



John Robert Dicksee, *The Waitress*, 1872

The Afternoon Tea

THIS PIECE IS A CHAPTER FROM THE BOOK *A-B-C OF GOOD FORM*, BY ANNE SEYMOUR. RELEASED IN 1915, IT WAS PUBLISHED BY HARPER & BROTHERS. IT MAY BE FOUND ON ARCHIVE.ORG.



THE “AFTERNOON TEA” IS THE LEAST EXPENSIVE, the least troublesome, and one of the most popular forms of social entertainment. Good tea, good sandwiches, and good company make an ideal social combination. As to the tea, one of the best recipes in existence was given by Leigh Stuart in *The Seer*. It should be copied into the notebook of every good housekeeper:

In the first place the teapot is found by experience to be best when made of metal. But, whether metal or ware, take care that it be thoroughly clean, and the water thoroughly boiling. There should not be a leaf of the stale tea left from the last meal. No good tea can be depended upon from an urn, because an urn cannot be kept boiling; and the water should never be put upon the tea but in a thoroughly and immediately boiling state. Boiling, proportion, and attention are the three magic words of teamaking. The water should also be soft—hard water being sure to spoil the best tea; and it is advisable to prepare against a chill by letting a

small quantity of hot water stand in it before you begin, emptying it out, of course, when you do so.

These premises being taken care of, excellent tea may be made for one person by putting into the pot three teaspoonfuls and as much water as will cover the quantity. Let this stand five minutes, and then add as much more as will twice fill the cup you are going to use. Leave this additional water another five minutes; and then, first putting the sugar and cream into the cup, pour out the tea, making sure to put in another cup of boiling water directly. Of tea made for a party, a spoonful for each, and one over, must be used; taking care never to drain the teapot, and always to add the requisite quantity of boiling water as mentioned.

In deference to the warnings of the medical profession against the dreaded tannin, that poison residing in the grounds of the infusion,

many women have now adopted the tea ball, the silver or aluminum globe with perforated sides, and this, filled with tea, is swung about in the pot for a moment or two and then withdrawn. Compared with Hunt's drastic infusion this is like the chicken soup where the fowl flies through the kitchen. Sometimes there is a tea ball for each cup, so that every one may have the tea as strong or as weak as is liked. Before the tea ball came in, careful housewives conceived the plan of using little linen bags in the same manner.

Mr. Hunt to the contrary notwithstanding, the tea urn is the accepted method of serving this refreshment. At small teas, on the porch of the country house, it is customary for the tea service to be placed on a wicker table covered with the prettiest cloth the hostess possesses, the round, lace-trimmed one being the preference of the moment, and the brass or silver kettle having its place of honor near the center. An alcohol lamp keeps the water boiling, and there are cups and saucers, sugar bowl and cream jug, to keep it company. What else shall be served is a matter of individual taste. Sometimes there is fresh toast and a dish of marmalade.

The English muffin, toasted, is, unhappily, not a thing that we have much success in making, nor the nice Scotch scones. But, on the other hand, we excel in little cakes. The small scalloped cakes, either sugared or frosted, baked in little tins, and coming on fresh from the oven, are delightful. On the table may be a dish of bonbons, if one likes. Or, better still, a plate of homemade caramels or fudge. There is something cavalier in offering one's friend crackers bought in boxes, and as for the sawdusty little bits of sweetness that are often made to answer the place of a bite of nourishment, they are delusions and snares. Anything in the world except stale sweet crackers.

At the usual afternoon at home, when tea is served on either the porch or the lawn or in the drawing room, it is pleasant for the daughters of the house to preside, leaving the mother free for the general duties of entertaining. A maid, immaculate in black

frock and white starched collar and cuffs, may be in evidence to change the cups or bring in fresh relays of cakes or biscuits. But the ladies themselves are supposed to like to wait upon their guests, and the serving offers occasion for the most pleasant little intimacies. From chat about the requisite amount of cream and sugar the diversion is natural to other topics, and nothing breaks the ice at a first visit like the introduction of the tea urn.

Infinitesimal is the cost of a modest tea after the service is once obtained. And that lasts indefinitely. A dozen persons may be entertained for a single dollar. Fifty for five times that amount. Of course, decorations can be made to mount up to any sum. A few flowers on the table are indispensable. More scattered about add to the artistic effect.

In summer it is now customary to serve sherbets or iced tea, and the hissing urn is banished for the nonce. Even Roman punch is offered, and then heavier cakes give it countenance. But the old saying that hot tea is cooler in the long run than iced tea has adherents, and many persons will not drink the iced beverage. At large affairs it will be necessary to have both hot tea and iced tea, and that adds greatly to the trouble, but not much to the expense.

In winter chocolate, coffee, and tea are all served, but it is not obligatory to have anything else than the Simon-pure beverage which gives the little function its name.

In small towns and in the country it is now quite customary to present a daughter at a "tea." A pretty girl is at an unusual advantage in the graceful position the little tea table affords, and the hint of her domesticity is not lost upon the observant masculine guest. Young and elderly persons are included in such a company, and a little music is not amiss at intervals to vary the monotony of talk.

But the objective point is the well equipped table adorned with china and silver, cut glass, and its few judiciously selected flowers. Avoid flowers with heavy perfume; some persons cannot bear to sit at the table on which they appear, and the more delicate the flowers the better the effect. The usual table fern is always



George Dunlop Leslie, *Afternoon Tea*, 1865



Carl Thomsen, *A Sunday Afternoon*, early 20th century

in order, but good taste suggests that all such artificial adjuncts as ribbons or bands of colored silk be avoided. Everything about the tea table should bear out the character of an impromptu, unpremeditated entertainment, and the most cunning art should have the appearance of simplicity.

One item on the tea table should not be forgotten, and this is a little plate containing slices of freshly cut lemon, for some persons cannot use sugar or cream, and, although from politeness accepting them, are uncomfortable in consequence. Be careful also about your selection of tea. A dash of green flavors black tea deliciously, yet it is poison to some individuals. The best selection is the English brand that is generally in use among our tea-drinking cousins, and will be chosen for you by your careful grocer.

Regarding the toilet of the hostess at the five o'clock tea function: any sober gown of silk may be worn, but it should *not* be *décolleté*. It is the worst possible taste to let the shoulders be seen by daylight. Evening gowns belong to evening, and it is assumed that the woman who wears one when the occasion demands an afternoon gown does not possess the proper toilet. Any pretty afternoon dress, with the distinct character of a gown, and not of a *peignoir*, is now the better style.

As to refreshments for larger affairs, there should be the inevitable sandwiches, as delicately made as possible. Also a fresh, homemade sponge cake cut into squares and served with the tea is a welcome dainty.

Any cake served with tea should not be too sweet nor too rich. This beverage calls for a light, nourishing accompaniment, just as coffee and chocolate admit the heavier dainties, like fruit and pound cake.

The proper dress for guests at an afternoon tea or reception is street or reception costume. The latter, according to present fashion, consists of silk, velvet, or other handsome material if the wearer is a married woman or a single one who is no longer in her first youth. It should not be very light in color nor very showy if it is to be worn in a public conveyance. The woman who

appears in a very handsome toilette should take a carriage, since it is in bad taste to make oneself conspicuous in train or trolley car. A young girl eschews brocades and other rich fabrics. Her reception costume may be of woolen or silken stuff, but it should preserve the simplicity of style which is at once appropriate and becoming to young people. White gloves are demanded by the present fashion, although some ladies wear black ones, while dainty footgear is very desirable. It is offending against good taste as well as against common sense, however, to walk through the streets in the winter season clad in slippers so thin and stockings so transparent that they make the beholder shiver. They look as much out of place as heavy furs in the heat of summer.

For teas in the country greater informality is permissible, some young and pretty women appearing in golfing or skating costume, with red sweater and cap to match. Such a dress is not to be recommended for general wear, however, few persons having the air and distinction necessary to carry it off.

The conventional costume for men at a large "tea" or an afternoon reception is "formal afternoon dress"—i.e., black cutaway or frock coat, black or fancy waistcoat, dark, striped trousers, patent leather shoes, and an ascot or four-in-hand tie. A dark gray cutaway suit (coat, waistcoat, and trousers all being of the same material) may also be worn. It must be confessed, however, that men now appear in a diversity of costumes on these occasions. At tea dances they dress as they find convenient.

If the occasion is a large "coming out party," the *débutante* stands at the left of the hostess, and is presented to the women guests by her mother, the men being introduced to her. There may be assistant hostesses in the receiving line, or they may be scattered about the rooms, doing the honors of the house. The visitor would probably like to have a little chat with the lady of the house before passing on, especially if she knows few persons in the room. If she arrives at the crowded hour when a stream of people are entering, she must only delay for a moment. It is usually possible, by



Hilda Faron, *Tea Party*, 1916. Oil on canvas

watching one's chance, to return later when the crowd has entered the dining room and the hostesses have a little leisure to chat with those who really wish to see them. A courteous person is careful to pay due attention to the lady of the house and to have some talk with her should opportunity offer. If the guest finds any acquaintances, she will enjoy the occasion; if she does not, she may agree with the masculine verdict that "teas are a bore."

Arrived at that Mecca of afternoon teas, the dining room, one does not on a formal occasion remove one's gloves, albeit it seems rather a foolish fashion to hold sandwiches with fingers clad in white kid. The dining room is the center of attraction on these occasions, not only on account of the refreshments, but because it usually seems brighter and gayer than the other apartments, unless dancing is going on elsewhere. The guests should resist the temptation to linger there, however, as the room is apt to grow hot and overcrowded.

It is not necessary to stay long at an afternoon tea. During the height of the season in a large city, many of these affairs take place on the same afternoon, the guests going from one to another. It suffices to remain from a quarter to a half hour. At a small and friendly "tea" or at a house where one feels much at home, people stay longer if they are amused. One should take leave of the hostess, unless she is so surrounded with people as to make this difficult.

At a large reception the coming and going of a constant stream of guests makes it necessary for the lady of the house to remain in her place or very near it throughout the afternoon. She usually stands in the drawing room near enough to the entrance to be readily accessible, and yet far enough away to prevent the blocking of the doorway. A crowd would be apt to form there if the guests stopped at once to speak to the hostess. She should shake hands cordially with all. The *débutante* does the same, although



Carl Fredrik Hill, *A Cup of Tea*, c. 1900

she may, if she prefer, simply bow or curtsy to the gentlemen. She remains beside her mother throughout the afternoon, or certainly until all the guests have arrived.

At a small tea the hostess feels at liberty to move about more freely. She may even enter the dining room late in the afternoon; although she must be careful to return to her position should there be late comers.

The pouring of the tea is such a characteristic and pleasant feature of these occasions that it is seen often, although not always, at large and formal receptions. For smaller affairs the tea table is indispensable. An assistant hostess usually presides at each end of the table, one pouring coffee, chocolate, or bouillon, the other tea.

For a formal reception in winter artificial light is ordinarily used, the shutters being closed or the shades drawn down. At an informal tea it is pleasant to have the daylight as long as it lasts; but one should turn on the electricity or

the gas before the rooms begin to grow dim and gloomy. As the season advances and the days become longer most people find it refreshing to let in the sunlight.

Two maids or other helpers should be in attendance. The waitress removes the cups and spoons as soon as they have been used, brings in fresh supplies, and assists in passing tea and cake to the guests. The other woman opens the door, washes the tea things in the pantry, and helps wherever she is needed. At a studio or an apartment house in the city, or in a quiet village in the country, the hostess and her friends sometimes attend to all these duties in themselves. The dish washing must, of course, be conducted in a separate room, or in case of necessity it may take place behind a screen. The young girls slip on big aprons for this task and make merry over it. A "curate's assistant" is a convenient adjunct for a small tea. Cake, buns, muffins, and buttered toast may be passed on this little three-storied stand. ☼