

SOCIAL EVENTS IN A GIRL'S LIFE.

By LA PETITE.

PART VI.

LITERARY DINNERS.

course, I have been to a good many by now, for they are much more common than they used to be; but I looked on my first invitation with mingled awe and delight, and felt it was a step up the ladder of fame.

None but "women" writers were invited, which seemed to be another feather in my cap, for it betokened that I was recognised as one, and gave me a pleasant sense of importance. The dinner



took place at one of the large public rooms set aside for the purpose, and as we ascended the public staircase we heard a girl whisper to her companion in an awe-struck tone, "Those are women-writers!"

My head was held quite an inch higher after this, though there may be a doubt as to whether the remark were complimentary or the reverse.

A good deal of this awe has melted away by now, for everybody writes in these days, though they forget that every idea that comes into their heads may not be worth writing down.

The waiter stationed at the head of the stairs evidently thought that it would not be polite to call us "women," the grand old title that one hears too seldom nowadays, so he kept repeating, "This way for the lady-writers' dinner!" which made us laugh and everyone else stare, till we felt more like a travelling circus than ever.

First we were shown to a room where we laid aside our wraps and then to a reception-room, where we were received by the chair-woman and committee, who welcomed us and pointed to a table where lay various sprays of flowers. These were made up ready to attach to our dresses, and we were each expected to take one, a delicate, womanly touch, which at once robbed the assembly of its official and formal character.

Creeping into a corner I sat and watched the company assemble, and thrilled with pleasure as I saw the faces of many who had made me laugh or cry.

We each had given us a plan of the tables, so that we knew exactly where we were to sit and the names of all present, but I greatly wished the guests wore labels, so that one might know exactly who each lady was.

At length we were all assembled and a general move was made to the dining-room next door, the chair-woman and committee leading the way, but otherwise no precedence being observed.

The table, in the shape of a horse-shoe, looked charming, and, as name-cards were put on each plate, we had no difficulty in finding our places, and soon settled down.

It soon struck me as incongruous that we were waited on by men. It was hardly consistent considering we rigidly excluded them from the table, but this was almost the only mistake (if mistake it could be called), and was simply a matter of opinion. Besides, in a public institution, you must avail yourself of the services provided, and cannot alter it to suit your own tastes and fancies.

The menus had been designed by one of the guests, and bore on the front a Greek girl

reclining gracefully on a couch, with a book and a lamp before her, holding out a champagne glass to be filled. It was charmingly pretty; but, as one of those present observed, it was hardly a fair representation of the life of a woman-writer, for though indeed she may "burn the midnight oil," she has but little leisure to lie on sofas, and none at all to drink champagne!

As I looked round I realised more than ever what a mistake it was to suppose that cleverness must needs be allied to dowdiness of dress, or that busy women had no time to take a proper interest in their clothes. Each one of us was dressed as befitted the occasion with a due regard to fashion, though not a slavish surrender to it, and we all seemed to have laid to heart Shakespeare's injunction—

"Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,
But not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy;

For the apparel oft proclaims the man,"
and woman!

The dinner passed off like most dinners, and it was only towards its close that it differed at all from others. When the dessert was reached the waiters were banished, and we felt that the real business of the evening was about to commence. Lighted candles were placed at intervals down the table, coffee was served and cigarette-boxes produced.

Not many of us smoked though, but I took a cigarette as a souvenir, and was assured, on masculine authority next day, that it was a very bad one.

Then the chair-woman rose and gave the toast of the first woman in the land, "The Queen," and, after that, we listened to several speeches upholding the importance of our profession and pointing out that, as our prospects improved and our influence increased so also should our sense of responsibility, and that we should aim high, so that others might be the better for what we wrote.

I noticed with amusement that the waiters peeped cautiously from behind the screens during the speech-making, as it was then rather a novelty to hear a woman speak; but they were visibly impressed by the good sense and capability of what they heard, and the spirit of scornful curiosity with which they entered soon changed to one of attentive approval.

This ended the formal part of the proceedings.

We listened to a charming song or two from a pretty girl, and then, acting on the suggestion of the chair-woman, moved freely about, chatting with those we knew, and being introduced to those we did not know, so that what with the "feast of reason and the flow of soul," the evening was gone before we realised it.

The husbands, fathers and brothers were waiting meekly in the ante-room to escort their respective belongings home, which I thought inconsistent, for if we were independent enough to come alone and eat alone, we might surely have gone home alone.

We parted with regret, promising to meet again next year. This we did, and from these dinners I trace many pleasant and helpful friendships.

As time went on too the small eccentricities, which our best friends might deplore as giving our enemies opportunities of scoffing, were softened down and we became less aggressive, so to speak. Of course people said unkind things, as they always do if they get the chance. For instance, our menus one year

had etched on them (by the same hand as before) the Greek girl again holding out a handful of food towards an exceptionally solemn-looking owl, Minerva's bird, as everyone knows, who looked rather disdainfully over her head. This was quoted as a sign that we tried in vain to lure wisdom to our side, but we paid no heed, and are now, I think, firmly established.

Last year, being our beloved Queen's Jubilee, our banquet was of course very specially brilliant and loyal. The committee wore white bows with pens, and their chairs were draped with broad red, white and blue sashes, and our name-cards had attached to them red, white and blue narrow baby-ribbon with a wee silver safety-pin run through it. This led to one of my secret ambitions being realised, for our chair-woman (a novelist whose books are widely read and highly thought of) suggested our each pinning our name-card to our dress so that everyone would be labelled. This was done amid much laughter, but I turned the blank side of mine outwards, feeling that no one would be burning to know my name, and if they were they would not be much enlightened when they saw it.

Our numbers had increased from the sixty who had assembled on the first occasion I spoke of, so that we had to have a larger room; but we no longer banished the waiters when we began speechifying, for we had got over our self-consciousness and took it all more as a matter of course.

Altogether it was the most successful gathering we had ever had, and was thoroughly enjoyable.

I felt very uplifted the first time I went as a guest to a mixed literary dinner, by which I mean a male literary club which has ladies' guest nights.

The dinner took place the evening of the day when we went to the Jubilee drawing-room, and those of you who have read that paper can imagine how tired we were; but all the same how we enjoyed it, and what a fitting conclusion it made to a memorable day. Of course it was more ceremonious than the others, and a regular *soirée* was held afterwards.

It was wonderfully interesting to note the faces of men whose books we had read and enjoyed, and, although obliged to admit that sometimes my ideal pictures of them were rather ruthlessly destroyed, still, on the whole, they were not so disappointing as one might expect.

It was pleasant too to notice that my sex held their own very creditably in the matter of speech-making, and were listened to with marked attention.

The hall in which we dined was very stately and handsome, and we all sat at separate tables, large or small, according to the size of our party.

The proceedings were agreeably diversified by songs, but for the rest there was so much to see and hear that any other amusement seemed superfluous.

Ladies and gentlemen left the table together, of course, when the time arrived for the *soirée* (which was held in an adjoining room), but many lingered as if loth to break up a happy party, and those in the balcony, as they looked down on the gay crowd, must have had an impression of a moving tableau, so bright and animated was the scene. But all must come to an end in time, and so did my last literary dinner, taking its place at length with the other social events of the past.

(To be continued.)