

They Laughed when I Invented the Cocktail Party

by Alec Waugh

*An exclusive report on the greatest social innovation
of the twentieth century, by the innovator himself*

It is my belief and boast that I invented the London cocktail party—in April, 1924.

At that time I considered myself to be, and in retrospect I feel I was, a fate-favored mortal. I was approaching the close of my six-and-twentieth year. In July, 1917, when I was a frontline subaltern in France, I had published a novel—a realistic study of English public-school life that proved a succès de scandale and in England a best seller. It is difficult to follow up a first success, but now, seven years later, I was beginning to get my second wind. I had published a couple of novels and a collection of short stories, which had encouraged critics to believe that I was not a one-book man. I was employed two days a week as literary adviser to the venerable publishing house of Chapman and Hall, of which my father was managing director. I sold short stories to the little magazines. I had no qualms about acquiring on credit suits in Savile Row and shirts in Jermyn Street. I had a two-room service flat in Kensington. As a cricketer and a Rugby footballer, I kept myself in training. I had also survived a rash experiment in matrimony that left me unburdened with alimony. The world seemed to be a cozily conditioned place.

It had been argued in 1919 that the war that would end war had been followed by the peace that would end peace, but that was a very distant cloud on the horizon. There might be unemployment and labor disputes but we could look forward to a relatively calm ten years. Most people were making enough money to enjoy themselves. No one took anything too seriously. There was a general atmosphere of lighthearted, sophisticated disenchantment. The pace was being set by the comedies of Frederick Lonsdale—*On Approval*, *Aren't We All?*, *The Last of Mrs. Chepney*. Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* was in the press. In tiny night-clubs, close-clasped couples were swaying to Noel Coward's dance tunes. Anyone under forty and in reasonable health had ample cause for feeling grateful that he had survived the war.

Myself, I had only one very minor grievance: that for men who did not go to offices—and at that time in London there were quite a number of young men who did not—there was nothing to do on winter evenings between half-past five and seven. Some hotels staged thés dansants; but dancing is not very satisfactory when there is no bottle cooling beside your table in a steaming bucket. There were formal tea parties, and tea is a very English thing with a great deal of special food—crumpets, hot scones, Patum Peperium sandwiches, currant cakes. It has been said that the two

best meals in England are tea and breakfast, but tea parties, I felt, should be reserved as a Sunday-afternoon indulgence. One does not, on a weekday, want to be faced with so much food so soon after lunch. Anyhow, tea parties were over at six o'clock.

I dilated on this topic one evening to C. R. W. Nevinson, the painter, and his wife, Kathleen. "What one needs," I said, "is some kind of a party that starts at half-past five, that lasts ninety minutes, at which alcohol is served but not much food."

"What kind of alcohol?" Kathleen asked.

"Something short, not whisky and sodas. Sherry or Madeira. Why not a cocktail?"

"Why not?"

The idea appealed to the Nevinsons. They were great party givers and partygoers. They had, they said, been planning to salute the opening of the season at the end of April anyhow. Why not that kind of party?

A week later the invitations were in the post. They announced that the Nevinsons were emerging from their hibernation and would be at home in their studio on the last Saturday in April between half-past five and half-past seven and that alcoholic beverages would be in supply. On my card was penciled, "Mind you come early."

I arrived shortly before half-past five. It was a warm and sunny evening. Their studio on Haverstock Hill was bright with daffodils. Some forty small tumblers had been set out along a refectory table. "We've invited thirty," Kathleen said, "but people usually bring people with them." At each end of the table was a large earthenware jug. "One's rum. The other's gin. Which'll you have?" they asked. I opted for rum. Jamaican rum had been blended with Rose's lime juice and sharpened with Angostura. Large nuggets of ice kept the mixture cool. It was very potent. The first sip made me shiver, in the way that a dry martini does. It also sent a glow along my veins. "This," I said, "is going to be a party."

In front of the tumblers were two dishes of cream crackers and a large cheddar cheese. I cut myself a slice. "This concoction," I said, "demands blotting paper." I took a second sip. This time I did not shiver. The glow deepened. Yes, this was going to be a party. "I wonder," said Kathleen, "who'll be the first to come."

"Everyone's always afraid of being first," said Richard. "I can't think why."

The minutes passed. My glass grew empty. Richard said, "Have a refill before it gets weakened by the ice."

I took a long sip. I was beginning to feel a little awkward. Ten minutes to six. I had a sense of guilt; after all, I was responsible for this. Conversation had begun to flag. At seven minutes past six the doorbell rang.

"At last," said Kathleen.

"Prepare for action," Richard said.

But there was only one voice in the hall. "I'm afraid I'm fearfully late," it said. The owner of the voice stood in the doorway. He was an obscure middle-aged journalist who did a London gossip column for a provincial paper. He checked. He looked puzzled. "Have I come on the wrong day?" he asked.

He was assured that he had not. "But it looks," said Richard, "as though you'll have more than your ration of liquor to consume."

Within a quarter of an hour it was clear that there would be no more guests. There was nothing to do but make the best of it, and the Nevinsons knew how to take the rough with the smooth. As a matter of fact, we managed pretty well. The cheddar brought out the flavor of the rum. It was after eight before I was ready to take the tube back to Kensington. "I knew I was going to have a good time," I said. "But I didn't expect it to be quite so good."

"I'm glad of that," Richard said, "but you haven't convinced us that what London needs is an alcoholic party at half-past five."

I stood my ground. "London's not ready for it yet," I said.

That autumn I began a novel called *Kept*, which I subtitled "a story of postwar London." As I followed the adventures of my characters, I often wished that I could have them meeting over cocktails in the early evening. I realized how the existence of parties at that hour would solve some of their amatory problems. Evening parties always started at nine o'clock. As guests had dined first, their hosts would not need to provide much nourishment immediately, nor would their guests be very thirsty. For host and hostess everything was simplified. But for those with amorous intentions the advantages were not propitious. You would take a damsel out to dinner. You would soften her with food and wine, her mood would appear responsive, but at that very moment she would remember that you were already due at that party of the Goldrings in Regent's Park. If only you hadn't got to go; if only you could go back to your flat in Kensington, build up the fire, pour out a glass of port, and put on a languorous record; how easy it would be to persuade her two hours later that there was really no point in going all that way back to Highgate.

"I wish we hadn't got to go to that party," you may say. "It's so cozy here."

"I know," she'll say. "But since we've promised and you've always told me what fun the Goldrings are; I'm curious to meet them." There is nothing to do but give way graciously. And that, as far as you and she are concerned, is the finish of the evening. She will spend such a long time upstairs "fixing her face" that you know she will not want it to be tousled in a taxi.

Flushed and warmed by good fare and flattery, she will make an impressive entrance at the Goldrings'. Her hostess will pounce upon her. "I'm delighted that you could come; I've heard so much about you. There's a young actor here who I know will interest you." She is swept away and that is the last that you will see of her for a couple of hours. Other men who have come straight from their clubs will reap where you have sown. They will benefit

(Continued on page 164)



sick. Now they are grown and paying their own social security and I find myself paying about half my income in taxes and social security. We're heavily taxed in the middle-income brackets but I don't resent it because we benefited from it when we needed it."

Lord said that the life-style he enjoys in New Zealand would be impossible in many American cities. His home is eleven miles from Auckland, on the shore of a lake, and about three hundred miles of uninterrupted beach starts just behind his house. He pays \$89—about \$127 U.S.—to belong to a golf club ten minutes' drive from his home, and the membership fee takes care of all expenses—there are no green fees for the twenty-seven-hole course.

"There's a different set of values in New Zealand," he said. "Men are not rated according to their profession or income bracket. You put your name on the board for play at the golf club and a pickup foursome might be made up of a managing director, a mechanic, a dock worker and a doctor. There's the same democracy at social functions. At cocktail parties you might find a Mark X Jaguar parked in front, together with a builder's van, a two-year-old car and a three-year-old car. It doesn't make a damned bit of difference.

"New Zealanders have a very reserved type of friendliness. You won't find a back-slapping, hail-fellow-well-met New Zealander; he's very rare. But once a New Zealander has decided he wants to be associated with you, he doesn't care whether you've got a good refrigerator or a big car. He likes you for what you are. I must admit, though, that social standards are changing a bit as life in New Zealand becomes more competitive."

Although New Zealand officially encourages immigration—even underwriting the moving costs of those whose skills are needed there—immigration visas are not easily or quickly granted.

Frederic F. Frahm, a recent émigré from Los Angeles, says, "I have found that while the New Zealand embassies are encouraging immigration, the Ministry of Labour—whose function it is to screen applications—does its damndest to discourage you from doing so—and I think the Ministry should. After all, New Zealand isn't just something you pass through while looking for a place to live. The move is too expensive to risk the discovery that you don't like it."

Frahm moved to New Zealand—permanently, he hopes—with his wife and two young sons last fall, and his reasons for doing so are fresh in his mind. Here's the way he lists them: "1. Beautiful country that I would geographically equate with California. 2. Only three million people enjoying the scenery. 3. Almost totally unpolluted except for a few million tons of horse, cow and sheep shit annually. The country is clean! 4. Lines of communication in, out of, and around New Zealand are good. 5. Our cultural differences are not so great that we cannot make adjustments and assimilate into the society. 6. We are

made to feel welcome in New Zealand. The people like Yanks. 7. The pursuit of the dollar is tempered by an appreciation of family, friends and outdoor sports. Weekends and holidays are properly used. 8. Social benefits—socialized medicine, free schooling, pension plan available to all citizens, child assistance (three dollars weekly per child returns \$312 of my tax money directly to me until the boys are out of school). 9. No history of violent crimes—no big social problems. 10. Stable people—stable government. 11. Until the recent world

monetary problems, New Zealand had a stable economy; and when the rest of the world figures itself out there is every reason to expect New Zealand will too."

Obviously, the best way to decide whether life in New Zealand fulfills your version of the American dream is to visit the country first as a tourist. The economy air fare from San Francisco to Auckland is \$618.60 one way—and that's all you pay if you decide to stay. If you don't . . . well, the round-trip fare is just twice as much. #

THEY LAUGHED WHEN I INVENTED THE COCKTAIL PARTY

(Continued from page 104) from the glowing mood you have created. She will have a fine time too, and though at the end when you drive her home she will cuddle drowsily and affectionately against your shoulder and assure you that she has had a heavenly time, it is too late, far too late, for you to suggest a return to Kensington.

How different it would have been if you had taken her to a party that began at half-past five or six. At half-past seven the whole evening would have lain open to your enterprise.

The party at which alcohol was served between half-past five and half-past seven shone for me in a fresher light. Surely this was how social life should be reorganized in London. Not only would cavaliers taking their dates to parties have a chance of achieving the purpose for which they had invited them, but what opportunities for strangers meeting "across a crowded room." What fresh scope for the novelist. Maupassant said when divorce was legalized in France that a whole California of new situations had been opened for him, and indeed without it he could not have written *Bel-Ami*. How I wished that in my current novel, *Kept*, I could have a couple meeting at a cocktail party, then going off together to Soho to "the shaded lights of little corner tables," to an evening that would revolutionize their lives. Thirty-five years later I was indeed to start a novel in just that way. But in 1924 I had no alternative to trying to spread my gospel of the cocktail party.

I returned to the attack in the Autumn of 1925. I decided to proceed with caution. The Nevinson party had been too abrupt, presenting Londoners with a situation to which they were unaccustomed; Londoners are basically conventional, or were so fifty years ago. I had to take them off their guard. I would not warn them that they were being lured to that kind of party. I asked some thirty people to tea at five o'clock. That was late for tea, but Londoners are prepared to accept a minor eccentricity. I expected them to say, when they received their invitations, "That's late, but he's probably trying to catch people who have to go to offices from which once in a while they can manage to escape early. Anyhow, let's go."

Anyhow, they came. They arrived to find the conventional appurtenances of

a tea: crumpets, cakes, savory sandwiches. They sat on chairs, they sat on cushions. Most of them knew each other. They were in familiar surroundings. They seemed to be having a good time. Then, at a quarter to six, I produced my surprise—a beaker of Daiquiri.

I had had the sense to seek the help of a member of the United States Embassy who had married a good friend of mine. Myself, I had a very rudimentary knowledge of the cocktail. I did not in fact very often drink them. I was a wine and port and sherry man. When I asked what I should serve, he answered without hesitation, "A Daiquiri. It's sweet, like a dessert, and very strong. It will produce the precise effect you need."

"And you will mix it?"

"I will mix it."

He arrived with a large pitcher and a swizzle stick. In accordance with his instructions, I produced several bottles of Bacardi rum, ice and sugar, lemon juice and Cointreau. He poured the ingredients into his pitcher in carefully judged proportions; he lashed the mixture into a foam with his swizzle stick and poured it into a series of small glasses on a tray. He did not explain to his fellow guests what they were being offered. "Spécialité de la maison," he announced. It was, I fancy, the first time that the majority of them had ever tasted a Daiquiri. It was certainly the first time I had. It was very good. It did not seem particularly alcoholic. It resembled a sherbet; most of my guests drank the first sample quickly and held out their glasses for a refill. Very soon it became apparent that the potion was singularly strong. The talk loudened. There was a great deal of laughter. Quite clearly the party would not break up at half-past six. Sheila Kaye-Smith did not feel well enough to make her dinner date.

It was this fact, I think, that gave the party its particular cachet, that got it talked about. Sheila Kaye-Smith was a lady about whom a great many felt curiosity. She was not only a very good but a best-selling novelist. Her novels were rural and robust, of-the-earth earthy. It was wondered how she could have come to write them. She was petite and she was pretty. She lived a quiet life in Hastings with her parents and was a devout Anglo-Catholic. In the previous year she had married a clergyman. Later they became Roman Catho-

lie. She had never been the object of any scandal. It was news that Sheila Kaye-Smith had gone to a tea party, been served hard liquor, and failed to turn up for dinner.

I was asked a good many questions about the party during the next ten days. "Is it true about Sheila Kaye-Smith and your tea party?"

"So I've been told," I said.

"And you served cocktails after tea?"

"Yes."

"What was the point of that?"

I explained what was the point of that. People listened thoughtfully. "That doesn't sound a bad idea," they said. I asked why they didn't try giving one themselves.

"Why not?" One or two of them did. Others followed their example. The idea caught on. In June I set out on a world tour. When I returned ten months later I was invited to more cocktail than evening parties.

I have heard it suggested that the cocktail party was an American invention. But I do not think this is so. America invented the cocktail, certainly; it came up from the West Indies

where in the nineteenth century a rum concoction was known as "cocktail." Martin Chuzzlewit sampled it in New York. But in the 1920's Prohibition was nominally in force. You were invited to teas at which a decorous dowager at one end of a long table presided over an urn and kettle. She was not very busy. Most of the guests were at the other end of the table, being served highballs. One talked in the late Twenties of publishers' teas.

Some years ago I remarked to my brother Evelyn that I believed I had invented the cocktail party. His eyes widened and whitened in the way they did. "I should be careful about making that boast in print," he said. "In circles that you did not frequent, hostesses like Lady Londonderry were very likely entertaining their friends with alcohol between six and eight. Though presumably," he added, "they served champagne."

He may well be right. But I have, I trust, reason for maintaining that in the literary bohemian circle I did frequent in London, I gave the first cocktail party. ■

kind used in the movies, wrestling, roller derby, etc. Make cuts, bruises, gashes, scars: *Great way to get sympathy.* There are plastic eyeballs that float in your drink ("weighted so pupil always looks up"), dummy nails and bandages, the bloody razor blade which "snaps on finger or toe."

"Shirley Temple used to be a customer in her heyday. Orson Bean, Johnny Carson, Rudy Vallee in the Thirties. We had an order from the King of Nepal two or three months ago. It was for two or three hundred dollars. He sent two or three orders before that."

There is the amputated bloody finger and the magic finger chopper and a skull "molded directly from a real human skull." (Real. Real. You could reel from real.) And I'm thinking of the voice of the toilet again, of the niche all men must have if there can be a talking toilet. *Molded directly* from a real human skull! Who knew him, Horatio? Who was he? Some silent toilet star who couldn't make it when the jakes went talkie? Who? *Who?* And one sees in this warehouse of toy pain and joke shit that there *are* more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in anyone's philosophy.

"Our all-time most popular item is the midget Bible. It's the size of a postage stamp"—things in Johnson Smith's Gulliver world are often the world's largest or smallest; I had already seen the world's largest bow tie, its longest necktie—"and we print it ourselves. In volume sales it's our biggest seller—two hundred thousand a year. We used to print a hundred different books. I wrote some of them myself."

"What books have you written?"

"Let's see, what books have I written? I wrote a book, one book on dance steps. I wrote most of my books before the Second World War."

"Were you in the war?"

"No. I was at the University of Chicago during the war."

"Inventing the atom bomb?"

"No. Working on it. I understood the science and I knew what was happening, but I was in administration, in purchasing."

Of course, he had decoded the catalog. No question. By dint of his legacy, his inheritance, middle child of the middleman. Middleman himself, from the exploding cigar to the atomic bomb, a purveyor of practical jokes, harmless and ultimate, to all the world.

And there is one last thing, *item*. One is rounding off the Borges image of the warehouse library. (The catalog holds a fun-house mirror up to men's desires and imaginings, the hope of the heart writ small. Eschatological and scat—midget Bibles and counterfeit poop—the dream of power—the strongman's copper wristband—and treasure—metal detectors that may strike you rich in longshot's dirt landscape—all, all, everything, all, every last kick in the mind's cakewalk wardrobe.) Number 1929 in the new catalog is a reprint of the 768-page Johnson Smith catalog of 1929, #1169 a book on how mail-order fortunes are made. Paul Smith, who wants to retire,

A LA RECHERCHE DU WHOOPEE CUSHION

(Continued from page 139) banks. (Catch the rhythm? There is rhythm in chaos.)

We are in the warehouse. Blue-jeaned women come down the aisles, order slips in their hands, bearing shallow tin trays. Abstracted, they fill the orders. They might be shoppers, housewives in some A&P of the odd, or browsers, perhaps, in the stacks of a wide Borgesian library of merchandise. They reach into bins consecutively numbered in shipping-clerk Dewey decimal, little Jacqueline Horners of the extraordinary, and pluck out the cloacal gee-gaws, a Noisy Nose Blower here, there some brown and yellow plastic upchuck like melted peanut brittle or cold pizza. Deadpan—Johnson Smith's on Automation Road—one girl lifts out a rubbery coil of dog poop like a shit rattle-snake and places it in her tray.

"We accept BankAmericard and Master Charge now. We fill two hundred fifty thousand orders a year, but I would say the average order doesn't run more than a dollar fifty or three dollars, so our sales are somewhere in the high six figures."

It is like strolling through some comic, transmogrified version of Victor Hugo's basement Paris, a sewery landscape of mucous membrane and intestine. Past the loaves of toilet paper—"Birthday Toilet Tissue" ("The only gift everyone can—and has to—use. Comic birthday wishes printed on each section. 'Relax and do a good job on your birthday!'",) and toilet paper printed in the form of money, and "Used Toilet Tissue" ("Oops! Looks like someone forgot to throw this roll away. You can bet nobody is going to be anxious to use it!"). Past the pay-toilet coin slots you attach to your bathroom door. Past the cigarette (spelled "cigaret" in the catalog) dis-

pensers, the jackass that drives a cigarette at you out of his behind when you pull his ear, the elephant when you pull his tusk. (A-political.) Past life-size Peeping Tom torsos you put in the toilet bowl, and past the Whoopee Cushion ("When the victim unsuspectingly sits upon the cushion, it gives forth noises better imagined than described"), to the "Hilarious Talking Toilet" ("No more rest in your rest room! When victim sits down, someone down there speaks out. Real surprise for party poopers!")

I ask Mr. Smith if I may listen to the talking toilet and he finds a battery somewhere and rigs it quickly. He presses the white rubber bulb that triggers the mechanism.

"HEY! CAN'T YOU SEE I'M WORKING DOWN HERE?"

And the feeling reinforced as we pass the last bins of the cloacal—the "Disgusting Mess" (fake dog mess and vomit), the "Oops! Somebody Missed!" contour turd you fix to the lid of your toilet like a bracelet. As we pass "Glop," pass "Fummy Phony Bird Mess" (two smeared yolks on a palette of fried eggs). "The S.S. Adams Company does those. Now to my mind the S.S. Adams Company of Neptune, New Jersey, is the most famous joke company in America. Mr. Adams, he was the one who had the best line of good quality jokes in the U.S. In fact, Mr. Adams invented and sold the Joy Buzzer, which I would think comes pretty close to being our all-time best seller and still is a good item. Now it's made in Japan but Mr. Adams held the patents on it."

And into another section—what? What can we call this? *Petit Guignol?* There are "Realistic Bloody Life-Sized Butchered" hands, realistic giant flies with "hairy legs, transparent wings," "real-looking fake blood . . . like the