

Author's Tea

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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„I've been reading your work, Mr. Dugan, and like it tremendously! You have such *power*, such *feeling*!“

„Thank you,“ he heard himself saying. „I'm glad you liked it.“ He glanced toward the door where several women were arriving. They weren't young women. He sighed and glanced hopelessly toward the table where one of those faded dowagers who nibble at the crusts of culture was pouring tea. Now if they only had a steak—

„Mr. Dugan,“ his hostess was saying, „I want you to meet Mrs. Nowlin. She is also a writer.“

She was so fat she had almost reached the parting of the stays, and she had one of those faces that always reminded him of buttermilk. „How do you do, Mrs. Nowlin?“ He smiled in a way he hoped was gracious. „It is always a pleasure to meet someone in the same profession. What do you write?“

„Oh, I'm not a *regular* writer, Mr. Dugan, but I do so love to write! Don't you find it simply fascinating? But I just never have been able to get anything published.

Sometimes I doubt the publishers even *read* my manuscripts! Why, I believe they just *couldn't!*"

„I imagine they are pretty busy, Mrs. Nowlin. They get so many stories, you know.“

„Why, I sent one of my poems away not long ago. It was a poem about James, you know, and they wouldn't take it. They didn't even *say* anything! Just one of those rejection slips. Why, I read the poem at the club, and they all said it was simply *beautiful!*"

„Was—was James your husband?“ he asked hopefully, glancing toward the tea table again. Still no steak.

„James! Oh, goodness no! James is my dog! My little Pom. Don't you just *adore* Poms, Mr. Dugan?“

Then she was gone, fluttering across the room like a blimp escaped from its moorings.

He sighed again. Every time chance caught him at one of these author's teas, he would think of Frisco Brady. He could imagine the profane disgust of the big Irish longshoreman if he knew the guy who flattened him in the Harbor Pool Room was guest of honor at a pink tea.

Dugan felt the red crawling around his ears at the thought, and his eyes sought the tea table again. Someday, he reflected, there is going to be a hostess who will serve real meals to authors and achieve immortality at a single stroke. Writers would burn candles to her memory, or better still, some of those shadowy wafers that were served with the tea and were scarcely more tangible than the tea itself.

He started out of his dream and tried to look remotely intelligent as he saw his hostess piloting another body through the crowd. He knew at a glance that she had written a book of poetry that wouldn't scan, privately published, of course. Even worse, it was obvious that in some dim, distant year she had seen some of Garbo's less worthy pictures and had never recovered. She carried her chin high, and her neck stretched endlessly toward affected shoulders.

„I have so *wanted* to meet you! There is something so deep, so spiritual about your work! And your last book! One feels you were on a great height when you wrote it! Ah!..."

She was gone. But someone else was speaking to him, and he turned attentively.

„Why do so many of you writers write about such *hard* things? There is so much that is beautiful in the world! All people aren't like those people you write about, so why don't you write about *nice* people? And that boy you wrote about in the story about hunger, why, you know perfectly well, Mr. Dugan, that a boy like that couldn't go hungry in this country!“

His muscles ached with weariness, and he stood on the corner staring down the street, his thoughts blurred by hunger, his face white and strained. Somehow all form had become formless, and things about him took on new attitudes and appearances. He found his mind fastening upon little things with an abnormal concentration born of hunger and exhaustion. Walking a crack in the sidewalk became an obsession, and when he looked up from that, a fat man was crossing the street, and his arms and legs seemed to jerk grotesquely. Everything about

him seemed to move in slow motion, and he stopped walking and tried to steady himself, conscious it was a delirium born of hunger.

He had been standing still for a moment trying to work his foot free from the sock where it was stuck with the dried blood from a broken blister, and when he moved forward suddenly, he almost fell. He pulled up sharply and turned his head to see if anyone noticed. He walked on then with careful attention.

He was hungry.

The words stood out in his consciousness, cold and clear, almost without thought or sensation. He looked at them as at a sign that had no meaning.

He passed a policeman and tried to adopt a careless, confident air but felt the man looking after him. Passing a bakery, the smell of fresh pastry went through him like a wave, leaving a sensation of emptiness and nausea.

„You’ve had such an *interesting* life, Mr. Dugan! There must have been so many adventures. If I had been a man, I would have lived just such a life as you have. It must have been so *thrilling* and romantic!“

“Why don’t you tell us some of the *real* stories? Some of the things that actually happened? I’ll bet there were a lot you haven’t even written.“

„I’m tellin’ you, Dugan. Lay off that dame, see? If you don’t, I’ll cut your heart out.“

The music moved through the room, and he felt the lithe, quick movements of the girl as she danced, and through the smoky pall he heard a chair crash, and he looked down and smiled at the girl, and then he spun her to arm’s length and ducked to avoid the first punch. Then he struck with his left, short and hard. He felt his fist thud against a jaw and saw the man’s face as he fell forward, eyes bulging, jaw slack. He brought up his right into the man’s midsection as he fell toward him and then stepped away. Something struck him from behind, and it wasn’t until he got up that the blood started running into his eyes. He knew he’d been hit hard, and heard the music playing *In a little Spanish town ‘twas on a night like this, stars were shining down...*

He was speaking then, and he heard himself saying, „There is only the personal continuity. The man we were yesterday may not be the man we are tomorrow. Names are only trademarks for the individual, and from day to day that individual changes, and his ways and thoughts change, although he is not always himself aware of the change. The man who was yesterday a soldier may be a seller of brushes tomorrow. He has the same name, but the man himself is not the same, although circumstances may cause him to revert to his former personality and character. Even the body changes; the flesh and blood change with the food we eat and the water we drink.

„To him who drifts about, life consists of moving in and out of environments and changing conditions, and with each change of environment the wanderer changes, also. We move into lives that for the time are very near and dear to us, but suddenly all can be changed, and nothing remains but the memory.

„Only the innocent speak of adventure, for adventure is only a romantic name for trouble, and when one is having ‘adventures’ one wishes it were all over and he was elsewhere and safe. *Adventure* is not nice. It is more often than not rough and dirty, cruel and harsh...“

Before they screwed on the copper helmet, Scotty stopped by, his features tight and hard. „Watch yourself, kid, this is bad water and too many sharks. Some say there are more octopi and squids here than anywhere else, but usually they're no trouble. We'll try to hold it down up here.“ He slapped his waistband as he spoke. Scotty moved, and Singapore Charlie lifted the helmet.

„Don't worry, skipper, I'll keep your lines clear, and I can handle any trouble.“ Then Dugan was sinking through the warm green water, feeling it clasp him close so that only the copper helmet protected him. Down, down, still farther down, and then he was standing on the sandy floor of the ocean, and around him moved the world of the undersea. There was silence, deep, unfathomable silence, except for the soft hiss of air. He moved forward, walking as though in a deep sleep, pushing himself against the water, turning himself from side to side like some unbelievable monster that haunted the lower depths.

Then he found the dark hull of the old ship and moved along the ghostly deck, half shrouded in the weed of a hundred years, moving toward the companionway where feet no longer trod. He hesitated at the door, looking down into darkness, and then he saw it moving toward him, huge, ominous, frightening. He tucked his warm-blooded hands into his armpits to leave only the slippery surface of the canvas and rubber suit. It came toward him, only vaguely curious, and inquiring tentacles slipped over and around him... feeling... feeling... feeling.

He sipped his tea and avoided the eyes of the woman who had the manuscript she wanted him to comment on, nibbled impotently at those infinitesimal buttons of nourishment, and listened to the ebb and flow of conversation about his ears. Here and there a remark swirled about, attracting his momentary attention. He heard himself speaking, saying how pleasant it had been, and then he was out on the street again, turning up his collar against the first few drops of spattering rain.

