

Storms in a teacup

If you look carefully into a cup of tea, you may, if you have sharp little eyes, spot the Tea-farer, as he plies his tiny rowing-boat across the surface of the tea. The Tea-farer is one who spends his life amidst the perilous waters of the tea-cup, dodging the rains of milk, and the cruel surges of the tea-spoon, and the great slurping monster that drains the tea to the very bottom of the cup. The tales he could tell, this Tea-farer, this old Tea-Dog, this cuponaut! If you listen, he will tell you in the wettest of voices of the great storms that arise in a teacup.

'Ah yes, me hearties,' he begins, settling down comfortably with his brawny brown arms behind his head, and a pipe stuck firmly in his teeth, 'Ah yes, many's the storm I've seen when rowing about minding my own business. There's people as might tell you they've seen pigs fly, and others as tell you of the nights when it rained cats and dogs - well, their stories are nothing compared to the storms I've seen in a teacup.

'The worst one I ever saw? Well, let me think now...!' The Tea-farer sucks his pipe and his clear brown eyes look heavenwards as he recalls all the storms he has seen.

'Well, me old spoon-mates' he resumes after some considerable thought, 'I recall the worst storm I ever was out in was a few years back. It began as a quiet afternoon, tea on the lawn, as I remember, with the sun shining, and the birds singing their little hearts out in the bushes. The tea-set was out, the tea made and brewing, the wasps buzzing around the cakes and the buns, and the dog stealing the biscuits. All very pleasant you might think, eh, me fellow travellers of the clipper trade. Oh yes, all very pleasant indeed.

'I had just selected my cup - a very nice one too, as I recall, wide at the brim to let the clouds of steam blow away, a rare old pattern of flowers round the inside, and not too deep - too deep, you know, and it's not a real life for a Tea-Dog like meself. So there I was, waiting for the tea to be poured so as I could launch my little coracle, when suddenly, out of the blue sky the good people around the table were arguing about some silly little thing - ah, what was it now? Ah yes, about whether to put the cakes away so as the wasps wouldn't get at them, or perhaps just to eat them up. Well, before you know it, they were arguing like good 'uns, shouting and waving their arms about.

'I began to despair of ever getting out on to the waters that afternoon, until eventually silence came, and the tea - a little cold by now, to be sure - was poured. As soon as the milk was in and the sugar, and the tea-spoon had been taken out, I put my vessel into the cup, and off I set. A good afternoon for a little jaunt it was, the currents running fast from all the stirring and not too much steam about. Sometimes I rowed and sometimes I just let the current take me, thinking of distant landfalls that I used to make in my youth, and the big vats of tea I used to sail in when learning my trade, and of fabled samovars and the mythical Boston Tea-Party where the tea covered a real live

ocean. I must confess, me young tea-salts, I almost fell asleep at the helm that afternoon.

'And would have done so had the most fearful and horrible storm not blown up. A clap of thunder, it was, and I was almost thrown right out of me boat by the shock. The tea was trembling like nothing I had ever seen before, great waves crashing as if a tea-monster was about to emerge, leaf-encrusted, from the deeps and overthrow all God-fearing tea-farers. Then the whole cup began to shake, a real live earthquake it was. Thunder I heard, and then voices raised in anger, shouting about wasps and tea-cakes. Well, I don't mind confessing to you that I was frightened right out of me skin, me old spoon-mates, and I clutched the sides of the boat just praying I would not be cast overboard.

'It just got worse, the thunder and the lightning and the shaking and the quaking and the crashing waves. Suddenly, from out of the sky, something I had never seen before and never wish to see again - the tea-spoon descended and was stirred rapidly around by the drinker.

'Well, I didn't stand a chance. The spoon caught me broadsides and my coracle was just lifted up in the air and crashed upsides- down into the waves. I was thrown a great distance, and was plunged into the tea, with no hope of clinging on to my boat or my oars. The tea closed over my head, and I thought I had breathed my last. I could see nothing but the brown waves crashing all around me. But before I went under for the third time, the spoon came surging round again and caught me up. I don't mind telling you, I hung on to it for dear life, kept my eyes tight shut. The thunder still rolled, and I could hear the cracking of wood as my coracle broke up.

'At length, the noise began to subside, and there was sunlight again. I opened one eye: the spoon had been lifted out of the cup and placed once more on the saucer. As soon as I had a chance, I slid off and hid in the shadow of the cup. After the storm there was silence, apart from the sound of children playing and the odd buzzing of a fly or a wasp.

'I tell you straight, me young master tea-strainers, I never went back in the teacups for a whole week after that. And since then I've seen storms enough, but never one as fiercesome as that.'

So the next time you have a cup of tea, watch out for the Tea-farer as he plies his way across the surface in his tiny boat. And do not use the spoon too much! Remember what can happen in a storm in a teacup!

'Now, me brave cup-mates,' our friend continues, 'Did I ever tell you of the time I was captain of a ship in a bottle?...''