

## **Mrs. Humphry's Books of Manners**

*Article researched by C. Claypool*

The etiquette bibles for Victorian society were Mrs. H's books of manners; one for women, one for men. A sampling of her advice:

### **Tea**

"Gentlemen of quality are highly sought after for five o'clock tea parties. Precise tasks are assigned to them. They must pass the teacups, sugar, milk, cakes and scones while carrying on an intelligent and witty conversation with the ladies. They must get up each time a lady enters the drawing room or leaves it and, if possible, open the door. If the gentleman is witty and amuses his listeners, the ladies must be careful of the manner in which they laugh. There is nothing more vulgar than the 'ha ha' of the ill-mannered. The proper laugh must be crystal-clear and musical. The great French actress Sarah Bernhardt, with her golden voice, has undoubtedly an incomparable silvery laugh. Doctors now assure us that laughing is a marvelous therapy for the spleen, as it stimulates the blood and promotes digestion. And why deprive oneself of it provided that it be truly elegant."

### **Balls**

"Only thirty or forty years ago there were great houses with many servants where one could very easily entertain and organize large soirees and balls. Alas, times have changed. Houses are now smaller and staffed by fewer servants. It is sometimes even necessary to rent large rooms in hotels because one can no longer receive at home. Such is life. At a ball, there are, unfortunately, those badly brought-up young men who ask the prettiest ladies to dance first while ignoring those less endowed. This behavior is obviously not to be tolerated. Young men of good society are quickly recognized as those who ask the 'wallflowers' to dance first. It may happen that while waltzing, for example, a couple falls. It is only proper, then, that the gentleman excuse himself to his partner and to the lady of the house. When the dance is over, the gentleman bows and thanks his partner."

### **Traveling Dress**

"Traveling costumes consist of tweed, serge, Irish frieze, homespun, and other all-wool materials, and are of the class of tailor-mades. In hot weather white muslins, piques, and flowered or pale muslins are worn by the sea, with openwork white stockings and white shoes. Alpacas, surahs, foulards, and mohairs are suitable for seaside and traveling dress. To wear satin, brocade or rich heavy silks is as great a solecism as for a man to don frock coat and silk hat at seaside places or when traveling...Evening dress includes two styles, full and demi-toilette. The former exacts uncovered arms and shoulders; the latter admits of partially covering both...The princess of Wales and her daughters favor a less décolleté style."

## **Dinners**

"When an invitation is for a precise hour, eight o'clock, for example, one must be punctual and no more than five minutes late, which would be the height of impoliteness. On entering the drawing room, the gentleman must, no matter what, first greet the hostess wherever she may be, even if he recognizes someone he knows near the door. He then shakes the hands of those he knows and waits to be introduced to the others by the hostess. At table, he converses about everything except the weather...The spoon is for the soup, the fish knife and fork are placed on the outside as this dish follows the soup. It is not good manners to thank the servants each time they serve you. It is preferable not to drink too much wine and to make as little noise as possible with the silver. Bread is broken by hand and not with the knife. Be careful of soup on the mustache. Curry dishes are eaten with fork and spoon. It is quite passé to wait until the others have been served to begin. When it is time for the liqueurs and someone offers you Chartreuse or Benedictine, above all do not answer 'Both.'"