

DIFFICULTIES OF DINNER GIVING.

If the truth were known, many people wait before answering an invitation to see whether a better one may not turn up, in which case they rarely scruple to answer the first, by expressing their sorrow that "a previous engagement prevents their accepting" it. It often happens that through refusals, many of which have been unwarrantably delayed, a third of the party has still to be made up within a few days of the banquet. The highways and hedges have now to be ransacked. The hostess orders her brougham at eleven in the morning and hurries off to press into her service one or two intimates who will stand short notice; and the host is sent to his club "to get a man." It is far from impossible that, on the very morning of the event, the Lothburys, for whom the party has been got up, may themselves fail, through the sudden illness of Lord Lothbury's mother; and the hospitable dinner-givers, to their chagrin, are obliged to go with all speed to a couple of poor relations and beseech them to come and sit at their table.

It often happens that on the very day of the party, the favourite green-grocer fails, and then there is a scramble to get another. Instead of the tall and well-mannered under-butler of a nobleman out of town, a shambling being who looks like a cheap undertaker's mute has to be put up with. Many other difficulties sometimes present themselves. A friend of ours once took a house for the season, with a large dining-room, and rather hurriedly arranged a party of eighteen for dinner. On the morning of the entertainment the butler found that there were only sufficient extra leaves for the table to make it long enough to accommodate fourteen people. There was nothing for it but to jump into a hansom, drive to an upholsterer's, and hire a proper-sized table, which eventually only arrived just in time to be prepared for dinner. We have known a much more tragic event happen in connection with a dinner-table. There was to be a large select party, and what novelists call "the hospitable board" was all ready for the feast. Everything had been laid with exquisite taste and ungrudging expenditure, under the very eye of the hostess herself. Within a few minutes of the time appointed for the banquet, a servant was lighting up the room, when he leaned rather heavily on the table in order to light the candles which stood upon the grand centre-piece. The table literally groaned, and not content with groaning, it crashed. Down went everything on to the floor, and in a moment there lay in the middle of the dining-room a confused heap of candles, broken glass, crushed fruit, stained table cloth, broken Dresden china, disjointed candelabra, and bruised flowers. On the top of all sprawled the servant, at full length, struggling to free himself from the bewildering *débris*.

As a general rule, we believe that an approaching dinner party is more agreeable to the hostess than to the host. To a woman there is something pleasant in the fuss which precedes her entertainments. She is mistress of the occasion, and her orders are implicitly obeyed. With a man it is different. What amuses his wife fidgets him. He is restless and uneasy. When he goes to his study for a quiet hour before dressing, he finds it has been taken possession of by his wife's maid, and converted into a temporary ladies' cloak-room. On the very altar stone of his sanctum, right in the centre of his writing-table, stands a looking-glass. His precious handbooks and dictionaries, his papers, note-books and Acts of Parliament, are profanely piled in a corner of the room. Finding his study desecrated, he wanders about the house, a burden both to himself and to others. He is in a fidget because his wife has not yet returned from her drive, and he fears she may be late for dressing. He is himself dressed far too soon, and finds nothing to do in the drawing-room, which is all prepared in state for the reception of guests. He employs himself in opening and shutting windows, regulating lamps, and very possibly upsetting a flower vase. As the party arrives he begins to talk with each person, but he is too preoccupied with the grouping of his couples for dinner to be able to give his mind to any continuous conversation. Somebody has not arrived, and he keeps nervously looking at his watch. When all have come, he shyly walks from one man to another with a piece of crumpled paper in his hand, at which he casts sheepish glances, and tells them in a mysterious whisper whom they are to take to dinner, with the air of a man who is doing something of which he is ashamed. This arrangement of the guests at the dinner-table has been the cause of great anxiety to him for days. He has thought it over in bed, in hansoms, and in church; he has found it more difficult than a game of chess, and even more provoking than Boss. Arrived in the dining-room, instead of quietly directing his guests to their allotted seats, he orders them to their places like a sergeant-major, and after making an apologetic grace, he sits down.

Once seated at the table, there is not much left for the host and hostess to do. They may try to attract the attention of the butler and ask him to open the windows wider; but if things go badly, all they can do is to look on grimly. It might often be well if hosts and hostesses were to endeavour to make themselves more agreeable at their own tables; but, as a rule, people are pleasanter companions in the house of others than in their own. At their own entertainments they are apt to be too much preoccupied to be able to give their whole minds to any subject which may be mooted. They are fretting because the soup is cold, or because an *entrée* is overflavoured; they are in agonies at a long pause which occurs between the courses; they are observing that a

couple at the other end of the table are not talking to each other; or they perceive that the best judge of wine at the table is drinking light claret, instead of the best champagne which has been produced for his special gratification. We lately saw a hostess much perturbed in spirit. She had provided the best of meats and drinks; but some of the guests failed to do justice to them. One gentleman had taken up total abstinence; and, instead of enjoying the excellent wines, he lectured upon the subject of his favourite hobby. It happened to be a Friday; and two of the other guests, who were Roman Catholics, touched neither soup, *entrées*, joints, nor jellies, to the great sorrow of their hostess, who did not perceive that they made capital dinners on fish, vegetables, sweets, and wine.

A serious, and let us hope exceptional difficulty in dinner-giving is a drunken butler. We remember a host looking anything but pleased when his inebriate domestic poured a trayful of cups filled with tea into a lady's lap in the drawing-room. Not long ago a gentleman told his new butler that he had better open a certain number of bottles of wine before a dinner-party, and that, when they were finished, he must use his discretion. Long after the gentlemen had left the dining-room, there were no signs of tea in the drawing-room; the host, therefore, went quietly downstairs to hurry the butler. He found that functionary in the ante-room engaged in gulping down champagne out of a tumbler. "What are you doing?" said the master. The wine you ordered was all finished, so I am using my discretion," answered the man. It is needless to say that much of the success of a dinner-party depends upon the efficiency and skill of the butler—more, we are inclined to think, than most people imagine. If a butler cannot always make a party go off well, he can always spoil it. The cook, of course, is the main agent in dinner-giving. We divide cooks into two classes—those who cook carefully but moderately well every day, but cannot cook artistically when there is a party, and those whose cooking is all that can be wished on any special occasion, but careless when the master and mistress are alone. Many people think the former the best sort of cooks; but, on the whole, there is much to be said for the latter, because the misery of seeing a bad dinner put before friends in one's own house is so great that some shortcomings in one's everyday dinners are not to be compared to it. There are few occasions on which a man feels at once so helpless and yet so responsible as when he sits at his own table watching a bad dinner being given to his guests. Perhaps the *entrées* are stodgy, the roasts under or overdone, and the sweets rolling about, instead of standing in their dishes; an even temperature is maintained in everything; the soups, the meats, the jellies, and the puddings are all pretty equally lukewarm. And yet the unfortunate giver of the feast, utterly helpless and inwardly boiling over with wrath, has to make himself agreeable and converse brilliantly on general topics, as if he had not a care in the world. The next morning the hostess proceeds to relieve her feelings in the housekeeper's room. With an air of injured innocence, the poor cook weeps over the fate of her excellent dinner. Everything, she says, had been cooked to perfection, but the butler and footman kept the whole dinner waiting, and dishes which were fit to put before a king were allowed to get sodden, tepid, and spoiled in the serving-room. The hostess goes to her husband, and tells him that "he really must speak" to the butler on the subject; but, before he has time to do so, the butler comes himself to complain. He has sent down again and again to the kitchen for the courses, and yet he was kept waiting. The sauces were not sent up with the things, and one man had to be employed during the greater part of dinner in running with messages to the cook. He had sometimes begun to think that she must have gone to sleep. The general result of the affair in such a case is likely to be a grand row among the domestics, with which we gladly dismiss the subject.—*Saturday Review*.

COLONIAL UNION.

The above title (Colonial Union) may seem strange to the readers of the SPECTATOR, for the reason that there has been such a surfeit of Commercial Union and Annexation titles. We have managed to read the "Political Destiny of Canada," as enunciated by Mr. James Little, and must confess that it is rather too redundant and too figurative for our comprehension, the Canadian Pacific Railway appearing to be the bugbear of Mr. Little's existence. He informs us that to the *Globe* and *Mail* he had mailed copies of a previous pamphlet written by him and containing much the same arguments as this latter one, but these leaders of public opinion took no notice of it. *Cui bono?* Public opinion is utterly opposed to Annexation, and will not discuss the matter at all, nor listen to weary arguments which endeavour to prove the disloyalty of Canada. In view of recent developments the Canadian Pacific Railway is not likely to prove an expense to the country, and Mr. Little's argument therefore, that we are being dragged into financial ruin and then into annexation by the railway policy, is effete and falls to the ground. I am sorry to notice that a contributor to the *Canadian Monthly*, signing himself "P. S. H." and holding opinions contrary to Mr. Little, is told by him that the signature "P. S. H." reminds one of *pish*, to which piece of small wit, the