

# On Dining Alone

LUCULLUS, the Roman host whose dinners are still talked about for their elaborate menus and their fabulous cost, grew tired one day of dining with other men.

He ordered a meal for one person. When it was served to him, he was conscious of a certain slackness: the wine was perhaps a shade too cold, and the sauce for the carp, which certainly was less succulent than usual, lacked that tang for which his chef was justly famed.

Lucullus frowned and summoned the major-domo.

"Perhaps, perhaps," that official agreed, with a flood of respectful salutations. "We thought that there was no need to prepare a fine banquet for my lord alone——"

"It is precisely when I am alone," the great gourmet answered, icily, "that you require to pay special attention to the dinner. At such times, you must remember, Lucullus dines with Lucullus."

At such times few men realize that they are dining with themselves. In fact, they try to forget that rather frightening truth. They read the newspaper or turn on the radio if they are at home. More often they flee from themselves to friend-filled clubs, or to the noisiest nearest restaurant, where other lone humans eat crowded together in a hungry, ugly mob and take digestive pills between their hurried courses.

It is a pity. An occasional meal with himself is very good for Mr. Doe. It gives him time to look about him; quiet in which to savour his present mouthful; opportunity to broil his steak a new way or try again those dishes his wife hates.

He need not take it too seriously, however. Old Thomas Walker, The Original, whose preoccupation with the fine points of dining approached pomposity at times, declared himself thus on the problem:

“When dining alone is necessary, the mind should be disposed to cheerfulness by a previous interval of relaxation from whatever has seriously occupied the attention, and by directing it to some agreeable object.”

The “interval of relaxation” might well be used for broiling a tender filet, although I doubt if Mr. Walker meant just that; and there could be no more “agreeable object” toward which to direct attention than a fine little bottle of red wine from the Côte d’Or. There with a leaf or two of salad and some crusty sour-dough bread, Lucullus has a meal fit even for Lucullus.

An Englishman, however, and an earl at that, once mapped out a slightly more complicated menu.

“A good soup,” he said, “a small turbot, a neck of venison, ducklings with green peas or chicken with asparagus, and an apricot tart—it is a dinner for an emperor.”

Perhaps he was right. Louis XIV of France, who always dined alone at one o’clock, ate several soups, three solid courses, and then a dessert.

He also ate only from a square table, and was served by nobles of his court, both facts probably influencing his digestion to a certain extent. (Many people enjoy good food only to the sound of soft music, or in a room with black walls. My mother cannot swallow if a cat is near her. Hunger, I observe, is not a part of these equations.)

I have known two people who understood, and probably without one thought about it, why Lucullus dined with Lucullus. One was an old man, the other a girl sixteen and usually inarticulate.

Biddy was tall and quiet, with magnificent brown eyes and the stiff awkwardness of a new-hatched butterfly. She lived in a kind of doze, seemingly placid, lethargic, docilely stubborn.

One day she took her week’s allowance and moved tranquilly and relentlessly towards the tram, muttering of errands and birthdays and such. To her mother’s puzzled questions she smiled reassurance, vague but firm.

Late that afternoon she came back.

She brought no birthday presents nor evidences of errands done, but one rather spotted paper bag, from which she drew a long brown cut of *apfelstrudel* for her mother. She was vaguer than usual, but seemed to be unharmed—and the *strudel* was delicious.

Later I saw Biddy. We were talking of restaurants. I saw her eyes flash suddenly when I mentioned Spring Street in Los Angeles, where, one man said, the best and worst food in seven states can be found in less than as many blocks.

"I hear you went to town last Saturday," I said, feeling like Sherlock Holmes and Tom the Peeper. "What did you do?"

Biddy looked quickly at me, and then smiled rather sheepishly.

"Spring Street, eh? Where did you go?"

"Well—I went to *Katie Levey's*. And why haven't you told me how good it is? And the people!"

"Lots of Austrian Jews, I suppose?"

"Naturally, in a kosher restaurant run by a Viennese! Of course," she added, carelessly, "Jews are the best indication of good food in a place."

I nodded recognition to one of her mother's favourite remarks, and asked, "But what did you do from eleven to three? You can't eat lunch for four hours."

Biddy answered me somewhat scornfully: "I ate breakfast, not lunch, and certainly I ate it for four hours: they understand things like that in a decent restaurant. I drank coffee, with lots of hot milk in it, and ate Viennese tarts and—and things."

"Things meaning salami and sweet pickles?"

"Mhm."

She looked dreamily past me. I said nothing, and finally she went on: "I sat by the cake counter and watched people in the mirror. They were so queer—so *pleasant* at eleven when everybody else in town was rushing around—and especially down there on Spring. And they spoke every language and dipped their tarts in their coffee-glasses.

"Yes," Biddy exclaimed, "my coffee was in a glass! It was wonderful!"

Her face was vivid, and in her dark eyes was a quiet awareness I had never seen before. She concluded, almost fiercely: "Four hours I sat there, watching them dip their bread in coffee-glasses, and thinking. And I'll do it again! It was—it was just what I needed."

Biddy breakfasted with Biddy, and saw in a mirror clearly, for the first of many times.

The other one who understood was an old man. I never knew who he was. Whenever we went to *Victor Hugo's* he was there, at

a quiet corner table. He was dressed carefully in rather old-fashioned dinner clothes, with his feet in tiny twinkling pumps, like a doll's.

He ate little, and drank a half-bottle of wine with his meat. For dessert he went through a never-varying formula with the intensity and detachment of a high priest.

An avocado was brought to him, cradled in a napkin. He felt of it delicately, smelled it, usually nodded yes. It was cut in two with a silver knife. Then he himself detached the stone-skin from each half, placed one part of the fruit gently on a large plate before him, and sent the other back to the kitchen.

Powdered sugar was brought, and the old man pressed it into the hollow of the fruit. He spent some time over this, making it firm and even.

Next the *sommelier* appeared with a bear-shaped bottle of clear Russian *kümmel*. He poured a generous liqueur-glass of it, waited for the old man's sniff of approval, and went away.

Drop by drop the *kümmel* disappeared into the moon of white sugar, very slowly, very patiently. Very delicately it was stirred and pressed down and stirred again.

Finally the old man ate a small spoonful of the smooth green fruit-flesh, then another. Sometimes he stopped, sometimes he finished it. Then he drank a mouthful of coffee and left.

I have not yet tested his strange dish. I have never been able to construct its flavours for my mind's palate with any clearness. But very clear in my memory is the expression on the old man's face. He was happy as Bidy was happy with her coffee in a glass and her mirror. He was at peace, and aware—aware that Lucullus dined with Lucullus for a reason.