. The airy stillness of its atmosphere evoked the mystical musings of Wordsworth on the daffodil of the moors and the stone in the brook. It was already late afternoon when I entered a lovely slate-roofed inn. Upon exchanging some Cumbrian courtesy with the innkeeper, a queer old lady, I inquired about the art of her trade, which was indeed running a tearoom – or rather a Druid alchemist's store, I should say. Never had I seen such a collection of teapots and teacups of burning browns and frosty whites lined up in oak shelves with more fretful neatness – doubtless revealing some secret code to those of her trade about their elvish dealings; sacks of dried herbs and leaves were locked behind a glass pane of a rustic cupboard – surely stored to cast some dark, black-tea spell on fussy or tight-fisted customers. Nonetheless, she might have also been Queen Catherine de Braganza or the Duchess of Bedford judging by their wild romance with the royal dainties of the afternoon teatime. I was then instructed on the beverage's healthy effects, especially on unhinged minds such as mine. So much so that on drinking up my first cup of tea, the vapours of my head began to clear up and such serenity as that of Wordsworth's poems took hold of me. Finally, before making my way home, I left a generous tip so as not to vex the innkeeper.

ON CONFITURES

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Ever since my childhood errands to the store, I developed a deep respect for jams made out of berries on account of the mystery in which they are veiled. It was downright inconceivable to have tea without some, say, gooseberry jam to spread on breadstuff. Already at that early age, I set myself to reveal such mystery. It was then that I began to consider the knightly exploits of peasantry that embarks on harvests of the ruddiest raspberries as if they were precious rubies, standing at bay at the whims of the weather and swarms of dragonflies. Such deeds are believed to be, at the most, either ignored or easily turned into legendary tales. Whether or not this may deserve no credit, what I know for certain is the spell the fairy godmother casts upon the glowing-red raspberry - if a pumpkin may be turned into a magnificent coach, why not a single raspberry, I wonder? Finally, there it is: a home-made confiture, fit to flatter the fine connoisseur and the sweets-greedy child as well. This mystery having been unveiled, I passed on to the next one, of equal importance.

ON BAKED PASTRIES

Chronicles relate the remote origins of the humble bread, the childlike biscuits, and the greedy cakes. At the dawn of the centuries, it is believed that the slumbering snow-shrouded hilltops melt into rushing waters. The resulting stream, in winding pilgrimage, stored every kind of heraldic gifts in its bosom from its murmuring banks: shrines of sunny primroses stamped their mellow hues on its watery robes; the drooping boughs mingled their penitent tears in its crystal chalice; the lush turf danced at its foamy waving murmur. Thus, in the final procession, the gentle current would move the watermill to grind the grain of wheat until the chaste, snowy flour was given birth. Yet, from the enriched spring, its water was treasured as well. The skilful hand of man, in due reverence, mixed them both and tried them in fire, as gold is tried in the furnace. And in the third quarter of an hour, as the balmy sunshine streamed in at dusk, a waft of baked pastries called the priestly caste and congregation for the ritual gathering of teatime. Such are the records of history on the matter, and as truthful as the primitive paintings that Man left in caves.

Whether modern times have nearly abolished the inbred instinct of rest in man, now fraught with haunting anxieties and haste, teatime still remains as the refreshing solace in the desert. If the corollary of the current oppressive culture of dullness and materialism has been to constrict the natural exploits of our race, then, afternoon tea might cater for evoking the noblest feature of the most monstrous and delightful of creatures: his vocation for the eternal Pasch. Therefore, the need to revive the home-made drama of bakery and tea making is still to be met. Likewise, we should return to the idyllic romance between nature and man's craft. Thus, daily toils are to be rendered even restful at the diligent recollection of teatime respite.