Wine in a Teacup

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Abstract
Legend had it that during a dorm feast Sarah Granger-Field refused an awfully good bottle of wine because it was served in a teacup. She had said she couldn't possibly drink the stuff in that receptacle. Only a wine glass would do. The taste of the cup would simply destroy one's taste buds ... wine taste buds. She had had an ordinary drink of Ribena instead.

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Quite particular about etiquette was Sarah. She pronounced the last syllable of her name with a long gaspish sort of ‘Ah ...’ You know, in a posh la-di-da accent.

Actually it was in the dining-room that her manners really shone. If you sat by her you would certainly be passed the sugar or the salt, without even asking for them. If you sat by, say, Paula, you could go through the whole meal without eating. Then she’d say ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you wanted such and such.’

You see it was considered rude to ask for anything, let alone stretch over the table for it. Your best bet would be to sit by Sarah. She would definitely see to all your needs without so much as a murmur from you.

When she ate it was a joy to watch. She’d eat as if the food was slightly boring. The fork would neatly spear the pea. Then there was the slight chewing movement before the mouth was parted, just a little, for the next morsel. At the end of the meal, tidy divisions of each food group – carbycs, protees and fats – would be pushed to the side of the plate, again with a gesture of utter high-class disdain. The cutlery would not make any unrefined sound as is the way with cutlery in certain pairs of hands. Take Hilary for instance, or Mildred. Real plebs at the dining-table. The moment fork and knife made contact with plate, you felt sorry for the plate. And for the fork and knife too. Hilary and Mildred with their mouths full, drank liquids even while they were chewing, smacked their lips and ate with such obvious enjoyment, it was really quite fascinating in a boorish sort of way.

Then if you were sitting at the high-table with the house-mistress and Sarah was there, you were fine. Because she was good at making polite conversation. None of those awful silences when you wouldn’t know in God’s name what to say. And time was galloping towards the end of the meal and you hadn’t made your conversational input and no one else had either and it was so embarrassing.

Like the time that wretched junior Alice thought she’d be the saviour
of the lunch-time hour and asked the house-mistress Miss Gramley,
'Please Madam, do you think it will rain tomorrow?' Apparently the 
silence got a little bit worse until Gramley thundered, 'Silly child! I'm 
not the weatherman you know.' Thus Alice held a place – if somewhat 
shaky – in dining-room history.

Not as much history as Sarah made one Sunday though. After church 
the lunch bell rang. As usual we formed a queue and went to our 
appropriate places in the room. The silence bell went and softly the 
head prefect passed the 'Grace board', holy words covered in glass, to 
the mistress on duty. We thanked God for what we were about to 
receive. Then came the serving bell, and the servers for the day went to 
the kitchen, soon coming back with trays laden with Sunday lunch, or 
'dinner' if you were a pleb.

Being Sunday, lunch wasn't so bad. Not liver and onions and mashed 
potatoes or leeks followed by a stodgy pudding and lumpy custard like 
during the week. But on Sunday we could look forward to a bit of lamb 
and new potatoes and mint sauce. And then trifle without sherry, but 
with cream on top.

Not too bad really.

But Sarah found fault with everything. The meat was like leather, the 
potatoes were mushy and the mint sauce was actually not mint sauce.

She was determined to complain to the mistress in charge, who just 
happened to be the cookery mistress. Quite perfect timing really. I 
mean if you're going to complain about the cooking, you might as well 
complain to an expert.

Actually the mistress really looked the part. She was the cooking sort. 
She wore flat, grey, soft shoes which she'd use to sneakingly tip-toe up 
to the oven and fling the door open. Many pies were caught by 
surprise. Some never recovered. When she read recipes, she'd lick her 
lips for punctuation. Her voice was like butter and so was her hair. At 
least at present. It was black hair dyed yellow and she had it all sort of 
swept to the top of her forehead in a crimped roll. And it looked like 
butler too. The crimped curl of butter you get served as part of a 
Continental breakfast.

But how Sarah complained. She really did go on. The cookery 
mistress ignored her. Sarah fumed all through grace and all through 
lunch time announcements. And if she hadn't already established a 
reputation – which was really quite solid, with the not drinking wine 
from a teacup and all – I myself might have wondered at this outburst 
of hers. Still if she was behaving like a pleb it was justified ... after all 
she was speaking up for all of us against that class of food.

The mistress, studiously looking past Sarah, continued with her 
lunch-time announcements. She said that some girls had been reported 
for peeping through the curtains at the village boys last Friday. Such 
behaviour would have to stop.

'Village boys are not your sort. Remember this girls,' she said in her 
voice of butter with the butter-crimped roll on her head.
Sarah had not been paying much attention. In fact she had been working herself up into a superior rage which was quite majestic. She used this rage to stalk into the kitchen and soon we heard her modulated tones – even when she was angry, it was kind of, well, modulated – giving the maids a ticking-off about the Sunday lunch. We could hear her giving them just that.

Next thing you know, Mrs. P., one of the maids, rushed into the dining room with Sarah in tow. ‘Ma’am ... I’m handin’ in me notice. These girls are too uppity. This one ‘ere, an’ me old enough to be her mother, she has a nerve comin’ in ‘ere tellin’ me what to do ... tellin’ me me job. If she don’t like the food, she can bloody well do the cookin’ herself.’

‘Come come Mrs. Perkins, pull yourself together,’ said butter voice. ‘Sarah you should be ashamed of yourself. Go into the kitchen and ask the maid’s pardon.’

Sarah refused to budge. The long and short of it was that not only Sarah but all the girls in her form had to apologise for her – Sarah’s – rudeness. Butter voice said that those at Sarah’s table had to apologise too. We all, she said, had to learn respect for others the hard way. No wonder her pies never turned out properly. Someone who couldn’t follow a recipe can hardly be expected to understand the rules of conduct.

It was pretty annoying having to apologise to the maids for Sarah’s rudeness.

Thing is, it wouldn’t have been so bad if she was really upper-class, or at least upper-middle-class, or middle-middle-class. It’s all very well to have servants, have one’s parents go on cruises, have their name in the social register and only drink wine from a wine glass and tea from a teacup: then one has every right to say what one wants to the lower classes. But her grandfather, I understand, was in the textile trade.