

THE 17th CENTURY STILL-ROOM

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The knowledge of
Stilling is one pretty feat
The waters be wholesome
The charges not greate.

—Tusser's "500 Points of Good Husbandry," 1573.

THE good house-wife of the 17th century was expected to be very wise in the preparation and use of the herbs she grew; in large country houses a room was set apart for the lady of the manor to carry on these house-wifely arts: this room was called the still-room, and its story is almost hidden in the closely-woven warp of the domestic life of the period. To the 20th century such a room is a sort of mystery, as it has no counterpart in our life; the still-room was a sort of composite, partly a laboratory, a medicine closet, and somewhat a storeroom and pantry.

Its location was not fixed; we may pore over old plans, read into the domestic life of the people, yet fail to find that it had a definite place in the manor house, like the kitchen or dairy; it was there, a part of every country house, sometimes even on the second floor,¹ next the bedrooms; sometimes, as in the drawing of William Lawson,² in a tiny detached house. But in whatever place we find it, it was here that the lady of the manor directed her maids in the composition of the laborious recipes by which she produced the domestic remedies for her household, and the poor in her parish; here she dried the herbs for the flavors for the kitchen, and distilled the sweet waters, scents and toiletteries in which she delighted.

We get a very good picture of the activities in the still-room from the old still-room books, in which the cherished recipes were kept. Some of these books are preserved in MS. in the libraries in England, others are still in possession of descendants of the writers; fortu-

¹Hawstead, Surrey.

²*A New Orchard and Garden* by W. Lawson, 1617.

nately, a few have been made more available by publication.³

The still-room book has a character all its own; it is more than a cook book, less than an herbal, but it contains the accumulated knowledge of the family of the virtues and preparation of the plants, which formed such an important part of the domestic economy of the day. How these 17th century women cherished these recipes from their friends! What joy to plain Elizabeth Wainwright to get the recipe for "Lady Allen's Water"; it reads like an herbal, with its list of thirty-three herbs to be steeped in white wine and brandy, and then distilled.

In addition to these MS. books, several contemporary works were printed "contayning the vertious knowledge . . . which ought to be in any compleat housewife, of what degree or calling soever."⁴

These also were collections of recipes from relatives and friends, mixed with the writer's own philosophy as to a woman's duties.

An early "Approved Book" was the *English House-Wife* of Gervase Markham; to begin with, Markham would have this ideal woman skilled in the preparation of medicines for the health of her household; then she must have knowledge of all sorts of herbs belonging to the kitchen, which skill she must get by her own labor and experience: "When our English house-wife is exact in these rules she shall then sort her mind to other secrets. Therefore first I would have her furnish herself with a good still for the distillation of sweet waters. . . . Then she shall know that the best waters for the smoothing the skin, and keeping the face delicate and amiable are those distilled from strawberries, flowers of lillies, etc." With this summary of the duties of an English house-wife, and his large collection of recipes, Gervase Markham gives a good index of the activities in the still-room of the 17th century.

³*A Proper Newe Booke of Cokery*. From a Ms. left to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, by Archbishop of Canterbury.

Customs of Yardley Hastings.

Arcana Fairfaxiana. Facsimile of Mary Cholmeley Still-Room Book.

Plain Plantain. Madam Susanna Avery Ms. Still-Room Book.

⁴*Jewel House of Art and Nature* by Sir Hugh Platt.

Tusser's *500 Points of Good Husbandry*.

Country House-Wife's Garden by William Lawson, 1617.

English House-Wife by Gervase Markham, 1637.