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A CUP OF TEA SETTLES THE NERVES..

"It has been well said that tea is suggestive of a thousand wants, from which spring the decencies and luxuries of civilization."

Agnes Repplier (1858-1950), U.S. author, social critic. To Think of Tea! Ch. 2 (1932).

A long time ago in a place very far away there was a village. This village rested by a crystal clear lake in a beautiful green valley that held graceful tall trees, sumptuous flowers, many small woodland creatures and laughing, happy children. The days were sweet, the nights mild,

and life had a rhythm as regular as the village clock.

Each evening gave voice to a chorus of song, as frog and cricket and bird farewelled the day. Each morning woke to the rays of dawn as they tickled open the flowers and stirred into life the

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first signs of that day's business... Each day the baker baked, the Village caller announced the new morn, and the Café brewed the first pots of coffee whose fingers of scent would reach out and bring the sleepy folk from their warm beds. And so this day began like so many before it... With absolutely no warning what-so-ever of the changes about to occur... No hint at all.

Out in the town square the market produce was being brought in from the farms all around, and the murmur of civilisation began gathering into a hubbub. As the morning grew, the chatter and comment from the people took over from the whispers and calls of the woods about, and a new day began its journey from dawn to the dream worlds of the night yet to arrive.

This was a contented, friendly place. Order and routine set the metre and rhythm of each day, and life here had a comfortable, familiar sense. The village folk were gentle people who did not curse the weather or say nasty things to strangers, and all visiting traders would swear to their honesty. In short, this village was the sort of town where your word was your bond and, naturally, where everyone knew what you said. (Some would swear their neighbours knew what was said before it was even spoken!)

There was but one road that joined the village to the outside world... And following it out to the other villages you crossed over the small stream that brought the town its water supply. Green trees and birds gathered there, and often the folk would take their lunch down beside the stream, and talk of whatever it was that they had to say.

Though, of course, there was the 'other' way... The way that ran out of town to the strange forest, the dark place, and from there on to the road no one spoke about, and which most certainly no one ever travelled. The dreaded Long White Road.

Oh ... Forgive me ... You are no doubt curious about this? Well, outside the village, past the forest that surrounded the town, and in the direction no-one ever went there stretched a long, wide, gleaming white road that wound all the way up to an extraordinarily high mountain. Here, if you had a head for such heights, you would have (reputedly) found a castle of unsurpassed majesty.

You could just make it out, away on the high mountain, a faint outline at best... Some thought that it was just an odd rock formation, others swore that it was indeed what it looked like, a Castle. But the question was never really answered, because to travel there you had to go by way of the Very Dangerous Long White Road.

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The Castle was an enigma. If it did exist, any record of it pre-dated the age of the village, and so it must have been very, very old ... but how old no one really knew. Legend said it was very ancient, and some thought it might have existed even before men had entered the Valley. Whatever the truth it was generally held that certain death awaited any man (Or woman! Forgive my old fashioned nature here) foolish enough to make his (or her) way there.

One man thought differently. And, of course, he is the hero of this tale ... This odd fellow thought that the Castle had existed for all eternity, and that only wonders and delight lay inside its mysterious walls. Possibly even great treasure lay hidden in this “Forever” Castle.

It was a wonderful, romantic notion... (Though obviously it was ridiculed by both the local scholars and the sensible townsfolk.) The whole concept of “forever” was, after all, an impossibly long time... Even so, the notion was so outrageous that the Castle had commonly received a name in accord with our hero-to-be’s curious ideas. It was now generally called The Castle of Forever.

Oh yes... The hero of this tale. (I almost forgot!) This very peculiar fellow was called Jerimiah, and he was of doughy stock, low to the ground (but only because his legs were too short), with a little belly and a big, reddish nose that hung over a dour, yet thoughtful mouth. Hmmm. How can I describe our hero better? Really, there was very little of note about Jerimiah, apart from his constantly puzzled expression. In fact, he was almost the exact opposite of what you would expect from a hero.

It was as if Jerimiah feared that anything he did might go wrong or be wrong in some way. (And, as we know, this is a very un-hero-like thing.) How do we fully explain him? Short, not quite ugly, yet not exactly handsome. Fat-ish, kind-ish, gentle-ish, quiet ... Ah, yes, here is a word that is more definitive. He was quite quiet, and odd. Yes, I suppose that we must also call him odd, though not in an unpleasant way. Still, despite his oddness, he had a sweet nature and was well liked regardless.

Each day when Jerimiah had finished cobbling the villager’s shoes, for he was a cobbler, he would take the walk that “other way” ... The way that led to the outskirts of the forest. Once there he would simply gaze up at the mountain where he knew the castle lay. Each day he would do this, longing to go there, but of course, he never did. He dreamed he might visit the mysterious Castle of Forever but it was so very far away, and so very high up ... And so, as he had so much to do with fixing the villager’s shoes, he continually put off the time where he might start the journey.

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This had gone on for many years, and over time the slightly askance glances from the villagers only increased in degrees of curiosity. This was because (more than the Cobbler's other odd little habits) each evening Jerimiah would come back to the little house beside the his cobbler's shop with an ever sadder expression on his face. It was plain and obvious to all that the cobbler had a problem of sorts ... And naturally, as is the wont in small villages like this, people talked, and more and more people began to quietly ask what it was that Jerimiah was so caught up about.

Of course, everyone had heard his silly theory about the castle that had existed for forever at the top of the mountain, but what they were really wondering was why it seemed to afflict him so. Everyone knew of the (supposed) Castle... It was spoken of in fables to children on their parent's knee, and was as feared as much as the dangerous Long, White Road that led to it. But why was it such a problem for the cobbler? Finally, the village elder decided to have a talk with the unhappy fellow, to see if there was anything he could do to help.

The elder waited by Jerimiah's house, and sure enough, shortly after dusk the little cobbler came walking back home, his head low and his shoulders stooped. He was so preoccupied that it was only when he was right up to the doorstep that he noticed the elder waiting for him. A look of great surprise came across the cobbler's face.

"Oh, hello, Mr Jumpinsuch." Jerimiah managed to say, before getting the attack of hiccups that he usually got when surprised like this... "Ahh (hic) what is it that I can (hic) do for you? (hic)" he asked politely.

Mr Jumpinsuch looked down at the sad fellow, and said, "My dear Jerimiah, I was hoping that I could do something for you! May I come in?"

"Oh... (hic) Of course, Mr Jumpinsuch... Of (hic) course." And so they stepped inside, with Jerimiah feeling very... Well, he wasn't sure exactly WHAT he was feeling, but it was not pleasant.

His stomach was nervous, his hiccups were acute, his eyes were wandering over the room trying to find a conversation (for Jerimiah was not very used to talking with people outside of his shop) and his heart was beating very quickly. In short, he was a worried cobbler... Yet with no idea why this was so, other than the fact that the village elder seldom called on people with anything but good news or bad news... And Jerimiah was not expecting any good news.

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After making some nice Flavinsniltch tea, the two sat next to the hearth (which remained unlit because it was still quite warm) and Mr Jumpinsuch began... “I... er... (cough) I think, I have come to ask, er... Look, what I want to say, Jerimiah, is that many of us in the village are worried about you...”

“Oh dear!” Jerimiah spoke nervously... “Oh dear, I hope I have not done something terribly wrong... I don’t know what it is, but I will never do it again ... and, and I certainly will make amends .“

“No, no Jerimiah... It is nothing like that. It is just that you seem so, well, so sad each afternoon after your walk to the forest’s edge. We were wondering if there was anything we could do to help, if we were able to. I don’t mean to impose but...”

“Oh no, Mr Jumpinsuch... You do not impose. I am (hic) glad, very glad that I have not (hic) hurt anyone, or done something bad... but really, I do not think anyone can help me, I’m afraid.”

Mr Jumpinsuch looked at the sad, downcast face before him, and sighed... He was such an odd little cobbler, but everyone liked him never-the-less. “Well, Jerimiah, why not tell me what it is that makes you so sad. Perhaps it might help a little?”

Jerimiah looked up as if he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He felt so silly with his notion of the castle that had existed forever, and had suffered so much ridicule for it, that he did not really want to tell anyone ever again. The last time he mentioned it to a customer, the whole village knew by that afternoon, and this made him cautious.

However, he felt so miserable that he just had to tell someone ... “Mr Jumpinsuch, I will tell you if you promise not to tell others how silly I am...”

“Of course, my dear fellow... What is it?”

“Well, I want to (hic) travel up the Long White Road to see the Castle of Forever.” There... It was said! Jerimiah felt just a little bit better for his courage.

“Is that it? This is what is making you so unhappy?” Mr Jumpinsuch was relieved, though he did not show it. He had thought the matter more serious, but it all turns out to be just another of the cobbler’s odd notions affecting him.

“Well, (hic) ... yes.” Jerimiah suddenly felt very silly. It seemed such a stupid thing to get sad about.

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Now we need to stop here and understand one thing before the story evolves further. Mr Jumpinsuch has had long experience in dealing with village problems. He knew that time and time again, if a person with a concern could just get out of their shell for a bit things usually worked out fine. It was only when you kept things bottled up that the problems grew.

The elder considered the matter from all sides for a minute or two before replying. He reasoned that if Jerimiah actually DID try to go to the Castle, one brief period on the terrible and dangerous Long White Road would be quite enough to sober him up and effectively douse the fire of the mad, romantic passions ruling his heart. Why, even just a few hours in the dark wood and he would be home and far more than content in his cobbler's shop from then on.

"Well, why don't you?" the Elder prodded.

"Er..." asked Jerimiah... "Why don't I do what?"

"Go to the Castle, of course. You owe it to yourself."

"But I couldn't really do that could I... Not really?" A sense of hopeful doubt crossed Jerimiah's eyes. Could he really just up and go to the Castle like he had always dreamed?

"I don't see why not." Mr Jumpinsuch concluded with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But it is so very far away, Mr Jumpinsuch, and I have so much work to do here (hic) mending shoes. I would not (hic) have time to get there and back before (hic) someone's shoes needed mending."

"My dear boy... Is that all? Then why don't you call it a holiday! I'm sure you deserve it, and we will even find someone to water your garden while you are gone... Go onto the Long White Road, find the Castle, if you can. And if you can't, well, people will only think how brave you were for at least trying. What do you think... A good plan!"

Jerimiah was amazed at how simply his great problem could be solved. A holiday! Why had he not thought of it before? "What a splendid idea, Mr Jumpinsuch. I will do this very thing... And in fact, if it is all right with you, I will leave tomorrow morning."

Mr Jumpinsuch looked a little shocked by the speed of things, but he could see no reason why the cobbler should not go on holiday, and so he agreed. It would not be hard to find someone to water Jerimiah's garden after all, and everyone usually had two pairs of shoes, even if one wore out in the meantime...



"Go to the Castle ... You owe it to yourself."

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“Very well, Jerimiah... Consider it done,” the village elder announced, and placing down his empty tea cup Mr Jumpinsuch went to leave, but then thought about something and turned back to add ... “Oh, and be sure to take some warm clothes with you. I hear it is cold at night when travelling.”

“Oh... Have you been there? Into the woods or onto the Road?” asked Jerimiah, suddenly curious and enthusiastic about all things to do with the Castle.

“Well ... (cough) Not exactly.” (Mr Jumpinsuch was hardly eager to go travelling out there in the woods, but still he wanted to give the Cobbler hope.) “Er... My grandmother once went a little way up, but it got so cold she turned back. That is how I know it can get cold out there in the forest,” the elder replied.

“Oh, I see... I will take my overcoat then, Mr Jumpinsuch. I am sure that the mountain can get VERY cold, and I will take all good precautions.” Jerimiah was already travelling up the Road to the Castle in his mind.

Mr Jumpinsuch nodded somewhat vaguely, pleased that the cobbler was now in such good spirits ... But had he endangered the poor fellow by suggesting a walk on the Long White Road? “Fine... I will organise a gardener for you then,” he replied, somewhat distantly, for he was already thinking of how his wife would respond to the news. It would certainly give the gossips plenty to talk about tomorrow.

“Wonderful! Marvellous! A holiday... Splendid!” Jerimiah exclaimed happily.

Mr Jumpinsuch nodded. He had cheered the cobbler up, but now wished he had not done his job quite so well. However, there was little for it either way now... His word had been given and so he would simply have to stand aside and let the cobbler attempt the journey.

A holiday! The trip along the Long White Road was sure to be no holiday ... But realising you can only do so much, the elder went on home to inform his wife of this new event in village life.

Jerimiah, naturally enough, was so excited he could not sleep. Instead he took the remaining hours of night to prepare all that he would need for his upcoming journey. He packed food, clothes, his overcoat, a blanket, a mirror (on impulse), his sturdiest walking shoes, toiletries and, of course, a stout walking stick to help him up the steep mountainside.

Thus prepared he sat back, drank some more tea, and fell asleep in his armchair dreaming of the great journey ahead of him.