

## THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

### AFTERNOON TEA EXAMINED

ANY man who knows that, sooner or later, he must go to another afternoon tea cannot but rejoice at the recent invention of an oval, platter-like saucer, large enough to hold with ease a cup, a lettuce or other sandwich, and a dainty trifle of pastry. The thing was needed: the modesty of the anonymous inventor—evidently *not* Mr. Edison—reveals him one of the large body of occasional and unwilling tea-goers. We, the reluctant and unwilling, are all strangely alike at these functions; and we have all been embarrassed by the old-fashioned saucer. Circular in shape, and hardly larger than the cup that belies its reputation and dances drunkenly whenever another guest joggles our elbow,—which happens so often that we suspect conspiracy,—the old-fashioned saucer affords no reasonably secure perch for a sandwich; responds with delight to the law of gravitation if left to itself; and sets us wishing, those of us who think scientifically, that evolution had refrained from doing away with an extension by which alone we could now hope to manage it. *We mean a tail!* If afternoon teas had been started in the Oligocene Epoch instead of the seventeenth century, we are convinced that evolution, far from discarding this useful appendage, would have perfected it. A little hand would have evolved at the end of it—such an one as might hold his saucer while a gentleman sips from his tea-cup.

Nay, more. In many ways that will at once occur to the intelligent reader this little hand would be helpful in our complex modern civilization. It would

hold this essay. It would turn the music at the piano. It would enable two well-disposed persons cordially to shake hands when their four other hands were busy with bundles. It would slap the coward mosquito that stabs in the back. It would be absolutely perfect for waving farewell. Nor would there be anything 'funny' about it, or shocking to the most refined sensibilities: the vulgar would laugh and the refined would hide a shudder at the sight of a man with no tail! We would, of course, all look like the Devil, but everybody knows that *his* tail has never yet kept him out of polite society.

This digression, however, leads us away from our subject into alien regrets. We put it behind us.

The truth is, we do not like your afternoon teas—except those little ones, like the nice children of an objectionable mother, that are informal, intimate, and not destructive of our identity. At larger gatherings we have no identity: we are supernumeraries; mere tea-cup bearers; wooden Indians who have been through Hampton; automaton tea-goers. In short, we are so many lay figures, each with a tea-cup in one hand and food in the other; we know that we are smiling because we can feel it; we remain where we are laid until forcibly moved to another spot, and we are capable, under pressure, of emitting a few set phrases that resemble human speech. Yet within this odd simulacrum of a worldly, entertaining, and interested gentleman a living mind surveys the gay scene with a strange, emotionless detachment—just so, perhaps, will it eventually survive the body. We are really alive, conscious

that we dislike change, nervous when moved and stood up in another place, and intellectually certain that no real harm can come to us. One is reminded of Seneca's observation: *Vere magnum, habere fragilitatem hominis, securitatem dei*. There is about us something of the frailty of a man, something of the security of a god: the pity of it is that we cannot follow Seneca to his conclusion and comfort ourselves with the thought that we are 'truly great.'

I have often wondered, while 'dolling up,' as the strikingly appropriate modernism puts it, for such a function, whether there is any universal reason why a reluctant man should go to an afternoon tea. There are, of course, many individual reasons, more or less important to the individual tea-goer; but for us the impulsion comes inevitably from without. The verb 'drag,' often applied to the process by which a man is brought to a tea, indicates how valuable would be the discovery of a Universal Reason wherefore any man might hope to derive some personal good from this inescapable experience.

An excellent place for the thinker to examine this problem is in his bath-tub preparatory to dolling up. He is alone and safe from interruption unless he has forgotten to lock the door; his memory and observation of afternoon teas past is stimulated by afternoon tea to come; and he is himself more like the Universal Man than on most other occasions. Featherless biped mammals that we are, what need have we in common that might conceivably provide a good and sufficient reason for the dolling up to which I am about to subject myself? Substantial food, less fleeting, however, than a lettuce or other sandwich and a dainty trifle of pastry; protective clothing; a house, or even a cave, to shelter us in cold or stormy weather — these, evidently, are clearly apprehended necessities, and

we will march on the soles of our feet, like the plantigrade creatures we are, wherever such goods are obtainable.

If all men were hungry, naked, and homeless, and the afternoon tea provided food, clothes, and a home, any man would jump at an invitation. But there are other necessities of living — and here, too, I in my porcelain dish am one with Christopher Columbus, Chang the Chinese Giant, the Editor of the *Atlantic*, and the humblest illiterate who never heard of him — of which we are not so vividly conscious. Yet we seek them instinctively, each in his own manner and degree: amusement, useful experience, friends, and his own soul. So I read and accept Tagore when he says, 'Man's history is the history of man's journey to the unknown in quest of his immortal self — his soul.' Willy-nilly, even higglety-pigglety and helter-skelter, these are what the featherless biped is after.

As for useful experience, this afternoon tea reminds me of those lower social gatherings where liquor is sold only to be drunk on the premises. Granting that I become a finished tea-goer, easy of speech, nodding, laughing, secure in the graceful manipulation of my tea-things, never upsetting my tea, never putting my sandwich in the way of an articulating tongue, yet is all this experience of no use whatever to me except at other afternoon teas. I go to school simply to learn how to go to school. The most finished and complete tea-goer, if he behaves anywhere else as he does at an afternoon tea, creates more widely the same unfavorable impression that he creates, in his own proper sphere, on me. Can I then reasonably regard experience as useful which I observe to be useful only for doing something which I observe to be useless? The soap agrees that I cannot. Yet, says the sponge, if I might hope at some afternoon tea to discover my.

immortal soul, the case would be different; this experience would be valuable. O foolish sponge! I am compelled to tell you that at afternoon teas it is especially difficult for a man to believe that he has any immortal soul to look for. It is a gathering essentially mundane and ephemeral. For it we put on our most worldly garments. For it we practice our most worldly smirks in dumb rehearsal before our mirror and an audience of one silly, attentive image, thinking that this time, this time — But it is always the same: the observant mind in the immovable body. As for the immortal soul, O sponge! It may, and doubtless does, go to strange places — but it *cannot be dragged*.

And so we come to the final question: is the afternoon tea a place where one featherless, plantigrade, biped mammal of the genus *Homo* may meet another whom he might hope some time to call a friend? I do not mean 'my friend What's-his-name?' but rather such another biped as Tennyson had in mind when he wrote, —

Since we deserved the name of friends  
And thine effect so lives in me,  
A part of mine may live in thee  
And move thee on to noble ends.

I grant you, peering out of my tub at the world, that there are many to whom this thought sounds sublimated and extravagant: a poet says this sort of thing because such is his poetic business. We come nearer perhaps to the universal understanding in John Hay's definition that 'Friends are the sunshine of life'; for it is equally true that all men seek sunlight and that every man seeks a friend after his own kind and nature. The best and most intelligent of us admit the rarity and value of friendship; the worst and most ignorant of us is unwittingly the better for knowing some friendly companion. But this afternoon tea is inimical to friendship; and the first duty of a hostess is to separate,

expeditiously and without hope of again coming together, any other two guests who seem to be getting acquainted. On this count, even were we not Automaton Tea-Goers, debarred by inherent stability from any normal human intercourse, the afternoon tea must prove more disheartening than helpful. We might at best glimpse a potential friend as the desert islander sights a passing sail on the far horizon.

There is, alas, no Universal Reason why a man should go to an afternoon tea!

So the matter looks to me in my tub, but perhaps, like Diogenes, I am a cynic philosopher. After all, when a thing cannot be escaped, why seek for reasons not to escape it? Let us, rather, be brave if we cannot be gay; cheerful if we cannot talk; ornamental if we cannot move. As the grave-digger in Elsinore churchyard might say, 'Here lies the afternoon tea; good: here stands the man; good: If the man go to this afternoon tea and bore himself, it is, will he, nill he, he goes, — mark you that? But if the afternoon tea come to him and bore him, he bores not himself; argal, he that goes not willingly to the afternoon tea wearies not his own life.'

So, in effect, he that is *dragged* to an afternoon tea does not go at all; and when he gets there he is really somewhere else. This happy thought is a little difficult to reconcile with circumstances; but when one has become thoroughly soaked in it, it is a great help.

#### OF NAMES

WHO does not know the man who is in the habit of marring the stillness of 'summer days . . . that scarce dare breath they are so beautiful,' by glibly reciting the name of every bird within reach of his opera-glasses, or his blood brother who makes night hideous by calling the roll of the stars? I have no quarrel with the abstract ability to tell