

*The Teastrainer* or *A strain on time* by David Bradley

Rare these days is the house with a pre-warmed pot and the vessel filled with near-boiling water to mash loose leaves. Most people just dunk a dusty bag, swirl it a bit with a spoon, and flick it into the sink. There may be a little hug of the bag against the lip of the mug to leech the tannins into their brew prior to that nonchalant flick. But, rare is the proper teapot, the ceremony of the tea strainer, the chink of teaspoon against china cup and saucer. Rituals are ingrained and maybe our descendants with their vacuum-sealed space food will see that lip service of the teabag in the mug as somehow quaintly ceremonial. Who knows? Maybe they won't even have electric kettles come the next millennium. Not even the tea leaves can look that far into the future.

But they can stew over the coming days and months, sometimes even a year or two. The dregs that slip through the fine gauze, strain against the interior curves of the cup. They might in their astringent configurations foretell of a new-found friend to be well met, a tall, dark stranger perhaps, or even an imminent death in the family. It's all grist to the mill for Georgie.

Georgie was actually christened Mabel Georgina Brown, sweet enough. Even as a child though, Georgie thought that Mabel made her sound old, like somebody's grannie. Georgie is much more sprightly. Georgie is fun. Mabel is maudlin...although not quite so maudlin as Maude. Georgie laughed inwardly at her own little joke. A joke never shared with an audience, a joke with no real punchline, not much of a joke at all.

Now, she's entered her tenth decade, Mabel is still Georgie and she measures out her afternoons in teaspoons.

Ah, yes tea. So revered that one particular strain, a poignant blend, takes its name from God's Own County and yet its roots are very much in the far-flung reaches of the long-gone, rosy-flushed Empire. Georgie never drinks the stuff. Too bitter for her palate and the addition of the proverbial spoonful of sugar really wouldn't help it go down. Tastes like history rather than the future, Georgie always thinks. And, it is futures that Georgie sees in tea. Not futures of the fiscal kind. No, the futures Georgie sees in other people's tea, and specifically, the tea leaves that reside in the smooth curves of china, once the drink is drunk, are an investment of an often much more maudlin nature.

Today's guest is late. It is not a problem. The kettle is yet to boil and to pipe aboard the visitor. Georgie is expecting a gentleman caller this afternoon. In her youth, her cheeks would rapidly take on an embarrassing glow at the very thought of a gentleman calling on her. The gentlemen, and more commonly, ladies who call these days are investors, not in love, but in futures...their futures.

The kettle begins its call, its lament to the repeated, once almost daily, scalding of its insides.

The teapot is silent and ready.

Leaves sit heaped in the caddy awaiting their calling.

Perhaps today's caller has had a change of heart. Not everyone looks to the future, even at this time of year. But, as the kettle whistles its climactic monotone, Georgie does not respond to its plea. The kettle boils dry. Georgie sinks into the past.

The tea leaves remain unmashed.