

ETIQUETTE OF THE SMOKING AND BILLIARD ROOM.



HOWEVER great the airs of abandon are which exist in the smoking and billiard rooms, there is a style in entering and occupying them which is well worth cultivation. The well-bred ease of a gentleman's manner cannot, of course, be always successfully imitated, but it can be approached by careful observation and attention to the niceties of politeness; and there are few situations in which a man of refinement shows to greater advantage. In these places men of very varied qualities and style mix, and although an acquaintanceship may be merely of a nodding character in the street, in the rooms it is entirely different. You meet them upon equal terms—chat, smoke, play, discourse with

them. So long as you remain among them you are entitled to the consideration of the highest, and expected to show it to the lowest.

This consideration is not, however, always shown, as there are "rooms" and "rooms"—that is to say, there are smoking and billiard rooms which are so exclusively frequented by the vulgar that to expect to hear any language there but what is coarse and vituperative is a great mistake, as it is also to be met in a friendly and courteous manner. But we refer distinctly to the rooms of clubs, hotels, and the higher class of taverns, where men of respectability meet, and where the "sharp" and the blackguard, unless under some extraordinary disguise, dare not show their faces.

In these places, as we have said, you meet with men of very varied shades of character and breeding. The well-bred man of the world, who has seen everything and done everything, who is surprised at nothing, and believes only in stern facts. The rather boisterous youngster who has just commenced to mix with men, and whose great delight is to shake hands with everybody and bore people with the jokes of their boyhood. The sallow-skinned Anglo-Indian, who is reserved and uneasy by reason of his liver. The mild young man, who wanders from group to group, endeavouring to pick up valuable crumbs of information about what is going on in the world, and whose system of cheap education seems to have no recognizable influence on his intellectual faculties. Then there are the shrewd business men, who look in after their day's toil to have a smoke or a game before journeying homewards for the night.

It is needless to enumerate further the men you meet with, for they are of all professions, and, in a general way, are very good fellows. Some affect a *blasé* tone, as if they were thoroughly tired of the world's enjoyments, and would not at

any price renew their acquaintance with its pomps and vanities. Others, on the contrary, at a mature age, rejoice in the buoyancy of their spirits, and keep the fun rolling when there is any to roll. Many are so good-natured that their bearing and language, if rather rough, provoke only a smile; and now and then a dandy may be met with, who is tolerated because harmless.

To watch their entrance is always a profitable study. The quiet dignity of the gentleman as he walks to his accustomed seat, nodding to a friend here and another there as he is perceived, is in singular contrast to the manner of the would-be man of the world, who nervously hands his hat and stick to the waiter, and drops into the first convenient chair, whence he rarely ventures to look round and speak until some one breaks the ice by some common-place observation addressed to him. And his manner contrasts as singularly with that of the hearty business man, who greets everybody at once, and, with a sigh of relief, flings himself into an easy-chair, determined, for an hour or two at least, to have some little enjoyment.

Hand-shaking is not quite obsolete in smoking and billiard rooms. A few men there are who never appear or depart without going round the room and taking everybody's hand; and, on occasions, quite as affectionately as though they were never to be seen there again. But a quiet, familiar nod to a friend, and a more impressive inclination of the head to an acquaintance, are considered by most men as quite sufficient. When it is, however, necessary to shake a hand, it is not only vulgar, but cruel, to let the strength of your own be felt by grasping the other in a vice-like manner. A gentle pressure suffices.

In the smoking-room refreshment is usually ordered, and this is done in the quietest possible way—no rapping on the

table with a stick or a coin ; the bell is pulled with not violence, but just so that it can be heard. It is the height of rudeness to let everybody know that you are about to partake of refreshment. Yet how often have we seen a well-dressed man walk to the bell-pull and tug at it until the waiter rushed in, alarmed lest something unusual had occurred, and told, in answer to his inquiry, to bring so-and-so (probably an expensive wine) "as quick as lightning," or some other equally absurd direction, in a voice that every one in the room could not fail to hear. This, we need hardly say, shows markedly against the individual. The conclusion arrived at is, that he so rarely drinks good wine, that he wishes all the world to know it when he does.

Asking another to join you in a bottle of wine is a practice which should only be observed among friends, and then rarely ; because neither the friend nor acquaintance may care to expose the state of his purse by replying in the affirmative or negative ; and there is another reason—should you pay for the bottle yourself, your friend will feel himself called upon to return the compliment, and that may not be at all times convenient. It is better, therefore, to take what you require yourself, and leave others to do the same.

In the case of a guest it is different. You have to consult his wishes and order for him what he likes best. But he usually leaves the matter in your hands, and it is for you to provide what you believe will give him the most satisfaction. Dictating to a guest or any other person what will suit him is a most reprehensible practice, even although the most expensive wines or liqueurs are named. If your guest prefers claret to champagne, let him have claret by all means. To say to him "have something better," implies that he has only been accustomed to drink which is inexpensive, and that on this occasion you will give him a treat. Many really excellent

people make this mistake. They forget that true hospitality does not consist in the nature or quality of the fare, but in the manner in which it is given. This mistake, however, is a pardonable one if it springs from an honest wish that you should thoroughly enjoy yourself, but where it is made for the purpose of exalting the entertainer, it is inexcusable.

Where the guest has a choice, let him name it frankly, unless he has a good reason to believe that it will make a large hole in his entertainer's purse, in which case let him give a name to something which shall hit the "golden mean." It is in the study of such matters that good fellowship is promoted. Confidence is soon exchanged between host and guest, and no uneasy feeling disturbs the harmony of the evening. But in a general way, too little attention is paid to them. The host empties his pocket, and the guest, not to be outdone in what he is pleased to call hospitality, empties his on some future occasion. Thus a species of rivalry ensues, which leads to extravagance and folly.

In the smoking-room, the conversation, it need hardly be said, should be carried on so as not to disturb that of your neighbours. To laugh boisterously, elevate the voice above a reasonable pitch, or make noises on the table or chairs with the fingers, shows that you have not been accustomed to anything like refined society. But, as a rule, middle-class Englishmen rarely offend in this way. There is, invariably, a repose where they are which is in keeping with their insular character. So much cannot be said for our continental friends, notwithstanding the name they have earned for politeness. Their presence is felt and their tongues are heard on the threshold of the place, and they talk and gesticulate the whole evening, as though their affairs were the only ones of importance in the world. It is well for us that we do not imitate them, otherwise there would be neither

decorum nor comfort to be found anywhere outside one's bed-room.

Where there are newspapers and magazines in the room, it is the height of selfishness to gather two or three together, as we have seen done, and detain them until you have read them all. Others may be as anxious as you are to read certain articles which they contain, and through some feeling of diffidence, perhaps, wait unoccupied your pleasure. Men who are guilty of this meanness are never forgiven. It is so paltry and detestable that everybody regards them with a feeling of contempt.

Exclusiveness becomes a mistake when once a man is known in the room, unless it proceeds from extreme diffidence or shyness, a feeling which some men can never really overcome. But otherwise it is set down as pride. It is equivalent to an intimation that the exclusive person regards himself as being too good to speak to, and this the others naturally resent ; that is, they allow him to remain in his exclusion, and by neither sign nor word invite him to discuss a topic or play a game. One need not, of course, be communicative to every person who is a neighbour, or familiar with every one who frames his remarks in kind and courteous phrases, although either the one or the other may be perfectly well known to you, but it is a piece of unpardonable affectation to remain silent while those around are making the evening pleasant by an exchange of opinion, sentiment, and joke.

In the billiard room, with its smooth, green lawn-like tables, upon which the only lights in the room are concentrated, the conversation is carried on but fitfully, and then it is of a decidedly technical character. The self-appointed critics, who occupy the tall seats round the walls, endeavour as well as they can to look like men in authority, and as each stroke is

made approve or disapprove with an air of patronage which is infinitely amusing. In all probability these critics are the men who practically know least about the game, as the really good players, should there be any present, rarely utter a remark until the necessary score has been completed.

It has always appeared to us somewhat irregular this habit, which youngsters especially have, of volunteering their advice and airing their opinions on the chances and skill of two gentlemen engaged in a billiard contest. Their advice savours of impertinence, and their opinions of ignorance. Let them take a cue in their own hands, and try their best on the table, and their failure to make a decently profitable use of time is often ignominious. Yet this is tolerated, probably because no one pays the least attention to what they say.

Among the most notable signs of an inexperienced player is the fuss he makes before the game has begun, and his running commentary on his own play as it proceeds. He has to smoke, drink, add another coat of chalk to his cue, say half-a-dozen foolish things to the spectators, and examine the surface of the table critically lest there should be any hollows, in which his adversary's ball might repose in security. Then he begins. If he fails, he is out of practice; if he wins, retires upon his laurels to one of the high seats where he describes how finely he had calculated every stroke, although his antagonist had done everything possible to upset his calculation. When the real man is at work there is no fuss or commentary. He looks round for neither approval nor the reverse; his thoughts are intent upon the game; and he fights manfully and coolly to win it. To him it must be exceedingly irritating the advice which is proffered now and again by some officious bystander who, having no stake in the game, never turns his own suggestion twice over in his mind. This is the kind of man who is willing to "mark" while the marker

is absent, and who usually succeeds in throwing the score into confusion before that person returns.

To those who know but little of billiards, the most gentlemanly course is to watch and study the players' strokes carefully, to refrain from all kind of comment on the play, and to refrain from marking until they know the game thoroughly. To congratulate the winner in the presence of the loser is in bad taste ; indeed, unless after an important match, it is not necessary to say anything at all, for your friend may be severely beaten in the very next game, and thus you would feel yourself looking very foolish:

We have purposely abstained from saying anything here about the game itself, as we know that opinions are very much divided as to its use and abuse as a pastime.



From: All About Etiquette; or The Manners of Polite Society for Ladies Gentlemen and Families
Ward, Lock & Co 1874