

Tea Leaves

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The room is grand, a model of understated elegance. In its centre, on a large marble table supported by four exquisitely carved mahogany claw feet, a huge china vase holds a floral arrangement of fresh cut peonies, roses, and birds of paradise, all perfectly poised among appropriate greens. Above the flowers hangs a crystal chandelier, Murano perhaps. Mirrored walls alternate with floor to ceiling windows trimmed in ivory silk drapery tastefully tied back with gold braid. White gloved waiters stand at the ready. A maitre d' observes all. It is time once again for the time honoured tradition of high tea at one of London's finer establishments.

On regency striped Queen Anne chairs, to the left of the entrance, sit Dorothy and Desmond Brandon. Desmond is managing director of his company; Dorothy is wife of the managing director. They often meet for tea here when Dorothy has trained up from Epsom for shopping or theatre. Desmond has had to hurry on this day to meet his wife on time. He seems rather distracted, Dorothy thinks.

"Everything all right, dear?" she asks.

"Yes! Fine! Absolutely! Just a bit of a hectic day." Desmond says.

Given that he has squeezed in a tryst with his secretary in the company flat between a director's meeting and tea with his wife, it's hardly surprising Desmond looks a bit peaky to Dorothy. But he is a past master at this sort of thing. Never misses a beat, hey what? Dorothy hasn't a clue, and Desmond's little *tete a tetes* have been going on for, good gracious, it's nearly nine years now!

Next to Dorothy and Desmond are seated Sybil Shane, cellist, and Arthur Ruck, would-be political cartoonist. Sybil and Arthur don't usually indulge in high tea, can't afford to, really, but they have been having relationship difficulties lately and wish to discuss the situation in a civil manner. They are safe here; no unseemly outbursts are likely. Sybil, whose career is moving along swimmingly, has asked Arthur, her live-in lover of two years, to meet her here so that in low whispers, between sips of Earl Grey, she can explore his growing angst. Is it because she is getting more paid work than he these days that he is so morose, testy, lacking in libido? Is he tiring of her? Has she done something to offend him? Surely, he cannot expect that she will stop going abroad to perform! She has vowed to tease the truth out of him, as she did when they were students at Oxford and he became withdrawn and jealous.

"Darling!" she says, reaching across the table to take his hand.

Arthur drops his serviette and withdraws his hand to fetch it, even though the waiter has discreetly placed another in his lap.

This little drama does not escape Diedre, who is twelve and taking tea with her father, Damien, at the next table. This is Diedre's weekend with her father. Well, actually, it wouldn't have been, but Stephanie, Diedre's mother, has had to fly to Paris for a meeting with a client, and has asked her former husband if he could possibly have Diedre as it would be ever so helpful, and of course, Damien has graciously agreed. Such an accommodation will mean he is one-up on Stephanie, and he will enjoy playing that card when the right time comes. Diedre, a skilled observer

of her parent's little games, is astutely watching Sybil and Arthur to see what will occur next between them. The distraction means she must concentrate to hear her father's predictable list of questions in order to answer him politely: How was school this week? (Fine.) How is the riding coming? (Well.) Enjoying French? (Yes.) What would you like to do this weekend? (Be lazy at home, if that's all right with you?) Diedre suspects that Stephanie has really gone to Paris with Peter, her new love interest, for the weekend, so Damien is not altogether one up, but not to worry. For her, it will mean indulgence on both sides, which is, after all, the least they can do, with all the shuffling back and forth that goes on.

Across the room sit the Misses Alice Maynes and Charlotte DeFleur. Alice is robust, full-bosomed, sensibly and tastefully dressed in tweed suit, silk shirt, and Italian leather pumps. Charlotte, on the other hand, is dressed just this side of garish, some might say. She wears a burgundy velour dress, a bright coloured scarf at the neck, and a beret. On her fingers are a mass of silver rings with rather large stones in them. Silver earrings dangle from her lobes. She smokes cigarillos. Alice and Charlotte have been "friends" for many years now. They first met at the publishing house where Alice still serves as senior editor. (Charlotte left that particular house when their "arrangement" was deemed, well, not quite appropriate, and now works for a leading liberal news magazine.) The fact is, Alice and Charlotte are in what is often called "a Boston marriage." They live together. They are sexually active, monogamous, and until the little matter of finances came up, they were happy. Alice, it seems, has gambled with Charlotte's inheritance and her investments have gone sour. Charlotte, who until now has trusted Alice's judgment in fiscal matters implicitly, believes that Alice acted irresponsibly. They have come to tea to sort it out.

Marvin and Millie Harwood, the American couple sitting next to Alice and Charlotte, are totally unaware of anything amiss at their neighbors' table. They are so enthralled with slathering Devon cream and strawberry jam on their scones they can hardly contain themselves. They review the day's other treats methodically, taking it in turns: the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, the hippies with green spiked hair at Picadilly Circus, the ride on the double decker bus to Trafalgar Square, the bargains at China Reject, and now, high tea! Millie smiles and raises her cup to the woman with silver-blue hair neatly coiffured who sits alone to her left.

Elizabeth Leewood-Davis nods ever so slightly; one must acknowledge a salutation, no matter from whom it is offered. Elizabeth is taking tea alone today. Her friend Margaret has had to cancel due to illness. Elizabeth is quietly relieved. She wants to sulk over her son's letter from America announcing that he plans to be married in the spring to someone called Jane and he hopes his mother will travel over for the occasion. Elizabeth isn't at all sure about this. After all, Alfred has been married not once but twice before; why should she believe that this woman will be any more right than Sheila or Linda were? It was all these Americans Alfred insisted on marrying. Why couldn't he have found himself an English girl of good stock before he embarked on his career abroad? So much more suitable! After all, what could one expect from these aggressive American women who expected men to cook and clean like charwomen! Still, Alfred was forty-one now. And Elizabeth wouldn't live forever. He would simply have to get on with it.

Mr. Cadogan and his mother, sitting to Elizabeth's left, are a mother and son of a different ilk. James Cadogan, a retired Army officer and now head of the crystal department at Selfridge's, is devoted to his mother. He brings her to tea for her

birthday every year; it is always done, like naming the first son Percy, or attending Magdalene College, Cambridge. Mrs. Cadogan is 86 this year, and still regal. James is proud of her. She is so elegant, so poised, James has never quite found a woman to equal her. He has stopped regretting this fact. At 61, he is quite happy to spend his evenings in the club these days. He would, however, have liked getting the country home, seeing as how Percy never goes down from London. But the first son always inherits the land, and there is nothing more to be done about it. Mrs. Cadogan, straight-backed, places her cup gently in her saucer and smiles at her good son. Mr. Cadogan glances at the Harwoods.

"Cucumbers! You call this a sandwich?" Marvin is saying to Millie. "They oughta come to St. Paul, wanna see what a real sandwich is!"

Millie rolls her eyes toward Mrs. Cadogan, a signal for Marvin to contain himself. In response, he raises his hand and draws an imaginary checkmark in the air. The waiter is already slipping a leather folder onto the table. When they rise to leave, Millie smiles and says to James Cadogan's mother, "It's a meal in itself."

Mrs. Cadogan nods, wiping the corners of her mouth on her serviette.

Elizabeth Leewood-Davis averts her eyes. Alice and Charlotte lower their voices as the Harwoods pass their table. Diedre stirs the remains of her tea and waits for her father to say they can leave. Sybil and Arthur sit in stony silence. Dorothy chatters about Harrod's Food Court while Desmond strokes his necktie patiently.

High tea, that civilized English tradition, will end for another day.