

**DINNERS, CEREMONIOUS
AND UNCEREMONIOUS
AND THE MODERN
METHODS OF SERVING THEM**

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Dinners, Ceremonious and Unceremonious and the Modern Methods of Serving Them by
Abby Buchanan Longstreet

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ABBY BUCHANAN LONGSTREET

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GOOD FORM

DINNERS

CEREMONIOUS AND UNCEREMONIOUS
*AND THE MODERN METHODS
OF SERVING THEM*

BY THE AUTHOR OF "CARDS, THEIR SIGNIFICANCE AND
PROPER USES," AND "SOCIAL ETIQUETTE
OF NEW YORK"



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GOOD FORM

DINNERS.

FORMAL DINNERS AND DINERS.

THE success and pleasure of a ceremonious dinner depends upon a judicious selection of guests who are harmoniously contrasted in their tastes, talents and ages, and upon grouping them happily together. A party wholly made up of exceptionally interesting and ambitious talkers not infrequently stirs a babel of voices, but the subjects about which they are eloquent are not as clearly intelligible as a host would have them.

They are discreet entertainers who invite such men and women to sit at meat together as are inclined to talk and listen, alternately with others who are not exceptional conversationalists, but are quick to appreciate a nimble wit and a fine sentiment. Many of one's dearest friends have little to bring to a dinner party but discriminating smiles. With such guests and fine courtesy, and with, also, a quietly served, properly arranged dinner, even though those who add no brill-

iancy are a majority, the dinner is a foregone success from a social standpoint. Seldom does it happen that husband and wife are equally eloquent of speech, but now and then they are; hence the custom, and indeed the strict etiquette, of always seating them apart at dinner.

An accomplished *conteuse* is entitled to a partner who has a talent for listening, provided the guests are too many for general conversation. The man who talks easily and well should, of course, be paired with a woman who is willing to be silent, but who has the tact, or the gift, to call out her escort's best thoughts and his most scintillating *mots*.

One of several reasons why American dinners are usually more interesting than those in England, is, that there all guests are seated according to a varying inherited rank, rather than for especial or distinguished conversational acquirements.

Educated and finely-bred persons need have no tastes or pursuits in common with their fellows at table, and yet be all the more interested and interesting because of novel combinations of thought.

A delightful harmony is thus evoked, but the hostess cannot always arrange ideal social combinations from the elements at her command. The next best thing for her to do is to distribute her fine talkers and place dull ones in the intervals.

At long and narrow tables, interesting guests may be seated opposite each other, since low decorations

are in favor; and it is not bad form to converse across, as it is in England. In the mother-country those who are *vis-à-vis* are usually farther apart than is customary here, and to talk across the flowers would be to use unpleasantly energetic voices; hence the reasonableness of etiquette that forbids it. The perfect dinner of ceremony includes married and unmarried, elderly and youthful, in agreeable proportions, and an equal number of men and women.

Of course, such a happy selection is sometimes broken at the last hour, but never except by very serious occurrences. A light reason for disappointing a hostess, or more modestly, breaking her plans, is an unpardonable discourtesy. All entertainers know that illnesses and other untoward events may at the last hour deprive them of some one or more of their guests. If there is an even number, as many men as women, and she has no intimate friends or kinspeople whom she can secure at short notice, she orders fewer covers at table and does not feel that her dinner will be wholly a failure. It is the highest compliment to ask a friend at the last moment to take a deserted chair at a dinner; therefore, even if at personal sacrifice, such invitations in polished society are accepted, if possible, at once. It is, also, esteemed the greatest possible kindness to thus drop into and fill an otherwise painful vacancy; especially is it a gracious concession if thereby that foolishly dreaded "thirteen at table" is avoided. A young man or woman who refuses a

dinner invitation that, if accepted, completes a broken number, unless it be through a necessity that is made clear to the hostess, is deemed unamiablé and such people are likely to be remembered unpleasantly when a social favor is requested for themselves or one of their friends. Seeking substitutes, in large circles during seasons when there is much gayety and a press of engagements, is sometimes unavailing. When the number has fallen to thirteen, and no fourteenth can be secured, the hostess may depend upon the friendship of some one of her young guests to decline the dinner and come in for coffee in the drawing-room later in the evening, provided he or she has no especially alluring offer of pleasure elsewhere. It is deemed much more courteous, and even assuring, to a hostess who has felt obliged to suggest an absence to a bidden guest, if he or she comes to pass the same evening and assist in entertaining. Such friendly favors are not likely to be unappreciated. Entertainers may care less than their guests about this ill-fabled number, but they should not be unmindful of others. No host can be quite certain but in the silence of some guest's mind this weird and senseless superstition is a torment during a dinner of thirteen people, and long afterwards.

The *bon vivant* insists that there are no more decisive testimonials to the refinements or vulgarities of a rich entertainer than are furnished by his *menus*, and his mode of serving ceremonious dinners; but this asser-

tion may justly be doubted. There is one other witness to his place in the scale of civilization, the testimony of which cannot be questioned. It is his selection and combination of guests, and their manners at his table ; such guests, of course, including persons of varying attainments, but all upon what is recognized as the same social plane.

For methods of grouping guests there can be no rules, etiquette failing to aid a host in the least. Our social distinctions, or differences, being almost wholly self-arranged or personally created, only the clearness of an entertainer's brain and his fine sense of fitness,—influenced not too much by his kindly instincts or warmth of heart,—with an appreciation of his own and other's experiences and observations, can be safely appealed to when grouping a large circle of acquaintances into a series of dinner parties.