

The Cocktail Party

Every year just before Christmas my bank manager father would arrive home laden with bottles, flowers, chocolates and candied fruits - presents from his grateful customers. You didn't think twice before accepting gifts in those days!

There was far too much drink for our family to consume and so between Christmas and New Year my mother would organise a cocktail party for our friends and neighbours and the more cheerful of our relatives.

The work began the day before. My sister had been taught domestic science at Manchester High and knew how to make cheese straws. She made tray after tray of long ones and a few circular ones to be used as holders. Many would break of course and these would be snacked on or eaten at tea-time. The 'good ones' would be kept overnight in an air-tight tin. Whilst the straws were made my mother would make the vol-au-vent cases. I think she used frozen puff pastry but it could be that she made her own. I helped to cut circles in the top half of the pastry cases - these would be removed after cooking and acted as the lids. When all that was done we made sure that the serving trays were clean and the glasses polished. Dad looked after the drinks and the mixers but Mum had to remember the lemons, maraschino cherries, olives and nuts. A vase was procured for the flowers - nearly always chrysanthemums.

After breakfast on the day of the party it was all systems go. My father emptied the living room of all superfluous furniture. Mum made two fillings for the vol-au-vents - prawn and mushroom. I was in charge of cutting the cheese into little squares, marrying them with halved pineapple chunks out of a tin and skewering each pair with a cocktail stick. Cheddar cheese worked fine but one year my mother bought Cheshire, which split and flaked. Cheese and silverskin onions were another pairing. My mother buttered brown bread and cut each slice into lengths to wrap around pieces of smoked salmon and asparagus. Stuffed dates were in vogue but my mother either mis-read the recipe or decided to go one better - we stewed dried prunes, took out the stones and stuffed the hollow with cream cheese. I recall we served cocktail sausages, sausage rolls, Bridge rolls halved and spread with egg mayonnaise, liver sausage spread on tiny round savoury biscuits and decorated with tiny bits of tomato (these made at the last minute as they tended to go soggy.). Some years we had potted shrimps on the same biscuits and one year there was caviar!

When the food was ready it was arranged on serving dishes and taken to the dining room, to make space for my father to use the kitchen table as his butler's pantry. Space had to be found for saucers of lemon slices, cherries and olives, a tiny bottle of bitters, bottles of Cinzano, dry vermouth, ginger ale, bitter lemon, soda water (we never had a siphon) as well as all the spirits and sherry.

We put crisps, cheese straws and nuts into bowls and distributed them around window-sills, side-tables and the top of the TV cabinet. Then we dashed upstairs to get ready before the first ring of the doorbell (usually at 12.02 p.m.). The Prof and his wife were always first - he was a professor of aerodynamics at Liverpool and amazingly clever but unable to talk about anything else: he stood in a corner and puffed constantly on his pipe. More rings at the door and soon people were arriving in such numbers that I would be up and downstairs like a yo-yo with the coats. Then I would be sent to ask what would people like to drink. I would convey the requests to the kitchen, then carry the glasses back two at a time, trying to remember who they were for and avoiding being bumped into or trodden on as I weaved my way between the guests. The ladies usually asked for sherry or gin, often with vermouth. Some of the men would have beer but only a few people asked for wine. My father did not go in for elaborate cocktails but he was generous with the gin and whisky, with the result that after an hour people would start to get a bit giggly.

Next my sister and I would circulate with a plate of food in each hand, trying to insert them both into the centre of a chatting group so that everyone could help themselves whilst still talking. People admired the cheese straws and looked curiously at the prunes. Conversation was at first

light and banal. Connections were established, mutual acquaintances talked about, Christmases, holidays and illnesses described. Some unlucky ones got stuck with people they had nothing in common with, others were soon getting on splendidly. The alcohol certainly helped: Aunty Edna would soon be berating her husband in a high-pitched voice, Mr Watt who was six foot three and a little deaf would be booming over the heads of everybody else. Glasses would be refilled, the noise and the smoke would intensify, drinks would be spilled and mopped up, offers of food would be met by glazed expressions and shakes of the head.

Eventually someone would have the courage to say that they really must be going and could they have their coat? The brown fur one. But which brown fur one? I would come down with armfuls, looking like a fur dealer. The opening of the front door brought welcome cold air and a chance for others to take their leave. The room being now half empty, those stalwarts who remained would seize the opportunity to fall back into the chairs round the edge and carry on for perhaps another hour. But all good things come to an end and by the time the final goodbyes had been said and people were tottering down the path it would be dark, with nothing to look forward to except a plate of uneaten prunes and the washing-up.