

WHEN A WOMAN IS A HOSTESS

By Agnes H. Morton



COME under my roof-tree, and allow me for a few hours to become responsible for your welfare and happiness." The conventional form of invitation does not so read, but that is its purport.

The caterer and the florist are convenient factors in social entertaining on a large scale. The material elements of welfare and happiness are readily secured and deftly combined at the bidding of a well-filled purse. But the spiritual elements are not to be had for money or for price, and the suggestion that a brilliant conversationalist might be engaged "by the hour" to take charge of the mental and moral conditions of a social gathering, would be regarded as a mild attempt at satire.

Whatever the æsthetic or sensuous attractions, the ultimate fact is that when people assemble socially they meet to talk. In popular definition "sociable" means "conversation," and "unsocial" means "silence." The success of any social gathering will be largely decided by the prevailing spirit of the conversation. And in this, more than in any other feature of the occasion, the personality of the hostess should appear. No matter how many gifted conversationalists there may be present, she should not permit an outsider to create the atmosphere of her house. Even the most diffident woman, who glides unobtrusively through a throng elsewhere, should courageously assert herself when the responsibility of entertaining rests upon her. In her admirable fearlessness she may recall the terse self-announcement of Rob Roy, "My foer is on my native heath, and my name is MacGregor."

By this I mean the spiritual fearlessness of a conscientious woman, not an ostentatious show of authority. The spiritually valiant woman is strong for herself first. The hostess who entertains delightfully and creditably is an unselfish woman. If she deliberately guides the conversation it is because she has an intelligent ideal, which, if realized, means added happiness to her guests, while, at the same time, it scores a triumph for the generic character and specific individuality of her style of entertaining, and marks her as one of the most accomplished of women.

Every hostess will recognize a variety of combinations in the conversational circle. Her guests may include people of all dispositions, sometimes friendly to one another, sometimes hostile; sometimes un congenial, and often unacquainted, or—worst of all—prejudiced. Moreover, there may be those in the circle whose conversational method is as faulty as their vanity is sensitive, and to correct the former without offending the latter is a peculiarly difficult undertaking.

THE IDEAL CONDITION



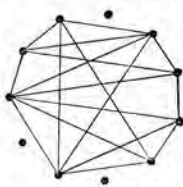
THE ideal condition to which the hostess aims to bring her circle of talkers, may be represented by a diagram in which every individual in the circle is shown to be in magnetic relation to every one of the others. How far short of this ideal the usual conditions are may be illustrated by a few typical instances in daily experiences.

TALKING EXCLUSIVELY BY TWOS



THE chain of interest is broken into short links. This defeats the purpose of a social gathering and destroys all semblance of a circle. When a comparatively small number are present conversation should be general and impartial. Even in large assemblies, where this fragmentary chatting is inevitable, the hostess should encourage such constant varying of groups as will result in a general mingling. To do this she must observe particularly those few who are conspicuously disposed to be selfishly exclusive. By herself joining such a group and diverting the attention—by a change of subject, by introducing other people, or on one or another pretext carrying off one of the "fixtures" to another knot of talkers, she may gracefully and effectually counteract the tête-à-tête tendency. She has a special right to do this, and on the less formal occasions she exercises this right in person. At a formal reception, where the hostess is obliged to keep her state, this duty of commingling and promoting general sociability devolves upon her "aids"—her recognized representatives—who radiate the hospitality from its centre.

THE SELFISH GROUP



SOME people are naturally talkative, while others are naturally reserved. This difference in individuality is one of the pleasing "varieties of life." But sometimes the more silent ones are unduly repressed, and might willingly have more to say if the garrulous ones would give them a chance. Sometimes the result is that several are left in awkward isolation. If the fault is due merely to social inexperience it may need only a gentle reminder. But when the ignoring of one or more is intentional, and even ostentatious, the case is more serious. If an undeniably objectionable person has been unfortunately included among the guests the hostess is accountable for the indiscretion of introducing such an element, and she may blame herself if the circle rebel to the extent of manifesting some disapproval. But even in this case polite people will rigidly observe the forms of civility while under the same roof, even though the "cut direct" be given an hour later on neutral ground. But when the neglected one is guiltless of anything deserving contempt the pronounced slight is usually the expression of arrogant snobbishness, and a hostess is justified in being indignant that any one should have the effrontery thus to insult a guest of hers; yet she will reflect that this phase of ill manners indicates a lack of perception in these people, who probably have no idea of the real character of the individual whom they are snubbing on some general principle of their own.

DUTIES OF THE HOSTESS

THE hostess has two duties to perform simultaneously—that of giving to the slighted one her own sympathy and sustaining, and that of enlightening the others as to the merits of the case. To this end she will address friendly remarks to the neglected one that will bring the latter into the conversation and prove the ability of the talker, or if the neglected one is gifted as a reader or a musician, or in any line of art, the hostess may utilize that fact to bring her quiet guest into prominence. I have seen a plainly-attired, diffident girl shrinking painfully under the scrutiny of her sisters in silken attire, until the hostess reassuringly guided the little brown wren to a perch on the piano-stool, when, encouraged by the kind words and genial smile of this fairy godmother, the voice, at first tremulous, grew strong and sustained as she sang. More than one proud lip quivered as that voice, with its birdlike mingling of cheerfulness and pathos, revealed—unconsciously—the heart of a girl of sensitively refined nature. Every one forgot the "made-over" brown dress. Who criticises the wren's feathers? Perhaps some of the group were moved only to the extent of a mild curiosity as they observed, to their little minds, the incomprehensible paradox of a poor girl in the best society. But they were silent and respectful and rather thoughtful, and perhaps the idea would become clear even to their minds eventually. At any rate, that girl was never again snubbed by those people.

In some such way the hostess may demonstrate the claim of her slighted guest to the respect and friendship of the others, and at the same time she does a real service to those whose rudeness is, after all, primarily due to ignorance. For cruel and selfish as they may be, they verily "know not what they do."

THE MONOPOLIST



HOW long should one talker be allowed to "have the floor," and when should he be silenced? That depends. It may happen that one speaker has something to say that all the rest are breathlessly pausing to hear. Some impromptu, unpredictable conditions may create this rare exception. But the rule, so general as to be almost universal, is that homily is not to be permitted on ordinary social occasions. The hostess should politely discourage the monopolist. This may be done by constantly addressing remarks to other members of the circle, and leading the conversation away from the homilist's pet hobbies. Such a move is easily accomplished, provided the hostess is possessed of fine tact and is sufficiently acquainted with the topics most interesting to those to whom she appeals, and her venture is so delicately made that no one suspects her strategy, or dreams that the conversation is being guided by her.

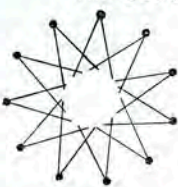
THE HOSTILE FACTIONS

IN extending invitations a hostess will generally avoid bringing hostile factions together—if she knows it. When this happens accidentally it is an awkward situation for everybody. Probably the simplest thing that the hostess can do is to ignore it, and assume that all are on the best of terms. Her cheerful friendliness toward every one may induce them to treat each other with the outward semblance of civility, which may have the effect of developing some measure of cordiality. Enemies who are compelled to be kind to one another sometimes discover that they have ceased to be enemies. Nothing cultivates kindness so thriftily as kindness. Moreover, to meet, even at the risk of a clash, is often exactly what hostile factions need as the first practical step toward reconciliation. In these radical cases it is not enough for the hostess to follow the passive plan of cheerful ignoring—which preserves peace for the time, but may have little permanent effect.

If she aims to secure lasting results in thus summoning belligerents to a treaty of peace she must adopt a more active method. As the process involves the mastery of stubborn antagonisms she will wisely search, first of all, for some "common ground," and make the most of this basis of affiliation. It may be some homely domestic appeal to mother-love or filial devotion, or some exhortation to patriotic unison of sentiment against a common foe, or, best of all, some scheme for inveigling both parties into an exchange of helpful courtesies that will arouse on both sides a pleasant sense of conferring benefits, and a corresponsive emotion of impulsive gratitude. There is no more subtle and effectual way to win over an enemy than to let him do you a favor. If a hostess can manage to place her hostile cliques in such a mutual relation she has very nearly won her victory. The conditions in such hostile factions are always unique, and always require a ready tact to meet them. When a brave hostess makes these daring combinations with the firm purpose to be a peacemaker she is undertaking one of the most difficult and unselfish of enterprises. Every lover of social harmony will bid her Godspeed.

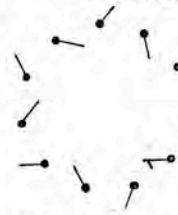


THE CONTROVERSIAL GROUP



THIS represents a circle in which the debating spirit is rife, to the imminent peril of the social spirit. The antagonisms which were impersonal at the start are liable to become personal in the irritating atmosphere of counter-assertions. Lacking order, such discussions are dissensions rather than debates. A discreet hostess will conduct the conversation away from subjects that prove to be a basis for wrangling disagreements, and lead up to something attractive and harmonious. This should be done very artlessly, for if a wrangler is conscious of being dragged away by the collar he will obstinately return to his bone of contention.

THE UNCONGENIAL GROUP



IN this circle the individuals have diverse aims and tastes. There is no hostility, but merely an absence of mutual interest. Conversation starts slowly and is maintained with difficulty.

When such a company is convened by invitation I infer that the hostess is a woman of great originality and versatility. If all are her chosen associates it proves that she has a remarkable power of affiliation. Readily sympathizing with every one herself, she may not realize what a variety of contradictions they represent until she happens to bring them all together, and then she is confronted with a problem that her individual association with them had not involved—that of harmonizing "all sorts and conditions of men," and making them as congenial to one another as each one is to her. She will often find that she has her hands full. But to that style of hostess it is an inspiring task, and well repays the enthusiasm which she brings to its accomplishment.

Wherever a social group stands in need of a discreet conversational guide the hostess becomes preëminently responsible, but she should be cordially seconded in her efforts by the abler members of her circle. A guest who would consciously antagonize the hostess would be guilty of a very great breach of courtesy.

Let us hope that our hostess, by her discretion, and her "patient continuance in well-doing," may teach the "more excellent way" to any who need the lesson, and that her guests, one and all, may find in her home a literal illustration of the truth that "Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."