

THE TOUCHSTONE OF GOOD MANNERS

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It is only necessary to travel to be convinced that the world in general—the world of *table d'hôte*, the casual hotel guest, the wayfaring man—sadly needs instruction in the etiquette of the table, a few suggestions as to the approved forms in good society may not be un- welcome.

In nothing does breeding reveal itself more quickly and unerringly than in one's manner of feeding one's self, and in a country where every one expects to become "the equal of his superiors and the superior of his equals," it behooves us to learn its correct forms.

Of course, no one requires to be told that the knife is not used in polite society to carry food to one's mouth, that its services are not needed for pie; that it is vulgar to breathe in one's glass when drinking, or to take large mouthfuls, but there are minor points imposed by conventionality and good taste that also deserve recognition.

THERE is among all sensible people a praiseworthy desire to know the proper thing to do under all circumstances. Nothing is more to be deplored than ignorance of the conventionalities of the table. An unwritten law covers every detail, and those accustomed to good society are themselves probably unaware of conformity to any special standard, but imitate unconsciously those with whom they habitually associate. The table is the touchstone of manners, and there a blunder is a crime. At a dinner to which guests are bidden, the gentlemen assist in seating the ladies before taking their own places, while at a family dinner no such formality is observed. When seated, the body should be about a foot from the table. The ladies at once remove their gloves. The habit of tucking them in at the wrist, while the arms remain covered, or of folding them and placing them in a wine-glass, as some occasionally do, is not according to the usages of good society. The napkin is next unfolded to the half of its amplitude, and laid across the lap. No elegance of attire can be an excuse for tucking it about the person in any way.

When the oysters are set before one it is customary to wait until all, or nearly all, the rest of the company are served before eating anything, and a moment's attention in selecting the appropriate fork will prevent the necessity later of asking for another, since the peculiar combination of blade and tines of the oyster-fork makes it useless for any of the other courses. Among the array of four or five forks at the left of one's plate each has its peculiar office, the largest being reserved for the roast.

If wine is served it is not an elegant manner of signifying one's refusal of it to reverse one's glass. A gesture of dissent by slightly raising the hand will be understood at once. Neither is it considerate of others to allow one's glass to be filled if one does not take wine.

IT is probably superfluous to warn any one not to make the slightest sound in taking soup into the mouth, though all are not above reproach in this matter. Soup is taken from the side of the spoon. It is not permissible to tip the soup-plate toward one's self to secure the last spoonful.

Fish must be eaten with a fork, supplemented, if need be, by a bit of bread, unless special silver fish-knives be provided. The "entrées" and the roast follow, and impose no special punctilio.

IT is in better taste to take a little of every dish than to imply, by our picking and choosing, a too abundant provision on the part of our hostess, or that she has been unsuccessful in pleasing our fancy. When a matter of health forbids the indulgence no explanation is required. With the game comes the salad, which should not be cut up with knife and fork. A single leaf may be folded with the fork to almost any size desired. Cheese is eaten by placing a bit on a cracker or piece of bread with the knife and so conveyed to one's mouth.

Ices, creams and other sweets are usually eaten with a fork, but when this is inadequate to present the dainty at its best, common sense suggests a spoon as a substitute, never as an auxiliary. Fruit should be cut into convenient morsels before being carried to the mouth, and never bitten. It is an ill-mannered habit to reject the seeds of grapes into the plate. They should be taken from the lips between the fingers and placed unobtrusively at one side of the dessert-plate.

IN England strawberries are served with the hulls on, by which they are held, dipped in sugar and thus eaten. The fashion is being followed here when the fruit is large and fine enough to warrant it. Bananas should be eaten with a fork, and oranges peeled like an apple, leaving the inner white skin, cut transversely and held in the hand.

In using the finger-bowl only the tips of the fingers should be dipped in the water. At the close of each course the knife and fork should be laid side by side on the plate, as an indication to the servant that one has finished. Upon leaving the table the napkin is laid, still unfolded, at the side of one's plate.

IN this country and in England the ladies, at a signal from the hostess, leave the gentlemen, at the conclusion of the dessert course, to the enjoyment of their cigars and each other, and take their coffee in the drawing-room. The gentlemen rise and remain standing as the ladies withdraw, the one nearest the door holding it open as they pass out. For the past two years, in the more fashionable circles, the gentlemen have accompanied the ladies to the drawing-room, found seats for them, bowed and retired to the dining-room, but the custom has been observed only at large dinners. It may not be amiss to suggest that it is due to one's hostess not to forget to take away the little menu or name card that she has been at pains to provide with a view to one's appreciation. As a souvenir of the occasion, one is supposed to value it, and the "law of kindness" sometimes requires one to "assume a virtue if you have it not."

The subject of table manners is broad enough to cover much more than the mere mode of eating. It deals, also, with the bearing and attitude. The table is not a lounging place, and the habit of leaning on the elbows, or even on one elbow, is exceedingly inelegant. A hostess should endeavor to appear perfectly at her ease. Having instructed the servants previous to the meal she should leave the service to them, and devote her entire attention to her guests.

The habit of toying with one's knife, fork or glass, absent-mindedly drumming on the table, drawing upon the table-cloth with a spoon, piling one little thing upon another, are forms of nervousness that are not well-bred and should be controlled. I once saw a gentleman crumple in his hand a very beautiful doily while earnestly engaged in conversation.

One should not engress one's neighbor by conversation, however entertaining, so that he is unable to satisfy his appetite, or even to appreciate in some measure what his hostess has endeavored to provide for his enjoyment.

IT is the "first duty of man" and woman at a dinner-table to make themselves agreeable. This includes not only the effort to be entertaining, but to be an appreciative listener, as well, to what others may have to contribute. It excludes the introduction of all subjects that are likely to excite heated argument, or that may be in the slightest degree obnoxious to any person present. Conscience, as well as "good form," forbids adverse criticism of the absent, or gossip in any of its unworthy forms. It is nothing less than rude to try to monopolize the conversation and seek to concentrate general attention upon one's self.

Each guest should try to contribute to the cheerful atmosphere of the scene, bringing whatever news of a pleasant nature one has heard for the general benefit. Good stories, bits of information, etc., should be treasured for such occasions, and the briefer these stories are the better will it be for all concerned. Fault-finding about the weather, teasing and personalities of whatever kind are not calculated to produce harmony and should be rigidly excluded from dinner-table conversation. Good digestion will wait on appetite the more surely if these rules be observed.

The A, B, C of table etiquette requires that one shall not attempt to talk while masticating. If addressed unexpectedly, one need be under no embarrassment to dispose of the food in one's mouth, if the quantity taken has not been unduly large. If anything has been taken into the mouth that is unpleasant to swallow, it may be disposed of in the napkin without remark, while ostensibly wiping one's mouth. If one desire a second helping of anything or to have one's cup refilled, it is more courteous to address those at the ends of the table who are serving, than to mention the wish to the person in attendance.

IN the decalogue of good behavior selfishness indisputably stands first. Of all forms of selfishness the most repulsive is that exhibited at table. The carver who manages to keep the tidbits for himself, and the one who, with thoughtlessness or indifference to others present, helps himself over-bountifully to some dainty, are inexcusable. At the home table self must be lost sight of for the general benefit. In cutting one's food the amount of "elbow-room" allowable is governed by a courteous consideration for one's neighbor. The habit of resting the right arm on the table while drinking from cup or spoon is undeservedly popular. The hand should be freely raised to meet the mouth—it were a reversal of the traditions of rank for the head to lower itself for the accommodation of its slave—the hand.

It is in the privacy of home, untrammelled by the restraint imposed by the presence of strangers, that bad habits grow apace, and it is precisely at the home table that the reform should begin. Other considerations apart, no one can appear well-bred in public to whom it has not become second nature to be courteous, considerate and self-restrained in the informality of the home circle. "Company manners" cannot be put on and off; no matter how careful one may be, one betrays one's self inadvertently. Punctuality at meals should be felt to be an obligation. Its infraction is a form of selfishness that entails annoyance upon many. A fresh toilette should express the respect felt for the social event of the day.

IT is customary to wait until all are served before beginning one's own meal, and it is considerate to affect to continue eating until all shall have finished. Especially is this courtesy due to a guest upon whom the bulk of the conversation may have devolved. I think Lord Chesterfield is credited with saying that one should not eat everything upon one's plate; it would seem to imply that, had there been more, one would have been better satisfied. Neither is it seemly to sop up the gravy with bits of bread, nor to pile one thing upon another on the fork. In eating vegetables a certain punctilio is observed with each. Asparagus is now taken in the fingers if the stalks be large and dry; if not, they should be divided and eaten with a fork. It is allowable to eat artichokes also with the fingers, pulling off the leaves one by one to eat the tender morsel at the base of each. Peas, of course, must not be eaten with a spoon. In England such a breach of the proprieties would be regarded with horror. It is an instance where a triviality is absurdly magnified by fashion. With regard to Indian corn we are a law unto ourselves. If eaten from the cob it should be broken and held in one hand, however. In England a boiled egg is always eaten out of its own shell. The practice of breaking one or more into a glass is an Americanism to which we have an undoubted right, but out of our own country it is regarded as provincial and vulgar. As a nation we are reproached with eating too fast, and our digestions would be under obligations, usually, if we should mend our manners in this regard.

IT is no longer customary to press a guest to eat heartily of anything by saying "there is plenty more." It were invidious for him to doubt it, and the statement implies that the abundance is not a matter of course. In helping a guest to anything, where other persons are present at table, it is not in good taste to select for him that which is choicest in a way that is observable, neither is it tactful to show favoritism in serving at any time, unless it is regulated by the precedence of age or sex, and in a judicial spirit. It educates greediness and selfishness in children where they are given habitually that which is least desirable.

IF a guest be guilty of any awkwardness of course no notice should be taken of it. George IV, outwardly "the first gentleman of Europe," carried politeness still farther. A young maid of honor, recently attached to the Queen's service, poured her tea out to cool and drank it from the saucer. Anticipating any looks on the part of others present that might wound the young woman, the King diverted the attention to himself, and set the novice at her ease by drinking his own tea in the same manner. The "golden rule" exhausts every requirement of courtesy. If as a guest you have overturned your glass or been *gauche* in any way, be as self-condemnatory as you please for a moment, but do not prolong the subject. If offered a choice between two things do not deliberate, but decide quickly.

It is in traveling and at hotel tables where people reveal their breeding, and their natural selves stand confessed. Some monopolize the waiter, entirely ignoring the claims of others, while others talk as though quite oblivious of the presence of strangers.

In conclusion I would suggest that the highest standard of behavior at table requires one to begin the reform with one's self, and cultivate a discreet and charitable blindness to the lapses and peccadillos of one's neighbors.