

Tea at Nantucket

With Introduction by FLORA THOMAS, author of *The Builders of Milford*, etc.

WHILE diligently delving among the ashes of the past for certain dry historical data, it was lately my good fortune to come upon a very live fragment, entirely free from the grey dustiness of its surroundings. This was the letter of a young girl belonging to a past generation of the family among whose records I was searching. A delightful letter, simple and sweet, exceedingly well written, breathing the spirit of the quiet Quaker folk and giving a vivid picture of American home life at that time. The year 1745 was a disturbed one in England, for the Jacobites were being very unpleasantly active, but the affairs of Bonny Prince Charlie seem to have left Nantucket cold, and its Quaker inhabitants pursued the even tenor of their way, unvexed by Stuart troubles.

There are in certain families, strong characteristics, which crop up in generation after generation as distinguishing marks. Such a feature was the Bourbon lip, faithfully rendered by Velasquez as possessed by occupiers of the Spanish throne. The owner of a not altogether attractive feature can therefore, if it be true to type, take comfort in the fact that at least he bears about with him the insignia of a good old line, showing him to be of no mushroom growth.

The Starbuck family had for their special characteristic a spirit of enterprise and pioneering, more marked than any physical feature, though in a footnote to Ruth Wentworth's letter some commentator has briefly recorded "they are a handsome race." Ruth Wentworth's mother was a Starbuck, and when the call of the wild drew this true child of the race to pioneer northward with her husband and children, Ruth was left at the Starbuck Plantation on Nantucket Island with her grandparents, her uncle Nathaniel, and her aunts Content and Esther.

It was in 1641 that Edward Starbuck had set sail from England to seek a new home in the new country, America. The Pilgrim Fathers had the start of him by twenty years, but he went his own way and with his own friends and his own peculiar faith, and made his own clearing on the shores of a strange river in the new land.

One such effort would be enough for most men in a lifetime, but given a spur of troublous circumstances, the company of a trusty friend or two, a good ship on the shore and the wide expanse of the unknown world

before him, and Edward Starbuck was up and off again for fresh discoveries. So it was that in 1659 he and his little party of friends came upon the island of Nantucket and its Indian inhabitants, and proceeded to purchase and settle it. The success of this enterprise is clearly to be seen in the internal evidence of the Quaker girl's letter written nearly a hundred years later.

It is another writer, one Judge Sullivan, of Boston, who some forty years later makes complimentary mention of the courage and dexterity of this Society of Friends in whale fishing. In this industry they did largely and well, supplying to the old country enough oil for the "luxurious lighting of London." But pretty Ruth Wentworth is not concerned with pioneering struggles or prowess on the high seas. Her lot is cast in pleasant places, already prepared, and she tells very charmingly of the people and doings on the island, weaving into the web of the story the shining thread of her own life's romance.

Thus she sets it down :

Starbuck Plantation,
Nantucket.

September, 1745

My own dear Mother,

It seems a long time since you and my honoured father and my ever dear brothers and sisters started for your new home ; but I suppose you have not yet reached your destination, and I think of you every day and all day long as marching and marching, following the lonely trail through the forests, and sometimes I am tempted to repine in that my father thought it best to remove to that far away settlement. But my grandfather tells me that the entertaining of this sentiment would be unworthy the daughter of a pioneer, and since it was thought best for me to remain on the island for a season, I must improve my time to the best advantage, and this I try to do with cheerfulness and Aunt Content is so kind as to say that I am of service to her in our household duties and in spinning and weaving.

Peradventure my letter shall be a puzzle to you, so I hasten to say that I indite a paragraph or two upon leisure, and whenever anything comes into my mind I desire you to know I straightway go to my uncle's desk and set it down. I do this, dear Mother, that you may share in my pleasant thoughts, and may know of my daily life ; also that my brothers and sisters may in a measure partake of my enjoyment.

The principal news I have to tell you is that my cousin Nathaniel Starbuck, junr., has returned to Boston from his

late long voyage to China, and is now hourly looked for here where there are divers preparations made for his welcoming. My grandfather walks restlessly up and down with his stout stick, peering anxiously up the roadway by which our traveller must come. Uncle Nathaniel says with pride: "The boy will have many stories to tell." Aunt Content flits about with a smile on her face and anon with tears in her eyes, concocting the dishes of which her son used to be so fond; while dear old Grandmother knits and knits, because she says: "'Than'el never yet wore any stockings but of my make, and I must have a supply for him to take on his next voyage;" while I am to have a new blue gown made from Aunt's last web, which is the finest and softest piece of flannel ever made on the island.

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My cousin has come. He is tall and lithe, with handsome hair and eyes, and his complexion is bronzed by the ocean winds and Eastern suns. He says it seems to him like a fairy tale that I am the same little dumpling of a Cousin he used to toss in the air when he was last home. He is much grieved to find you are all gone, and is planning a hunting expedition whose objective point shall be your far-away settlement.

The neighbours all congregated around our kitchen fire to hear his wonderful stories and adventures, which he was relating all day long and far into the night; and for all he has travelled almost over the whole world, he is as pleased as a boy to be at home on the dear old Nantucket plantation again. We are all as happy as we can be with our divided hearts, and all have a frequent thought and wish for our wanderers, while grandfather remembers you each morning and evening at the Throne of Grace.

My Cousin has brought a great many curiosities and presents for us all. One is a silken creamy shawl for me, woven and embroidered with beautiful flowers. Another is a gown of foamy Canton crepe as white as snow, and they are so pretty I am sure I shall never dare to wear them. Grandma says they shall be kept for my wedding. Aunt Esther says it is not seemly for such thoughts to be put into a maiden's head, but Aunt Content gave me the other day a whole piece of linen from the Fall bleach to be kept, she said for a day of need.

At all events, my finery is packed away in gums and spices in a foreign box and is not likely to turn any silly maiden's head at present.

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Cousin has returned to Boston, and yesterday he sent by a trusty messenger, another sea chest. It is a large box of tea, the first that was ever seen on the island, real Chinese, which Nat himself procured in China. It is of a greenish colour with little shrivelled leaves and when eaten dry has a pleasant spicy taste. Perhaps when I send this letter I can enclose some that you may see what it is like. He also sent a letter saying that when he returns to Nantucket, the owner of the ship in which he voyaged, Captain Morris, will come with him from Boston to pay us a visit.

We are again making master preparations for visitors ; and if you will believe it, the great parlour which has not been used since Aunt Mehitable's wedding is to be opened. The floor has been newly waxed and polished, and we have spread down here and there beautiful mats which Cousin Nat brought, with many curious and handsome things which are hung on the walls and spread on the table and mantel-piece ; and the huge fire of logs the sharp weather now renders needful in the chimney sends out such a glow that you can have no conception how finely the room appears. I was admiring it this morning, when Aunt Esther rebuked me gravely, saying : " The bright things of this world are of short duration," but dear, gentle grandma said, with a smile, that it was natural and right for the young to admire beauty, at which Aunt Esther seemed much displeased. I sometimes think she does not like me because I am young, but that cannot be. Yet I cannot quite understand how, being my own sweet mother's sister, she can be so unlike her.

We have just had tidings that Cousin Nat and his friend Captain Morris intend to arrive on the 31st of December. Uncle Nathaniel says he will have a tea-party, and invite Lieutenant Macy's family and Uncle Edward Starbuck's family, and a few others, to meet our guests, and to " sit the old year out and the new year in."

We cooked a beautiful dinner, and our guests all came. I wore my new blue gown with some lace grandma gave me in the neck, and my own dear mother's gold necklace. I tied back my curls that Cousin Nat will not allow me to braid with

a blue ribbon which he bought in London. Aunt Esther said men dislike to see girls look so brave but grandpa kissed me and called me "a bonnie blue-bell."

Aunt Content has been much pestered in her mind because she knew not how to serve the tea or to cook it, and after our neighbours were assembled she confided to them her perplexity. They all gathered round the chest, smelling and tasting the fragrant herb. Mrs. Macey said she had heard it ought to be well cooked to make it palatable. Aunt Edward Starbuck said a lady in Boston who had drunk tea told her it needed a good quantity for a steeping, which was the reason it was so expensive, so Aunt Content hung the bright five gallon bell metal kettle on the crane and putting a two quart bowlful of tea in it with plenty of water, swung it over the fire, and Aunt Esther stayed in the kitchen to keep it boiling.

While I was laying the table I heard Lydia Ann Macey say: "I have heard that when tea is drank it gives a brilliancy to the eyes and a youthful freshness to the complexion. I am afraid thy sister-in-law failed to put in enough of the leaves." So Aunt Esther put in another bowlful. When the tea had boiled an hour my Cousin and Captain Morris arrived. Then the tea which had boiled down to about a gallon was poured into grandma's great silver tankard and carried to the table, and each guest was provided with one of her silver porringers; also with cream and lumps of sugar.

The Captain talked to me before dinner, and I told him before I knew I was getting confidential how you were all off in the wilds. He said that enterprise was what the new Country needed, and that it was not best to have Nantucket peopled entirely with Starbucks. That I was one of the old stock it was plain to be seen, he said, if my name was Wentworth, and then he looked pleasantly around the circle of the Starbucks. I suppose I do not resemble them at all. I saw Aunt Esther looking at me so sharply that I remembered she had often told me it was not seemly to talk with men, so presently I became discreetly silent. But when dinner was announced, the Captain took me out and made me sit by him.

After grandpa had asked a blessing on the food, Aunt Content said to her son and his friend: "I have made a dish of tea for you, but I am fearful it is not rightly made, and would like to have your opinion;" whereupon my cousin and

the captain looked and sniffed at the tea, and my cousin made answer : " As my loved mother desires my opinion, I must needs tell her that a spoonful of this beverage, which she has with such hospitable intent prepared for us, would go nigh to kill anyone at this table ; " and the captain said, laughingly, that my aunt could keep the concoction to dye the woollens. He further said he would instruct us how to draw the tea, " and this young lady," he said, turning to me, " shall make the first dish of tea ever made on Nantucket." So the tea was made by his direction and poured into the tankard Aunt Content had got ready, and the captain carried it to the table for me and helped to pour it into the porringers for the guests. He was so kind also as to say it was the best dish of tea he had ever tasted.

We had a wholesome dinner and enjoyable withal. Cousin Nat told stories and sang songs, in which Captain Morris joined him, and then the happy new year's greetings took the place of the good-byes when our neighbours left for their homes.

My Cousin's friend still stays for the shooting, and there is not much spinning and weaving done, for it takes so much time for the cooking and the eating and the visiting. He is very agreeable and calls grandfather " the Miles Standish of Nantucket." I heard him tell Uncle Nathaniel that we had good blood, and ever since he became acquainted with Cousin Nat he had conceived a great admiration for the Nathaniel Starbucks ; and he said something about a wife. Perhaps he remains here on Aunt Esther's account ; but dear me, she is so prim (I write with all respect, dear Mother) and he is such a jovial gentleman, I do not understand how such a wedding could be harmonious. If he has a regard for her it must be on account of the Starbuck blood.

Oh, my Mother, how can I tell you ! It is not for love of Aunt Esther that Captain Morris remains, but your own little daughter ; and all the Starbucks, saving Aunt Esther, who declares I ought to be put back into pinafores, have given their consent that I shall be married and sail away with my husband in his ship to foreign parts, to see for myself all the wonders of which I have heard so much of late. But I will not give my consent until I first have that of my father and mother ; so there is a company being made up to go with Cousin Nat and the Captain through the snows to your far-away home.

And so after all it will be this new friend of whom I have written so much who will take this long letter to you. I am sure, dear Mother, that you who know my heart so well will not think it unseemly for me (to pray) that the Lord will guide your heart and that of my father to feel kindly toward this gentleman ; for indeed he is of good repute and is so kind as to be very fond of me ; and (if) I feel that I have your consent, and that of my honoured father, together with your blessing I shall be very happy and take an honest pride in being his honoured wife.

The Captain declares laughingly that I am sending him on a quest like a knight of old to prove his love. I cannot help thinking it strange his wanting to marry me and when I said so one day he replied gravely that it was all on account of the tea which got into his head. And indeed it may be so, for I was flighty and hardly shut my eyes to sleep at all the night after partaking of it ; and even my dear grandmother says she would not answer for the consequences of what she might be led to do were she to make use of it every day.

I send you, with other articles, some of this famous tea and a bit of the white crape that I shall, if so it seemeth best in the judgment of my honoured father and dear mother, wear as a wedding-gown.

The household all join me in sending loving greeting to you all (and) I remain now and ever,

Your dutiful and loving daughter,

RUTH STARBUCK WENTWORTH.

The above letter was printed in the *Leeds Mercury* many years ago, and it appeared in *The Evening Bulletin*, of Philadelphia, January 1st, 1922.

REMINGTON HOBBIE (*Jnl.* xvii. 73). John Comly writes, under date of 1818 :

“ Met with Remington Hobby, a Friend from Vassalborough, who gave an account of his convincement by means of a conversation with David Sands. He was then a Justice of the Peace. Being convinced of our principles, he joined Friends, and became an eminent minister, a man of talents and usefulness ; but, at length, being much esteemed by Friends, he let in spiritual pride, and exalting himself, he gave way to temptation, so as to lose his standing and usefulness in society. Alas ! how is he fallen, and yet there remains a love to Friends.” (*Journal*, 1853, p. 238.)