

# *Introduction to 19<sup>th</sup> Century Etiquette*

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a time of tremendous social and economic flux. The Industrial Revolution created a consumer economy and a huge middle class with the means of purchasing consumer goods. This new middle class felt that they had arrived at a higher social plane of existence. The social norms of the farm and the tenement would not do for the family of a man who had made his way in the world.

The new middle class wanted to purchase appropriate manners, just as they could purchase fashionable homes, stylish clothing or the latest domestic gadget. From the 1850s on, the market was flooded with etiquette books which laid out to people who had never been exposed to such things, the rules of “polite society.”

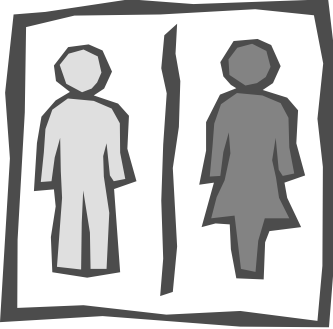
Ironically, these rules were based upon the norms of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century aristocratic society which the middle class had supplanted and rendered obsolete.

These changes were taking place throughout the European and American world, but in America, an additional dynamic was present. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Americans were keenly aware of the uniqueness of their democratic institutions and society, and many saw the manners of “polite society” as contrary to the egalitarian nature of America. Hifalutin manners were a thing of the decadent Old World.

This often manifested itself in loud, coarse and rough behavior and downright rudeness—especially on the part of the have-nots towards the haves. This was particularly prevalent in behavior towards the English. An English accent could pretty much ensure a rough reception from an American working man. Anyone, however, who wore a top hat had to be ready to patiently endure the “I’m as good a man as you” reception he would get from every white porter, cab driver, sailor and ditch digger he might encounter.

There was a gradual shift here however. As the century wore on, the norms of the middle class diffused throughout society, and “coarse behavior” became far less the norm in 1900 than it was in 1800. By the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a watered down version of middle class manners had become the property of the entire society, which led in the years following the First World War, to a general informalization of manners, with Victorian notions of social ritual being tossed out in favor of a more “modern” and less clearly delineated approach to behavior.

The manner of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as expressed in etiquette books, does contain many elaborate social rituals which seem a bit quaint to us moderns, but the vast majority of their space is devoted to what would seem to be common sense rules like “Don’t chew with your mouth open” or “Don’t interrupt people.” Two things may be drawn from this. First, there must have been a lot of people back then (just as there are today) who lacked “common courtesy” and needed to be told such things, and second, if you wish to portray a refined 19<sup>th</sup> Century American, just do the things your mamma taught you, and you are more than halfway there already.



## *Basic Social Rules for Gentlemen*

### Demeanor

- A good manner is the best letter of recommendation among strangers. Civility, refinement and gentleness are passports to hearts and homes, while awkwardness, coarseness and gruffness are met with locked doors and closed hearts.
- Never scratch your head, pick your teeth, clean your nails, or worse of all, pick your nose in company; all these things are disgusting. Spit as little as possible and never upon the floor.
- If you are going into the presence of ladies, beware of onions, spirits and tobacco.
- It is a great thing to be able to walk like a gentleman—that is, to get rid of that awkward, lounging, swinging gate of a clown and stop before you reach the affected and flippant step of the dandy. In short, nothing but being a gentleman can give you the air and step of one.

### Men at the Table

- Do not play with the table utensils or crumble the bread.
- Do not put your elbows on the table, or sit too far back, or lounge.
- Do not talk loud or boisterously.
- Be cheerful in conduct or conversation.
- Never, if possible, cough or sneeze at the table.
- Never tilt back your chair while at the table, or at any other time.
- Do not talk when the mouth is full.
- Never make a noise while eating.
- Do not open the mouth while chewing, but keep the lips closed. It is not necessary to show people how you masticate your food.
- Never indicate that you notice anything unpleasant in the food.
- Eat soup with the side of the spoon, without noise.
- If you wish to be served with more tea or coffee, place your spoon in your saucer.
- If a dish is presented to you, serve yourself first and then pass it on.
- If a course is set before you that you do not wish, do not touch it.
- Use a napkin only for your mouth. Never use it for your nose, face or forehead.

In America, with the exception of dancing, which is almost wholly confined to the unmarried of both sexes, all the enjoyments of the men are found in the absence of women. They dine, they play cards, they have musical meetings, they have suppers all in large parties, but without women.

### In the Presence of Ladies

- Civility is particularly due to all women; and, remember, that no provocation whatsoever can justify any man in not being civil to every woman; and the

greatest man would justly be reckoned a brute if he were not civil to the meanest woman. It is due to their sex, and is the only protection they have against the superior strength of ours; not, even a little is allowable with women; and a man may, without weakness, tell a woman she is either handsomer or wiser than she is.

- When entering a crowded streetcar, a lady should leave the door open. It is quite permissible for her to appropriate the seat of the man who gets up close to it.
- A gentleman will assist a lady over a bad crossing, or from an omnibus or carriage, without waiting for the formality of an introduction. When the service is performed, he will raise his hat, bow and pass on.

#### Greeting or Saying Hello to Others

- To a casual acquaintance you may bow without speaking; but to those with whom you are well acquainted greater cordiality is due. A bow should always be returned; even to an enemy it is courtesy to return his recognition.
- Between gentlemen, an inclination of the head, a gesture of the hand, or a mere touching of the hat is sufficient; but in bowing to a lady, the hat must be lifted from the head.
- In meeting a lady, it is optional with her whether she shall pause to speak. If the gentleman has anything to say to her, he should not stop her, but turn around and walk in her company until he has said what he has to say, when he may leave her with a bow and a lift of the hat.

#### Calling (Visitation) and Calling Cards

- “Calling” was a somewhat ritualized version of the fine old American custom of “visiting.” It was not nearly so important for the gentleman as it was for the lady. It generally fell upon the middle class lady to do what had to be done to hold “society” together. Even if the gentleman was doing the calling, it was generally the lady who was receiving callers. Ladies did not call on gentlemen except on matters of business. Gentleman called on one another with little ceremony.
- A gentleman, when making a formal call, should retain his hat and gloves in his hands on entering the room. The hat should not be laid upon the table or stand, unless it is found necessary from some cause to set it down. In that case, place it upon the floor. An umbrella should be left in the hall. In an informal call, the hat, gloves, overcoat and cane may be left in the hall.
- Visiting cards, or calling cards, were an essential accessory to any 19<sup>th</sup> Century middle class lady or gentleman. They served as tangible evidence of meeting social obligations, as well as a streamlined letter of introduction. They also served as an aid to memories that were no stronger than they are today. The stack of cards in the card tray in the hall was a handy catalog of exactly who had called and who’s calls might need to be returned. They did smack of pretentiousness however, and were not generally used among country folk or working class Americans. Business cards on the other hand, were widespread among men and women, of all classes with a business to promote. There was a

rigid distinction between business and visiting cards, and it was considered to be in very poor taste to use a business card when making a social call. A business card, left with the servants, could imply that you had called to collect a bill.

- Callers should always be provided with cards. A gentleman should carry them loose in a convenient pocket; but a lady may use a card case. No matter how many members of the family you call upon, you send in but one card. Where servants are not kept, and you are met at the door by the lady herself, of course there is no use for a card. If you call upon a friend who has a visitor, send in but one card; but if they are not at home, leave a card for each.

#### Etiquette in the Ballroom (Dancing Etiquette)

- Ladies and gentlemen were on their best behavior in the ballroom. Manners were more formal, clothing was finer, and bows were deeper. Men were expected to be extremely active in the ballroom to make up for the total passivity required of ladies; who could not ask gentlemen to dance, and who could not even be seen to cross the dance floor unescorted. Ladies would be conveyed to their station by a gentleman, and there they would wait until another gentleman came to speak to them, ask them to dance or convey them to the punchbowl.
- A gentleman should always walk around a lady's train and never attempt to step over it. If by accident he should tread upon her dress, he should beg her pardon, and if by greater awkwardness he should tear it, he must offer to escort her to the dressing room so that it may be repaired. If in the ballroom a lady asks any favor of a gentleman, such as to inquire if her carriage is waiting, he should under no circumstances refuse her requests...well bred gentleman will look after those who are unsought and neglected at the dance.
- A man who knows how to dance, and refuses to do so, should absent himself from a ball.
- Noisy talking and boisterous laughter in ballroom are contrary to the rules of etiquette.
- Always wear white gloves in a ballroom. Very light shades are admissible.
- Usually a married couple does not dance together in society, but it is a sign of unusual attention for a husband to dance with his wife, and he may do so if he wishes.
- Ladies and gentleman could not dance unless they had been introduced, so the hosts and escort spent much of the evening rushing about making introductions.



## *Basic Social Rules for Ladies*

A proper young lady had to learn rules of etiquette that almost had the force of morality in Victorian life—from how to walk down the street, or eat fruit genteelly (first peeling it with a silver knife and cutting it in bite-size morsels), to how to behave in **every** social situation.

These rules for social behavior were gathered from many written sources that were written during the Victorian era.

### *Always*

- Graciously accept gentlemanly offers of assistance.
- Wear gloves on the street, at church and other formal occasions, except when eating or drinking.
- When crossing the street, one must lift her dress a bit above the ankle while holding the folds of her gown together in her right hand and drawing them toward the right. It was considered vulgar to raise the dress with both hands as it would show too much ankle, but was tolerated for a moment when the mud was very deep.
- When introduced to a man a lady never offers her hand, she merely bows politely and says, “I am happy to make your acquaintance.”

### *Never*

- Refer to another adult by his or her first name in public.
- Grab your hoops [of your hoop skirts] or lift your skirts higher than is absolutely necessary to go up stairs.
- Lift your skirts up onto a chair or stool, etc.[to sit down].
- Sit with your legs crossed (except at the ankles if necessary for comfort or habit).
- Lift your skirts up onto the seat of your chair when sitting down (Wait for, or if necessary, ask for assistance when sitting down at a table or on a small light chair).
- Speak in a loud, coarse voice.

*partially taken from “The Gentleman’s Page: A Practical Guide for the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Man” website*