TABLE-FORKS, HISTORICALLY HANDLED.

(*From Chambers's Journal.*)

'I OBSERVED a custom in all those Italian cities and towns through the which I passed, that is not used in any other country that I saw in my travels, neither do I think that any other nation of Christendom doth use it, but only Italy.'

So writes the old English traveller Thomas Coryate, in that book of his, quaintly entitled *Crudities*, and published in the year of grace 1611. In 1608, Thomas has been travelling through France, Italy, Switzerland, and parts of Germany; and in his *Crudities* appear the results of the tour. But what is the unique which Thomas has observed in Italy. and to a knowledge of which he introduces his British countrymen in the said year of grace 1611?

It is neither more nor less than the use of forks at table. Thomas Coryate is struck, and amused withal, by the observance in Italy of a custom which he believes—and he is an experienced traveller—not Christendom at large can elsewhere shew an example of. Hear him detail the prandial phenomenon: 'The Italian, and also most strangers that are commorant in Italy, do always at their meals use a little fork when they cut their meat. For while with their knife, which they hold in one hand, they cut, the meat out of the dish, they fasten their fork, which they hold in their other hand, upon the same dish; so that whatsoever he be that, sitting in the company of any others at meal, should unavisedly touch the dish of meat with his fingers from which all at the table do cut. he will give occasion of offence unto the company, as having transgressed the laws of good-manners, insomuch that for his error he shall be at least browbeaten, if not reprehended on words. This form of feeding, I understand, is generally used in all places of Italy; their forks being, for the most part, made of iron or steel, and some of silver, but those are used only by gentlemen.' Honest Thomas Coryate was quite taken with this new-fangled curiosity—for a curiosity it was to him to all intents and purposes—and as a curiosity he put it down in black and white for the amusement of his readers. 'And the reason of this curiosity is,' he goes on to say, 'because the Italian cannot by any means endure to have his dish touched with fingers, seeing all men's fingers are not alike clean.' Very right, too, thought Thomas. So, when he got back again to the White Cliffs, and was set down before the roast-beef of Old England, in that self-same year of grace 1608, forthwith he resolved to naturalise that Itilian exotic, by planting it on his own table: and he did so. And men saw, and marvelled; some thought it a good idea, and others voted him an affected

Snapper up of unconsidered trifles;

and all, with one consent, all England over, called him *Furcifer* for his pains. Furcifer, the fork bearer; such was the famous 'style' bestowed on Thomas Coryate, the first man who ever used a table-fork in Great Britian.

We can fancy the Latin sobriquet, with its why and wherefore, mightily relished by King James, partaking without fork, whether iron or silver, of his regal repast, and cracking jokes, right regal and pedantic, at the expence of Furciferous Thomas, and to the delectation, as in duty bound, of his majesty's faithful and forkless guests. Records of royal fare, during that illustrious reign, are existing in abundance; and we are to suppose the monarch and his friends in every instance without table-forks, disposing with a good-will now of venison paty, now of Paris pie; anon, of 'rost kidd, wholl,' or of 'boyled carpe, hot;' in a trice, again, of 'chines of salmon, broyled,' or rostmutton with oysters,' or 'sweet breade pie,' or marled smelts,' or 'sowssed pigg;' then launching into an ocean of sweets and goodies, in the shape of quince-pie, candied-tart, musk-pear paste, orange-comfit, almond-leach, &c.—all amid much smacking of lips and clatter of knives and—no, *not* forks. We can fancy his majesty leaning back in his chair to have his laugh out, as some courtier, of satirical temper and literary taste, proceeds to quote the finale of Thomas Coryate's chapter on forks as follows: 'Hereupon I myself thought good to imitate the Italian fashion by this forked cutting of meat, not only while I was in Italy, but also in Germany, and oftentimes in England since I came home, being once quipped for that frequent using of my fork by a certain learned gentleman, a familiar friend of mine, one Mr. Lawrence Whitaker, who in his merry humour doubted not to call me at table Furcifer, only for using a fork at feeding, but,' Thomas carefully adds, 'for no other cause.' As Robert Southey's mother was jeered in the streets of Bristol for carrying an umbrella, as a mere effeminate innovation, so was Furcifer Thomas, and so were his first disciples, furciferous and few derided as finical coxcombs in books and on the stage. 'Your fork carving traveller' is finely flouted in Beaumont and Fletcher; and Meercraft, in Ben Jonson, thus complains to Sledge and Gilthead;

Have I deserved this from you two? for all
My pains at court, to get you each a patent.
Gilthead. For what?
Meercraft. Upon my project of the forks.
Sledge. Forks! What be they?
Meercroft. The laudable use of forks.
Brought into custom here as they are in Italy,
To the sparing of napkins, &c.

Beckmann, to whom we owe ourinfor mation on this as on so many other matters, in the *History of Inventions*, after remarking that in France, at the close of the sixteenth century, forks even at court were entirely new, and that they had not found their way into Sweden, adds 'But it must appear strange enough that Thomas Coryate, the traveller, should see forks for the first time in Italy, and in the same year be the first person to use them in England—from which circumstance he was facetiously nicknamed Furcifer.' In Italy itself, we are told, the use of forks was first known about the end of the fifteenth century; that is to say, during the latter years of Lorenzo de Medici and his brillant associates, while Charles VIII. was king of France, and the first of the Tudors reigned prosperously in England. A certain Italian, Galeotus Martius by name, who resided at the court of Hungary in the reign of Matthias Corvinus (1458—1490 A. D.), informs us, in his memoirs of that turbulent prince, that at that period, forks were not used at table—as they then were in mrny parts of Italy—but at meals each person laid hold of the meat with his fingers, whence ensued an unpleasing assimilation of the said fingers, to the colour of the duck's-foot, on account of the 'much saffron then put into sauces and soup.' The writer praises Matthias Corvinus himself for his kingly knack of 'eating without a fork, yet keeping up the table-talk meanwhile, and never smearing his clothes.'

Attempts have made to shew that the ancients must have known and used table-forks, or something equivalent; and dictonaries are appealed, and Greek and Latin nouns-substantive are adduced, to prove the point. Does not the Greek word *Kreagra* mean a fork?—we are asked. Does not Athenæus (author of those amusing *Noctes*)—do not he, and Pollux, and Capell, mention kreagra among kitchen utensils? That may be; as a large flesh-hook. to-wit, for the cook to use in hauling up a mass of boiled meat from the pot; not at all as a table-fork, for civilized creatures to use in effecting the transit of food from plate to mouth. It was 'from hand to mouth,' very literally, that our ancestors ate and lived. So, again, the Latin words *furca furcilla*, and others, may be translated forks, if you please; but then it is to the class of hay-forks, tridents, &c., not of table-forks, that they and their kind belong. Let it be borne in mind, however, that the food put upon the table of the ancients was considerably more 'tender' than what now-a days vexes our digestion. Furthermore, that all articles of food were cut into tiny bits before they were served up, which was the more necessary, as the guests did not sit at table, but reclined on couches, in a posture that would not leave both hands at liberty. 'For cutting meat, persons of rank kept in their houses a carver, who had learned to perform his duty according to certain rules.' This carver, Beckmann adds, used a knife—the only one placed on the table, and which in the mansions of the rich had an ivory handle, and was commonly ornamented with silver. Bread was broken, never cut—being baked in thin cakes, like the Jews' passover-bread, or the oat-meal cakes of North Britain. Juvenal, it is remarked, when he wishes to describe stale dried old bread, passed off by a churlish host on his 'poor relations,' while his grander visitors are regaled on the baker's newest, finest, best—does not say that it could not be *cut*, but that it could not be broken:

Mark with what scorn that other deals your stint
Of bread in mouldy fragments, hard as flint;
Fragments your lab'ring grinders cannot bite;
But your lord's bread, how fair, how fine, how white!

But this is a digression from forks; suffice it to say, that had they been used by the ancients, evidence of such usage must have been hunted out by investigators so lynx-eyed as Biornstahl and Baruffaldi (*de armis convivalibus*); and although a silver two-pronged fork was found among rubbish in the Appian Way, and some articles were discovered by Grignon in the ruins of a Roman town in Champagne, which he pronounces table-forks, yet are the age and the use of these rarities considered doubtful to say the least, by candid and competent judges.* Beckmann deliberately asserts, that neither the Greeks nor the Romans have any name for table-forks—'now so essential among polished nations, that the very notion of 'eating a meal without them excites disgust'—and that no phrase or expression which, with the least plausibility, can be referred to the use of them occurs anywhere in the literature of either people. He contends, with reason, that had table-forks been known, this ignoring of them wholesale could not have occurred, since so many entertainments are celebrated by the poets, or detailed by other writers; and that at least they must have been alluded to by Pollux, in the very minute and compendious catalogue which he has given of articles necessary for the table.

There is, on the other hand, a well-known couplet in Ovid's *Art of Love*, in which the poet, addressing a lady, lays down a rule as to the polite manner of picking her food with her fingers; which precept, a modern critic remarks, can scarcely be understood in the same ironical sense as one to be found in the writings of a later instructor in convivial gallantry, who advises that, in helping pigeons, the legs and pinions should be given to ladies, in order to afford them an opportunity of displaying their white and taper fingers in picking the small bones. 'The caution with which the Latin poet concludes, makes it plain that the fingers were used in his time not from choice, but from necessity.'

Even after Master Thomas Coryate had introduced table-forks amongst us, they must have worked their way very slowly into general use. They were still an object of waggery in 1647, when John Fletcher's *Queen of Corinth* was published, where the Tutor says, for instance:

Your T beard is the fashion,
And twofold doth express th' enamour'd courtier,
As full as *your fork-carving traveller*

Five years later—namely, in 1652, which is allowing more than forty years for Coyrate's hobby to amble into notice—Heylin, in his *Cosmography*, alludes to forks as still a comparative rarity. Writing of the Chinese, he says: 'They are much given unto their bellies, and eat thrice a day, but then not immoderately; drink their drink hot, and eat their meat with two sticks of ivory, ebony, or the like, not touching their meat with their hands at all, and therefore no great foulers of linen. The use of silver forks with us, by some of our spruce gallants taken up of late, came from hence into Italy, and thence into England.' Heylin's derivation of that 'great fact,' our silver-fork school, from the chopstick system of the Celestial Empire, may be rejected without much scruple; but his evidence to the tardy advance of table-forks as a national institution, is valid and significant. To our illustions of the infancy of their career, drawn from our own literature, let us add two others, in prose and verse respectively. Fynes Morison, in his *Itinerary* (1617), when relating the bargain he made with the master of the vessel which was to convey him from Venice to Constantinople, says, 'He gave us good diet, serving each man with his knife, a spoon, *and a fork.*' Forks must have been, and indeed were, in general acceptance among the civilised people of Italy by and before this period. The poetical fragment referred to will be found in the fourth act of Ben Johnson's *Volpone*, where Sir Politick Would-be gives advice to Peregrine of a kind confirmatory of the foregoing remark:

Then must you learn the use
And handling of your for at meals,
The metal of your glass (these are main matters
With your Italian).

The knight has met his friend in a street 'in the height of Venice,' and sees fit, himself an old traveller, to set down 'some few particulars, fit to be known of your crude traveller,' amid which as prominent a place is due to the 'handling of a silver fork at meals,' as the exquisites of Queen Anne's time ascribe to

The nice conduct of a clouded cane.

The use of forks at table seems to have been long considered a 'superfluous luxury.' They were forbidden in common with other pomps and vanities, auxiliary to the 'pride of life,' in various convents and religious houses.

At the time Beckmann wrote, they were still a rarity in many parts of Spain. 'And even yet,' he observes, 'in taverns, in many countries, particularly in some towns of France, knives are not placed on the table, because it is expected that each person should have one of his own—a custom which the French seem to have retained from the old Gauls. But as no person would any longer eat without forks, landlords were obliged to furnish these, together with plates and spoons.' What Beckmann here traces to the old Gauls, is a custom until recently cherished by the modern Gael. 'Thirty years ago,' writes Dr. Johnson, in his *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, 'the Highlander wore his knife as a companion to his dirk or dagger; and when the company sat down to meat, the men who had knives cut the flesh into small pieces for the women, who with their fingers conveyed it to their mouths.' The good old Great Bear growls over such knives as he met with, as being 'not often either very bright, or very sharp.' Such accidents as *that* will happen, to this hour, even in well-regulated and silver-fork families. Meanwhile, furcifer is no longer a term of ridicule; people who ignore or repudiate forks are in a minority; the cause of forks is the cause of progress:

For we doubt not through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
And the thoughts of men are widened;

and, as a corrollary to that proposition, the use of forks is spreading

——— with the process of the suns.

[The late Lieutenant-General G. R. Ainslie, author of a work on the Anglo-French Coinage, and who lived much in France after the peace of 1815, used to assert that he had seen the introduction of knives and forks, and many other needful utensils, into that country. During his residence at Bourdeaux, some English relations of his introduced the articles used in England for washing; and the general used to cause some merriment with an account of the puzzlement of the native gentry about a soap-dish, which some thought most probably a thing for making tea.—ED.]

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"Once there was a rich farmer in the country" (that is the way in which all old-fashioned stories used to begin when we were a boy, "and our old cap was new")—once there was a rich farmer who had four or five orchards of apples, pears, peaches, and other like fruits. He had taken up amateur farming after having been a "larned man," and a successful, money-making lawyer-at law" in the city. Now he was of a "close" nature, and did impart but little of his fruits or his substance to his friends and neighbors in the region round about him. He would walk about with his "men" in the mellow autumn time, picking his luscious fruits, but seldom would he offer any to the hungry passer-by who might look longingly upon his delicious treasures. He would even, with his jack-knife, cut from a half decayed peach, or apple, or pear, or apricot, the diseased part, and put them in a basket by themselves, "that nothing might be lost."

Now there was a plan formed by five or six of his neighbours' sons, whereby to make him more generous to others of the *fruitful* bounties of Nature wherewith he had been blessed.

This was an appeal to his vanity of fast learning. One afternoon, while he was in his orchard, picking apples and pears, near the roadside, he saw five or six of his neighbours' boys approaching in the main road. They were apparently wrangling concerning some question then at issue between them.

"Well, let us leave it to Mr. B——," said one: "*he* knows, because he has been a lawyer; he is a learned man, and a man who understands grammar."

"Agreed!" said they all; "we *will* leave it to Mr. B——,"

"What is the question in dispute?" asked Mr. B——, as he approached the corner of the fence which led along the road.

"It is this," said the head wag of the party; "Is it proper to say—*would* it be proper to say, to us, for example—we six —would it be proper for *you*, supposing a case, to say to *all* of us, 'Will you take a few apples and pears!' Shouldn't the question, to be grammatical, rather be, 'Will *ye* take some pears, apples or apprizots?' As a grammatical question, how should you put it, Mr. B——?" "The case," said Mr. B—— "is perfectly simple. '*You*' is individual, '*ye*' includes many; as, for example, Saint Paul: '*Ye men and brethren*,' etc. Oh, yes, it's a plain case. I should, of course, ask your question in *this* way: 'Will ye take some pears, apples, and apricots, gentlemen?' That would be—"

But before he could get another word out, they all replied:

"Certainly, Mr. B——, certainly, and much obliged to you besides:" "I am *very* fond of apples;" "I affect no fruit so much as a good pear:" "*I* go in for apricots—the most delicious of all fruit that grows on a tree!" And each man jumped over the fence and "helped himself," having been *invited* to do so in a courteous and entirely *grammatical* way!

We have been reminded of the foregoing by the following veritable fact, recorded in the annals of a place which it is not neccessary to name particularly; but the story is *true*:

"A few nights back a party of ladies and gentleman were laughing over the supposed awkwardness attending a declaration of love, when a gentleman remarked, that if *he* ever offered himself, he would do it in a collected and business-like manner.

"'For instance,' said he, addressing himself to a beautiful lady present, 'I would say:

"'Miss S——, I have been engaged two years in looking for a wife. I am in the receipt of a clear income of two thousand dollars a year from my present business, which is daily on the increase. Of all the ladies of my acquaintance, I admire you the most. Indeed, to speak plainly, I love you, and would most gladly make you my wife!'

"'You flatter me by your preference,' good-humouredly replied Miss S——, to the surprise of all present.

"'Not at all: I am entirely sincere.'

"'*Then I refer you to my father!*'

"'Bravo!' exclaimed the gentleman.

"'Well, I de-c-l-a-r-ed!' exclaimed the ladies, in one united chorus.

"The lady and gentleman were married soon after."

"Wasn't that," asks the narrator, "a modest way of coming to the point, and a lady-like method of taking a man at his word!"

Well, as Charles Lamb would say, "It wasn't any thing else."

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THE POET COWPER ON WAR.—A letter of William Cowper, containing the following passage, has just come to light:—"Wherever there is war there is misery and outrage, notwithstanding which it is not only lawful to wish, but even a duty to pray for, the success of one's country.

And as to the neutralities, I really think the Russian virago an impertinent puss for meddling with us, and engaging half a score kittens of her acquaintance to scratch the poor old lion, who, if he has been insolent in his day, has probably acted no otherwise then they would in his circumstances and with his power to embolden them.