THE ENGLISH TEA

BY MURIEL HARRIS

If the English tea has not always been the foundation of English society, it is simply because Marco Polo began his travels a few centuries late. The germ of English tea was as much a part of the English constitution as is the Bible, Beethoven, or Blighty. And just as the Germans feel that Shakespeare should have been born in their Fatherland, so it scarcely occurs to the English mind that China tea really comes from China and Indian from India. And even if it does, what is China? What is India? Both are places to which the Englishman takes England and brings it safely home again. And tea? Tea was being poured in the panelled drawing-room when he left England, and seven years later he comes back for his second cup. It is as impossible for the Englishman to forget English tea as it is for him to forget England.

There are grandmothers to-day who remember the severity with which their grandmothers regarded the decadent innovation of afternoon tea. You might have tea, but you might not have it comfortably. It was brought in under protest, and conversation languished until it was taken out again. And yet the Great War was run on tea, and the submarine sinkings and the convoy system and the munitions question and the War Cabinet itself were suspended regularly every afternoon for a few minutes when the little black tea-pot made its peremptory appearance, flanked with what had once been cake and toast but now was—it is difficult to say what it was in 1918. The apotheosis of tea took place during the Great War. More than this. A certain Georgian virility returned with it. The "dish of tay" which was drunk alike by men and by women after the portentous three and four and five o'clock dinners of more than a century ago, again became masculine as well as feminine. Perhaps it was more the one than the other by the time the war

was finished. Certainly the solvent that is tea accommodated a million inter-relationships where friction was possible. If nothing more, it was the weakness to which the truly great succumbed as readily as any one of their minions. Queen Anne is dead—though she was once a real person with a marked liking for playing at the game of "Let's Pretend"—but her tall glass cupboards with their Lowestoft and egg-shell china found real successors in the rude earthenware of the funny, ramshackle, shabby old Whitehall buildings which constitute the heart of the British Empire. If you go to Regent's Park to-day, if you visit the pleasant town of Cheltenham or of Bath, you will see by the hundred the houses in which the "dish of tay" flaunted it with parrots and negro servants and marmosets and coiffures of astounding geography. You will see where the Nabobs lived and you will hear faint echoes of John Company, and perhaps also some of the fantastic old tea-chests will remain and the red lacquer trays and the dragon china, and a memory of the days when the trial of Warren Hastings was the gossip of the day and a few other Anglo-Indians felt uneasy, even though the word "profiteering" had not yet been invented. And so the old Government offices, in which the Pepys and the Norths—also of tea fame—and the Pitts and the Foxes had had their being, positively clamored for the revival of the beverage of which the regalia was still there.

Nor could an institution be neglected which so instantly reflected the genius of the times. It is only necessary to compare the classic Georgian tea-service with the redundant curves of the Victorian tea-pot; the Victorian tea-pot—prosperous, stout-waistcoated—with the miscellany, the democratic diversity, if you will, of the Great War china—the silver was mostly at the Bank—to realize the part in English society played by tea. And why? Because tea—afternoon tea, nowadays, and not the ten o'clock nightcap of the Victorian era—makes a halfway house between English formality and English expansion. Strangers are often at pains to reconcile the English stiffness and coldness with the expansiveness of the English house and its manner of hospitality. In one sense, the Englishman's house is his castle, strongly barred against intruders, extremely jealous of its pri-

vacy, resentful of any attempt to penetrate its fastnesses. In another, it is an open door, welcoming, free, hospitable. You have to be given the freedom of the castle and it is yours. Without this freedom, you are a mere outsider. The English tea is at once a preliminary to this freedom and a relaxation from the forms of life. There is no set service, no special time within an hour or so. It comes after the day's efforts and provides the little stimulus which overcomes fatigue. The shining silver reflecting the leaping fire, the sound of the kettle, the warm scent of the flowers, the low book-box or stand, full perhaps of brand new books, all these elements which have grown up round the tea function, provide a quiet, expansive atmosphere in which both friend and family can feel themselves most perfectly at home. The secretive Englishman delivers himself most astoundingly at tea. You have a share in his confidences. For once he becomes conversational, easy, even eloquent. There are subjects suited for the dinner-table; the people who breakfast with each other are usually the rulers of our destinies; lunch is an uneasy meal, booted and spurred for the afternoon's avocations. At tea there are no rules—nothing but arm-chairs and relaxation and informal converse, and perhaps the children in clean frocks for an hour or so before dinner. The tea-hour represents the English home in its fullest sense in that it conveys a sense of intimacy even to the stranger. He can see the household out of the office, off the stage, when it is content thus to dispense with the trappings of ceremony and of form.

Perhaps the penetration of the English tea into the Versailles Conference was one of the most remarkable of its achievements. In a sense, of course, the Conference was itself something of a return to a state of society when society was small and international and not, as to-day, large and intensely national. Nobody who was unconnected with the Conference had for the moment any particular interest, and a limited and cosmopolitan society was thus the cynosure of every eye. When Mr. Balfour diverted M. Clémenceau with tea, it was an international incident, in the sense almost that upon the frown of a king's mistress depended the fate of nations. And it was tea made with canned milk, too! Was it a ruse of the wily Lloyd George?

Did he realize how tea helped the inarticulate Englishman? How it gave him something to do with his hands, filled in the pauses in his conversation, compensated for his French—or lack of it—and, most of all among the voluble Latins, gave him the feeling of being after all at home?

For the Englishman has to feel at home in order to deliver himself at all. The Frenchman is most truly gracious in public. The *beau geste*, of its nature, implies an audience. The German needs officialdom, almost a book of etiquette, behind him, to be most impressive. For the things he cares most about he puts on a uniform; for the things an Englishman cares most about, he takes off his uniform, or never puts it on. And the English tea is for the Englishman the taking off of his uniform and feeling himself at home and therefore free to act and speak. In India he divests himself of officialdom and takes his tea. In China he brings England into the home of tea, just as, after a life-time, he takes China back to England and his porcelain and his jade and his Mandarin robes and his carved ebony for the back-ground of the tea-table. It is the oddest thing to see in Cairo or Quebec English chintzes and perhaps an array of photographs in court trains upon which is the name of a South Kensington photographer; to drink tea among these household gods, just as though the thermometer were not above a hundred or below zero and the Red Sea and the St. Lawrence River were merely the Thames a little geographically displaced. It is the oddest thing to return to South Kensington and Regent's Park and again to drink the self-same blend amid brass bowls and mirrored hangings; amid perhaps Egyptian hieroglyphs and ushabtis; or amid assegais and Zulu shields and elephant tusks and lion skins.

For here again the Englishman's home may be his castle, but it is also his point of departure. You might define it as a place to come back to—and to come back to from Asia or Africa or the South Pole, laden—as John Company used to be laden—with shawls and spices, with the insignia of your travels which you laid at the foot of the steaming altar in the drawing-room. There are hundreds of these homes in England, repositories of successive tides of travel spoils, each of which leaves its high

water mark. And the tea-kettle goes steaming on, whether it be surrounded with stuffed birds from Australia or kakemonos from Japan or carved chessmen from India, or latest of all, polished shell-cases and shell-noses and German helmets and saw-bayonets, trophies of the last tide in the English adventure.

Perhaps the oddest contrast of all was tea in the Tower of London itself, in the building where Sir Walter Raleigh languished and wrote his *History of the World*, himself the typical Englishman who loved England to go away from her. And the tea-kettle hissed and bubbled as though the twelve-foot walls were upon no Roman site, as though no countless tragedies of Kings and Queens and courtiers had filled the very atmosphere. Perhaps the Englishman is lacking in the sense of time or place. Perhaps he has so complete a sense of continuity that time and place do not matter. Perhaps again, his one-idea-ed mind sees only that one thing is right and that thing must be done. It would account for his stolid bringing to America of eighteenth century bricks for his house in the cockle shells of the period, although boundless forests were at his disposal. It would account equally for his perfect naturalness in applying his own customs amid the most incongruous surroundings. Of course he has his tea, whether he is in London or in Timbuctoo; whether empires are falling or rising. It is the same instinct which makes him apply quite gravely the English form of government to the Kaffir or the Yoruba peoples. *Civis Romanus sum;* and tea is part of it all, part of a great freemasonry.

In the life of every country there are certain illuminating moments in the day. The Frenchman dines with mellowness and joy in living. The American thrills by doing something differently. The German expands under the influence of opera with ham sandwiches. The English love of formalism makes tea a regular institution and then proceeds to remove any suggestion of regularity about it, except its every day existence. Nor does this apply to any particular class. The cottage tea with its big loaf and its thick black liquor is just as much of an institution as is the Cathredral tea with a delicate blend from China and thin bread and butter. There is the same warm, generous feeling about it as in the crispness of the falling leaf and

the pungent smell of its burning and the glow of the flames against the blue mist of the darkening autumn afternoon. The English drawing-room is nearly always formless. It has just come about; it is rarely conscious. And the English tea-party is formless too, apart from its being an institution; apart from the sense of its always having been. Now, it is a gathering in an old London house, on the gates of which places for the link-man's torches still survive. And the guests come in at any time, and there is no guest of honor, though affairs of state may be settled or a plea put through for somebody's appointment, or a traveller may have returned from a big game expedition, or a writer may have uttered a *mot* which penetrates to all the groups in the various corners of the room, who are as publicly private as it is possible to be. Now, it is definitely a tea-party in an old provincial or cathedral town. And old ladies wear their seed-pearls, and, proud of their ancient family, look quite incredibly shabby, and the room is uncommonly full of furniture of every period, and there are glass cases with miniatures and perhaps a wax relief portrait or two, of which, if you are favored, you may be told that it was my great-uncle, who served under Lord X— during his first ministry. "Yes, I do value them a good deal." And there is nothing of the antique shop about it, because the things have always been there, have accumulated there. And here sometimes a lion may be found, though it is not openly confessed. And if he can be persuaded to roar, why then, there is all the more to talk of afterwards and it is very pleasant of course to hear of something from the great world and perhaps to learn that Dr. Y—— is to have the next bishopric. And the atmosphere is warm and friendly and quite incredibly dignified, and the young people whisper together, and in a few days it all begins again, only the exquisite lustre and the Queen Anne silver and the Chippendale tray are in a different house, and the glass table contains a tray of orders, and my great-uncle is this time my great-grandfather or a cousin who fought under Wellington. And once again, it is perhaps tea in the University town. And the rusty dons make jokes at each other's expense, and Greek and Latin tags fly round, and sometimes the fresh-faced undergraduate looks in and his breezy slang can be heard

penetrating the attenuated accents of the Oxford manner. And nobody is very rich and many are very poor and this is an exclusive society, and town—meaning the inhabitants—and gown—meaning the University—are separated by a great gulf, and there is the same study and the same reference books and the same dust upon the writing-table, and there is the same tea-kettle, the fountainhead of all the converse, indeed of all the gathering.

Withal, perhaps the English tea is best alone; when it comes in of its own accord and is set down silently by your great arm-chair near the fire. And you reach out to it vaguely from the engrossing book upon your knee, and you read and dream and sip your tea and relax beatifically, and the day seems smoothed out and you walk on air and a spell is over you, pointed only by the rhythm of a falling coal, and you are conscious of a great release.

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