

Still Room

❖ BOOK ❖



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Botanical illustrations by Melissa Gray

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Audio Reading:

Five actors read *Still Room Book*,
accompanied by the music of the Boulder Renaissance Consort.

Introduction

Here we tell the stories of three generations of people whose lives center around Dunnestoke Manor – its fields, gardens and, in particular, its still room. During the summer that these stories take place, Queen Elizabeth is aging, and William Shakespeare is in mid-career.

Dunnestoke Manor is outside London, but only half a day's carriage ride (in good weather when the roads are dry) from the main city. Those who live at or near the manor will tell us about the times they live in, with the dangers of religion, politics, and plague.

The Dunnestokes are practical; they made the change of religion from Roman Catholic to Church of England in Elizabeth's father's time. Now in a time of an expanding, educated middle class, they are experimenting with new income possibilities, both in the nearby town and in London. They teach us a little of their still room craft, and share with us some of their recipes, or – as they call them – receipts.

Quotes from Shakespeare referencing herb and still room craft serve as transitions between the stories.



Timothy

THE BREWER



*...his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbec only.*

Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*, I, vii

I am Timothy, Brewer for the Dunnestoke family, at M'Lord and Lady Dunnestoke's country estate. This still room is where we make the ales and beers we drink, and dry and distill the herbs and medicinal plants grown on this estate. My great-great-great grandfather was the first gardener here, when the Dunnestoke family was given this land by King Richard the Second in 1370, some three hunderet years ago. The family started this great house, Dunnestoke Manor, and held it through all the Wars of the Roses between the Lancasters and Yorks.

All my family down to me were either the gardeners or the brewers, dependin' on if we liked workin' more inside or out. I don't mind gardenin', and I have some say with wha' planting goes into th' garden, because my son and grandson are head and under gardener here. But I best like bein' the brewer, an' my tasks here in the still room are dear to me. Our still room's out o' th' traffic o' the house, in part so we can keep it very clean. But mos'ly it's because the stills are used to decoct liquids needin' to remain undisturbed durin' th' process. Still rooms need t' be cool an' dry



Roselyn

LADY OF DUNNESTOKE



*Here's flow'rs for you:
Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram,
The marigold, that goes to bed wi' th' sun,
And with him rises weeping. These are flow'rs
Of middle summer...*

Perdita, The Winter's Tale, IV, iv

When we were well agreed, Mr. Dunnestoke announced our intention to marry. I was brought before his mother, the Lady Dunnestoke, and interrogated closely as to my fitness as a wife for her son. To her questions I assured her that I was well prepared in the management of a still room, and that I was a good cook and a gardener as well. I remembered that I had supplied my mother's larder with marmalades, jellies, candied fruit, and rose petals, and many dried plants. But when I mentioned I was skilled in the candying of eringo root (supposedly aphrodisiac) the Lady was then satisfied as to my suitability.

Now I am the Lady of Dunnestoke Manor, and I have inherited the still room receipt book of the former lady, my mother-in-law (God rest her soul). I also have the full use of James the Herbarian's receipt book, as do we all. A more generous man than James never lived, for all I think he still keeps the Roman faith. He will say, "It's St. James' Day, time to plant turnips wet or dry," or, "Always eat goose and blackberries on the Archangel Michael's Day" – I know by that he keeps the old calendar. In spite of the Puritans, the people will have the saints stay on as part of the Church of England, mark my words.



Mine has been a good life, in spite of all these changes. Without my parents' death, I would never have come to the monastery, and to these vast gardens. Brother Peter taught me how to read and write, so I could keep the receipt book. I have doubled the size of that book during my days. I have loved the long, quiet hours in the still room, taking the gardens' gifts, and making tinctures and syrups, tisanes and decoctions that generations of our people have used for their good health. It is good to live a useful life, and I give thanks that I have had that life as mine own.

To Make Black Ink

Take four Ounces Nutt Galls beaten & infused a Week in One Scots Pint of Rain or River Water. Set in the Sun or near the fire, and shaken or flared frequently after the fire, add half an Ounce Green Coperas and a fourth of an Ounce Roman Vitriol, one Ounce Gum Arabic and a few specks of Logwood. Too much Copras makes the Ink Black at first but it soon grows Brown on the page, but with the above proportion it always grows Blacker and never degenerates.

