

Five O'Clock Party by F.W.C.

THE children's meal had to be prepared before we left, a zip fastener on Cynthia's dress wouldn't zip, and then, just as we were stepping into the car, Mrs Brown phoned to tell us all about her Jimmy's measles. We were running a bit late and I was not quite sure of the address.

I took the next on the left. "This is it," I said with relief. There could be no mistake. For a distance of half a block the street was lined with cars. "There's Robbie's old crate. Glad they're here. And there are the Johnstons. That's two people we know, anyhow."

Cynthia had a last, quick peep in the driving mirror. She tucked an errant wisp of black hair under the tight brim of four guineas worth of what I took to be carpet underfelt sprinkled with confetti. Four guineas. . . . But it was clever and it suited her. She raised an appraising eyebrow and then frowned ever so slightly.

"You look wonderful," I said. "Straight out of *Vogue*." The frown melted and she cocked her head to one side.

"Do I?" she asked. "Come on, then, let's go. But remember," she added with a twinkle in her eye, "it's your turn to drive home."

"Yes," I said, "I remember." I was pretty sure that my eye did not twinkle.

Walking up the Entwistle's drive I was pensive. How could one scintillate for an hour or two on at most three very small and evenly spaced whiskies? Would it be better to risk becoming water-logged on the Entwistle's gin-and-fruit-juice *ad lib*? Entwistle was all right; but his mass-produced cocktail would be no better than others I had sampled under similar circumstances. A cautious type, he would go to some length to ensure that his guests did not completely lose their neuro-muscular co-ordination or their critical faculties. In this way he would avoid the accidental dropping of oyster patties on the carpet and the deliberate dunking of cigarette butts in the aquarium. Noise put an end to my damp reverie.

"Goodness, Cynthia," I exclaimed, "we are late."

"How do you know?" she asked. "Listen to that," I replied, nodding in the direction of the French windows which opened off the living room. "Forty-five decibels at least. A really good party peaks at about sixty, and people start to go home when it drops to thirty-five."

"Don't be silly, George; I don't know what you are talking about," said Cynthia. "Anyhow, we couldn't be *that* late. And I don't like being early. You get introduced to everybody in the room, and I can never remember half the names. Here's Mrs Entwistle."

IN the Entwistle's crowded living room it was difficult to steer a pre-determined course. You simply got caught up in one of several human currents and were carried along helplessly until you came to rest in a back-water or a relatively calm eddy. At my sixth savoury I found myself in deep water. A few months ago when I had first met Peabody I had mentioned quite casually that I enjoyed a good book. I forget the exact circumstances, but I recall that our discussion had been interrupted almost as soon as it had begun. Which was just as well, be-

cause I had since heard that Peabody was a rather arty type. Since my reading was limited to train journeys and my favourites were of the Riders of the Purple Sage kind, I might as well have discussed racehorses or inter-planetary travel with him.

Either Peabody remembered or else he wished to introduce me and put me at ease in the group into which I had just been precipitated by the fickle current. I was amazed to discover Cynthia among the intelligentsia. Yet she looked radiant.

"Ah, Chatterley," bubbled Peabody, eyeing me not unkindly. "Your wife and I were just talking about Dubois's latest novel."

I blinked. "Don't you agree that his writing has amazing texture?"

"Er . . . texture?" I asked, blankly, and then tried to recover myself. "Oh, yes, indubitably!" I exclaimed. Peabody himself had used the word only a moment before. "And so fluid . . ."

My voice trailed off; I felt like a private in the ranks from whom an impossible feat of leadership is suddenly expected. Who was Dubois anyhow? Could one have a fluid texture? I fear not. And some idiot would ask me what I meant by "fluid." Quickly shoving the whole of an asparagus roll into my mouth, I assumed a thoughtful expression, gazed intently at the ceiling, and chewed with deliberation.

Observing me thus preoccupied, or divining that I had nothing to contribute, anyhow, Peabody resumed his exposition to the select little circle. His experiment in the interrogative mood having miscarried, he proceeded in the emphatic indicative.

"Mark you," he went on, addressing himself to Cynthia, "one must admit that Dubois's existentialism is essentially microcosmic. . ."

At least it sounded something like that. Though badly shaken I realised that if I could summon strength and act quickly I might be able to extricate Cynthia and myself from this dangerous situation. Delay would be fatal. Swallowing the thoroughly masticated asparagus, I turned to Cynthia.

"Darling," I said, fairly loudly, "Marjorie insisted that I find you. She said that she simply *must* tell you about the bottled tomatoes. She's over in the far corner. Come on, I'll take you."

Peabody looked pained; but I beamed apologetically though somewhat briefly. Grasping my empty glass in one hand and Cynthia's arm in the other, I struck out strongly in the general direction of the "special" liquid refreshments. To do the Entwistles justice, it must be said that these were always available to those whose cultivated palates or previous experience obliged them to decline the cocktail. This time the tide was in our favour.

"Now," I said, trying to look aggrieved, "we'll have to go home soon, and all I've had is two glasses of what tastes and acts like pineapple juice. Moreover, I think I've earned a little something by saving you from Peabody."

Cynthia smiled, rather enigmatically. I thought.

"All right," she said, "just a very small one."

She watched me pour it out. It wasn't small, but she nodded approval.

"It was nice of you to come to the rescue; but Mr Peabody is really quite entertaining if you show a little interest," she said.

"Maybe," I replied, "but what do you know about Dubois's latest novel?"

"Not much," she chuckled, "but I happened to finish reading it for the second time last night."

"Phew!" I said.

She drifted off to chat with the Johnstons while I sought out old Robbie and some of the boys who had established themselves by the fireplace.

As usual, Snodgrass was retailing chestnuts. Although his stories were no longer young he told them with such evident enjoyment, and he had such a funny face, that he could always muster an appreciative audience.

"Have you heard the one about the king who was conferring a knighthood on a very fat bloke?" Snodgrass posed the rhetorical question just as I broke into the charmed circle. We all lied heartily. "Well," he chortled, "you see, the fat bloke's name happened to be Cumference Smith. So, after touching him on the shoulder with a sword in the traditional manner, the king said, 'Arise, Sir Cumference!' Get it? Circumference! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

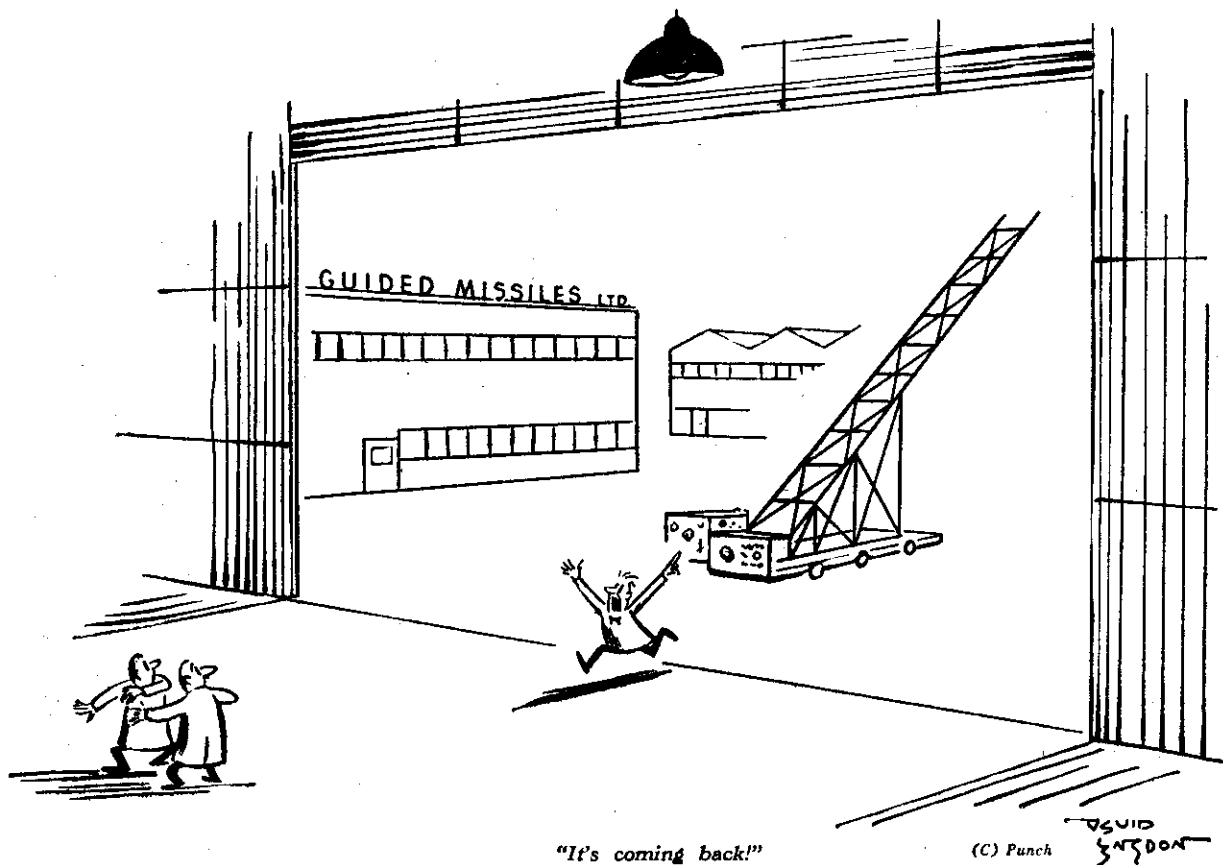
Dear old Robbie, who is a good 46 inches round the equator, laughed fit to spill his brandy. The tears were now streaming down Snodgrass's chubby face. There was more to follow. Soon we were all laughing our heads off. It wasn't the stories—though they seemed better than usual—it was Snodgrass himself.

"George, dear," said a voice at my side, "your decibels seem to be peaking nicely; but as a father you should have a thought for the little ones. And do you realise that we are almost the last to leave. Time to go home. Come and thank Mr and Mrs Entwistle."

CYNTHIA took my arm as we walked to the car. Her eyes were sparkling. "I had a lovely chat with Marjorie and Phyllis," she said. "And I knew lots of other people. Even old horseface came up and asked how Michael was getting on at school. I'm invited to afternoon tea next Thursday."

"I really believe you enjoyed yourself," I said.

"Yes," said Cynthia, "I did. You were a dear to buy me that hat. It helped a lot."



(C) Punch