

STAGE

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SPEAKING OF ASHES



NEW YORK is full of waiters, Chinese, American, Congo, French, Italian and German waiters, Jewish and Christian waiters, Vegetarian and Greek waiters, many good waiters, many bad waiters.

Waiters who blow their noses in tapestried dining rooms, who use napkins to polish their boots, or don't polish them at all, waiters who are badly shaved and make a practice of carrying their service towels under their arms, and remove them from there to polish a glass on which they have just breathed.

If there are any marble columns in the halls in which they minister, the bad waiters lean against them, mostly in a cataleptic state in which they hypnotize their fingernails and are unable to hear or see any guests, except those who are seated at their own tables.

Sometimes one can observe that a common bond—political faith, relationship, or just lonesomeness—draws the maître d'hôtel and the waiter together. To this group belong the political waiter and the political maître d'hôtel.

A good hour to see this is after luncheon, when the crowd thins out and the busboys, hunched over trays of dirty dishes, disappear into the pantries. The waiter then slowly moves from his marble column and goes over to the maître d'hôtel, who is then putting his O.K. on bills the guests have signed.

Rank is soon forgotten; in close communion they lean together. Out of a small glass on the maître d'hôtel's desk, the waiter takes a toothpick, removes the white paper-shirt from it and puts the quill between his teeth. After a while he takes it out to etch the former borderlines between Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia on the tablecloth—"Here is Prague, and here is Munich—and here comes Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain."

The political waiter is bad, but you are completely sunk if your waiter is a beauty coveter—i.e., one who has an eye for beauty, and the beauty—alas—does not sit at your table.

With widened nostrils, glass eyes, and the agile persistency of Sacha Guitry, the virile garçon has forgotten all about your lemon-roquefort dressing, his heart belongs to Brenda.

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Cheek to cheek, he operates under her hat brim, bends down to drink in the beauty of her shoulders and remove the bones of the *Grenouilles Brillat-Savarin*—you can wave all you want to—he will not budge until she has finished—then, outside in the privacy of the pantry, he buries his face in her napkin—the demi-tasse spoon he will take home as a souvenir.

Ah, qu'elle est belle!

LESS INTERESTING to the student, but just as terrible for the guest, is the common type of bad waiter whose table is a document of neglect that offers as exhibit "A" several dirty ashtrays.

Up to a dozen cigarette butts, half of them smeared with lipstick, stand on a grove of ashes surrounded by an undergrowth of burnt matches. If there be a doodler among the guests you will also find miniature statuary modeled from tinfoil and soggy breadcrumbs.

This still-life is usually framed by a ring of empty demi-tasse cups, sitting in saucers half filled with cold coffee.

In fortunate cases when the drafts in the restaurant are right and the smoke which rises drifts into the eyes of the bad waiter, he appears at the table and empties it. He turns the ashtray upside down, knocks it against the corner of his tray, blows on it and puts it back again, he hits the table a few times with his napkin and goes back to his marble column.

Rather than suffer this, I advise going the whole hog. I can recommend an Armenian restaurant where the prices are in complete accord with the service.

An old hearty of a waiter, fat as the Aga Khan, in an antique jacket off whose lapel you can read the menu, serves you *Shish Kebab* with a pipe in his teeth. This done, he sits down at your table, reads your book or paper, gives you a current events test and, after he slides out into the dark kitchen to get the dessert, which is always a pink saucer of stewed quinces, he sits down again, groans, leans back, half closes his eyes, and almost falls asleep. I go to this restaurant only to see him. He has character. He is like an actor of the Moscow Art Theatre.

After such encounters along the by-paths in the realm of restaurants, it's fine to be able to sing the song of the good waiter.

In the search for this rare workman, I have come across a restaurant where I least expected to find him, successful places usually become indifferent—but Twenty-One is fortunate in having a room full of good waiters. I have never been upstairs, perhaps they are just as good, but I have watched the men below, on rainy days, when the room was not filled, on days when there was a rush, early, late, with irritable clients, drunken women, and the nuisance of

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getting telephones for junior executives. No servility—no scraping and bowing, spotlessly clean, they are the only waiters I have seen in a long while who stand with their backs to each other, watching the guests, the tables, the ash-trays—they are certainly good waiters.



(Self-portrait by Bemelmans)

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