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.

It had been my intention to consider 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 front-line subaltern in France, I had published a novel—a realistic study of English public-school life that proved a succès de scandale in England and 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 advisor 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 most commodious place.

It had been recalled 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. The atmosphere was 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. Cheyney. Michael Arlen’s The Green Hat was in the press. In tiny night-clubs, close-clapped 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 thé danseaux; but dancing was 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. Anyway, how, 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 soda. 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, anyway. 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 all 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.”

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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 terribly 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 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 Navinsons knew how to take the lotion without the smooth. As a matter of fact, we managed pretty well. The cheese 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 would be 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 idyllic party at half-past five."

I stumbled on the ground. "London's not ready for it yet," I said.

That autumn I began a novel called Red, 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 need to provide much nourishment immediately, or would their guests be very thirsty. For host and hostess everything was simplified. But for those with amorous intentions, the arrangements were not propitious. You would take a dance out to dinner. You would soften her with food and wine, your mood would appear responsive, but at that very moment you 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, bolt 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 touched in a taxi. Finished and warned by good food 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.

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sick. Now they are grown and paying their way and need not find themselves 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.

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, 400 feet back from the shore of a lake, and about three hundred miles of uninterrupted beach starts just behind his house. He pays $290—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 deal back home at the 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 two-year-old child. 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 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 pretty tough to get.

—Frederic P. Frahm, a recent émigré from Los Angeles, says, “I have found that while the New Zealand embassies are encouraging immigration, the Ministry of Immigration is not.”

How he wished that in my current novel, Keeping House, I could have a couple at a cocktail party; then going off together to the lights of little corner tables,” to an evening that would revitalize their lives. Thirty-five years later I was indeed to start a novel just that way. But in 1924 I had no alternative to try 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 Norwegian party had been too abrupt, presenting Londoners with a situation to which they were unaccustomed; Londoners are basically conservative people. But in 1924 I had to take them off their guard. I should not warn them that they were being lured to that kind of party. I decided we must try to start at five o’clock. That was late for tea, but Londoners have prepared to accept a minor eccentricity. I expected them to say, ‘Thank you for your invitation,’ but probably try to catch people who have to get to offices from which one in a while 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 home-brewed cocktails. I did not have 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 desert, and very strong. It will produce the desired effect you need.”

“Ain’t we well mix it?” I asked.

“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, lime and sugar, lemon juice and Cointreau. He poured the ingredients into his pitcher in carefully judged proportions; he mixed the mixture into a fedora 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. “Spécialisée de la maison,” he announced. It was the first time that the majority of them had ever tasted a Daiquiri. It was certainly the first time I had had it. 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 thickened. 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 I was greatly curious. She was not only a very good but a best-selling novelist. Her novels were rural and robust, of-the-earth earthy. It was rather likely that I sometime have come to write them. She was petite and she was pretty. She led a quiet life in Hastings with her parents and was a devoted Anglo-Catholic. In the previous year she had married a clergyman. Later they became Roman Catho-

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A LA RECHERCHE DU WHOOPEE CUSHION

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

We are in the warehouse, blue-jaaned workmen in the aisles, order slips in their hands, bearing shallow tin trays. Abstractioned, they fill the orders. They might be bookers, housewives in some A&P or housewives, perhaps, in the stacks of a wide Bourgeoisian library of merchandise.

They reach into bins consecutively numbered in shipping-clerk Dewey decimal, little cardboard boxes on the extraordinary, and pluck out the ebonized gee-gaws, a Noise Noise Blower here, there some brown and yellow plastic spade like melted peanut butter, and the splendid Durable, Scotch’s Snorter on Automation Road—one girl lifts out a rubbery coil of dog poop like a shit rattlesnake and places it in her tray.

You are a poor American 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 five, a couple 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 seedy landscape of mucous membranes and intestine. Past the leaves of toilet paper—"Birthday Toilet Tissue" (this gift is a cinch for the aged—or the very young to use). Comic birthday wishes printed on each sheet: "Relax and do a good job on your birthday!"

And toilet paper without a dime 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 pick it up again.") And the pay-toilet coin slots you attach to your bathroom door. Past the cigarette (spelled "cigarette" in the catalog) dis- pensors, the jackass that drives a cigarette at you out of his pocket when you pull his dog, the elephant when you pull his hook. (A political.) Past Rosy Swelery Peepaw Tooh to throw out in the toilet bowl, and past the Whoopie 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 on ‘Real surprise for party goers!’")

I ask Mr. Smith if I may listen to the talking toilet and he finds a battery somewhere and begins to press the white plastic bulb that triggers the mechanism.

"Hey! Can’t you see I’m working here, man?"

And the feeling reinforced as we pass the last bins of the cloaca—the "Disgusting Mess" (fake dog mess and vomit), the "Oops! Somebody Missed!" (contour you fly to, to the lid of your toilet like, a brigadier). As we pass "Giant" pass "Funny Phony Bird Mess" (two snickering yells on a palette of eggs), "The S. S. Adams Company does those. Now my ead the S. S. Adams Company of Neptune, New Jersey, is the most famous joke company in America. Mr. Adams, he was the one who came up with all this 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 own-time heat seeker and still is a good item. Now it’s made in Japan but Mr. Adams hold the patents on it.

And into another section—what? What can you call it? Petit Gauntlet. There are "Rosy Swelery Bloody Life-Sized Butchered" hands, realistic giant flies with hairy legs, transparent wings, "real-looking fake blood... like the kind used in the movies, bloodting, dye, etc. Make cuts, bruises, gashes, sores, Great way to get sympathy." There are plastic eyeballs that float in your drink ("weighted so pilots always look up at it") and fake mustaches and bandages, the bloody razor blade which "snaps on finger or toe."

"Shirley Temple used to be a customer in her heyday. Once Benno, Johnny Carson, Rudy Vallee in the Thirties. We had an order from the King of Nepal two of three months ago. It was for six or three hundred at a time. The next ten or three orders before that.

There is the amalgamated bloody finger and the magic finger changer and a shell "molded directly from a real human skull." (Real. Real. You could feel from real.) And I’m thinking of the voice of the toilet again, of the niche of all men must have if there can be a talking toilet. Middlin’ Real. Not at all real."

"Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What is the point of that?"

"I explained what the point was of that. People listened thoughtfully.

"That’s how you make a hit," 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’ve 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..."