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COCKTAIL PARTIES

by
WILLY

There was a time, a good many years ago, when I thought cocktail parties wonderful. They were, I thought, fun. Whenever one of those cards came which informed me that on such and such a day at such and such a time Mrs. So-and-so was "at home", I felt elated. I would meet interesting people in pleasant surroundings, I thought, and there would be a good buffet with delicacies, canapés and things, and maybe hot little sausages on toothpicks. I soon learnt that the more such cocktail invitation cards one exhibited on one's mantelpiece when friends came, the more one would go up in their esteem. Whether some of them were already out of date did not matter very much, as nobody would be so indiscreet as to look closely. I also learnt that it made a terribly important impression if one said, when somebody rang up to propose a meeting, that one had to look up one's engagement book — even if it was practically empty. It was all part of a game of make-believe, which one played in rounds. One went to cocktail parties and one occasionally gave one, after having carefully removed the good carpet.

But gradually time changes one as one goes along. First cocktail parties became less and less interesting for me. Then they began to bore me and I began positively to dislike them. I began to send out more and more replies in which I expressed my regret at not being able to come. Then I found that some people were quite offended if one did not much appreciate this kind of hospitality, so I usually wrote back thanking for the invitation and saying that I hoped to be able to be present. It was then quite up to me to decide whether my hope could be fulfilled or whether I would plead an unforeseen amount of urgent work at the last moment. Today, I positively hate them, go to few, and usually think they have been a terrible waste of time when I am on the way back.

After all, who wants to stand around at a time when the stomach wants a good solid meal, with a glass in one hand and a silly little sausage on a toothpick in the other? Who wants to be told "You simply must meet Lady Appleturlover", then to be dragged across two rooms full of noisy chattering people to the corner where the worthy dowager holds court? Who wants to "meet" people, while performing a balancing act with glasses and plates, one knows (or hopes) one will not meet so soon again? Who wants to be asked by dowagers with flower exhibitions on their hats whether one is from Switzerland? Who, on giving an affirmative answer to this intelligent question, wants to be told again and again that Lucerne is lovely and that the Suvretta in St. Moritz and the Palace in Gstaad are first class hotels? Who, I ask, wants to be parked on so-called smart young things who talk about the Beatles, some TV show and, if one is lucky, their last ski-ing holiday in the mountains? Who does not really prefer a good, cosy, comfortable easychair to be sociable in to being crushed in a standing, chattering, babbling crowd of people, all of whom try to make themselves heard and speak at the top of their voices? Is there anybody who does not, at heart, agree that an after-dinner party — where dinner cannot, for one reason or another, be offered — with enough comfortable seats for everyone, is infinitely more inductive to sociability and worthwhile conversation than a cocktail party?

Of course I still like hot sausages, but I now prefer them big and served on a plate rather than on toothpicks, eaten with fork and knife and accompanied by a Röschti, finally to be washed down with a worthwhile glass of wine. I also still like seeing friends and hearing their news or exchanging views, but either round a table or near a fire and not shouting at cross purposes halfway around a room. So nowadays, whenever a cocktail party invitation comes, Willy usually regrets. If he goes, he does so because he looks on the event as a kind of command performance to be got through — just as he had to take his regular dose of codliver oil when he was a boy

THE FIRST WOMAN EXPLORER OF EUROPE

This title is worn, uncontested, by Marie-Sybille Merian (1647-1711). A native of Basle, she was the daughter of the well-known engraver and topographer Mathias Merian, whose scenes of Swiss villages and whose "Topographia Helvetiae, Rhaetiae et Valesiae" have remained famous. A talented engraver and water-colourer herself, Marie-Sybille was attracted at a very early age by entomology. Her illustrated work consisting of astounding plates in colour dedicated to caterpillars and their marvellous metamorphosis, directed the attention of the world of knowledge towards her. One day she discovered, in a Dutch Castle, a collection of butterflies with beautiful wings from Surinam. This was her call of the wide world. She answered. In 1699, at the age of fifty-two, which at that time made her already an old woman, she boarded a Dutch ship with her daughter. She faced the discomfort and perils of a three-month crossing all for the love of entomology. In Surinam, the settlers, who existed only for sugar cane and money, thought her crazy. For two years she explored the mysteries of the virgin forest. The fascinating world of the unknown, a reality which far surpassed imagination, was revealed to her. Upon her return, she published, in 1705, "Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium", which was immediately and justifiably recognized with utmost favour by the world of learning. She died, having known and merited her fame. Her works, however, having been translated into many languages, were soon forgotten, lying dusty on library shelves. But science has made progress. And if her texts became outdated, her illustrations preserved their life, their splendour and their youth. They were destined to see daylight again. The accomplishments of this Swiss explorer range today among the treasures of European Art.

[S.N.T.O.]

A NEW TEACHING MACHINE MADE IN SWITZERLAND

At INEL, the International Fair of Industrial Electronics, held recently in Basle, the first teaching machine to be made in Switzerland was on display. Whatever one's personal opinion on the subject, it must be recognised that mechanized teaching is becoming more and more widespread, at any rate in certain fields, so that the "DC-180" machine presented by an electronic firm of Lutry (near Lausanne) is particularly timely. This teaching aid is in the form of a small individual set consisting mainly of a screen, on which the student watches a special teaching film, and a series of buttons, which he pushes to answer the questions set him by the film. If an answer is correct, the film continues to unwind, while in the case of a wrong answer, it remains in the same position. Simultaneously, the machine records the time elapsed and the