

RULES FOR CONDUCT IN GOOD COMPANY

Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773)

to Philip Stanhope (1732–1768), his son

Bath, 29 October 1748

My anxiety for your success increases in proportion as the time approaches of your taking your part upon the great stage of the world.... I have long since done mentioning your great religious and moral duties, because I could not make your understanding so bad a compliment as to suppose that you wanted or could receive any new instructions upon these two important points. Mr. Harte, I am sure, has not neglected them; besides, they are so obvious to common sense and reason that commentators may (as they often do) perplex, but cannot make them clearer. My province, therefore, is to supply by my experience your hitherto inevitable inexperience in the ways of the world. People at your age are in a state of natural ebriety, and want rails and *gardefous* wherever they go, to hinder them from breaking their necks. This drunkenness of youth is not only tolerated, but even pleases, if kept within certain bounds of discretion and decency. These bounds are the point which it is difficult for the drunken man himself to find out, and there it is that the experience of a friend may not only serve but save him.

Carry with you, and welcome, into company all the gayety and spirits, but as little of the giddiness, of youth as you can. The former will charm; but the latter will often, though innocently, implacably offend. Inform yourself of the characters and situations of the company before you give way to what your imagination may prompt you to say. There are in all companies more wrong heads than right ones, and many more who deserve than who like censure. Should you therefore expatiate in the praise of some virtue which some in company notoriously want, or declaim against any vice which others are notoriously infected with, your reflections, however general and unapplied, will by being applicable be thought personal, and leveled at those people. This consideration points out to you sufficiently not to be suspicious and captious yourself, nor to suppose that things, because they may be, are therefore meant at you. The manners of well-bred people secure one from those indirect and mean attacks; but if by chance a flippant woman, or a pert cocks-comb, lets off anything of that kind, it is much better not to seem to understand than to reply to it.

Cautiously avoid talking of either your own or other people's domestic affairs. Yours are nothing to them but tedious; theirs are nothing to you. The subject is a tender one, and it is odds but that you touch somebody or other's sore place; for in this case there is no trusting to specious appearances, which may be, and often are, so contrary to the real situations of things between men and their wives, parents and their children, seeming friends, etc., that with the best intentions in the world one often blunders disagreeably.

Remember that the wit, humor, and jokes of most mixed companies are local. They thrive in that particular soil, but will not often bear transplanting. Every company is differently circumstanced, has its particular cant and jargon, which may give occasion to wit and mirth within that circle, but would seem flat and insipid in any other, and therefore will not bear repeating. Nothing makes a man look sillier than a pleasantry not relished or not understood; and if he meets with a profound silence when he expected a general applause, or, what is worse, if he is desired to explain the *bon mot*, his awkward and embarrassed situation is easier imagined than described. *A propos* of repeating, take great care never to repeat (I do not mean here the pleasantries) in one company what you hear in another. Things seemingly indifferent may by circulation have much graver consequences than you would imagine. Besides there is a general tacit trust in conversation by which a man is obliged not to report anything out of it, though he is not immediately enjoined secrecy. A retailer of this kind is sure to draw himself into a thousand scrapes and discussions, and to be shyly and uncomfortably received wherever he goes.

You will find in most good company some people who only keep their place there by a contemptible title enough; these are what we call "very good-natured fellows," and the French, *bons diables*. The truth is, they are people without any parts or fancy, and who, having no will of their own, readily assent to, concur in, and applaud whatever is said or done in the company; and adopt with the same alacrity the most virtuous or the most criminal, the wisest or the silliest, scheme that happens to be entertained by the majority of the company. This foolish and often criminal complaisance flows from a foolish cause,--the want of any other merit. I hope that you will hold your place in company by a nobler tenure, and that you will hold it (you can bear a quibble, I believe, yet *in capite*. Have a will and an opinion of your own, and adhere to them steadily; but then do it with good humor, good breeding, and (if you have it) with urbanity; for you have not yet beard enough either to preach or censure.

All other kinds of complaisance are not only blameless but necessary in good company. Not to seem to perceive the little weaknesses and the idle but innocent affectations of the company, but even to flatter them in a certain manner is not only very allowable, but in truth a sort of polite duty. They will be pleased with you if you do, and will certainly not be reformed by you if you do not. For instance; you will find in every *groupe* of company two principal figures—namely, the fine lady and the fine gentleman, who absolutely give the law of wit, language, fashion, and taste to the rest of that society. There is always a strict and often for the time being a tender alliance between these two figures. The lady looks upon her empire as founded upon the divine right of beauty (and full as good a divine right it is as any king, emperor, or pope can pretend to); she requires, and commonly meets with, unlimited passive obedience. And why should she not meet with it? Her demands go no higher than to have her unquestioned pre-eminence in beauty, wit, and fashion firmly established. Few sovereigns (by the way) are so reasonable. The fine gentleman's claims of right are, *mutatis mutandis*, the same; and though indeed he is not always a wit *de jure*, yet as he is the wit *de facto* of that company, he is entitled to a share of your allegiance; and everybody expects at least as much as they are entitled to if not something more. Prudence bids you make your court to these joint sovereigns, and no duty that I know of forbids it. Rebellion here is exceedingly dangerous, and inevitably punished by banishment and immediate forfeiture of all your wit, manners, taste, and fashion; as, on the other hand, a cheerful submission, not without some flattery, is sure to procure you a strong recommendation and most effectual pass throughout all their and probably the neighboring dominions. With a moderate share of sagacity, you will, before you have been half an hour in their company, easily discover those two principal figures, both by the deference which you will observe the whole company pay them, and by that easy, careless, and serene air which their consciousness of power gives them. As in this case, so in all others, aim always at the highest; get always into the highest company, and address yourself particularly to the highest in it. The search after the unattainable philosopher's stone has occasioned a thousand useful discoveries which otherwise would never have been made.

What the French justly call *les manières nobles* are only to be acquired in the very best companies. They are the distinguishing characteristics of men of fashion; people of low education never wear them so close but that some part or other of the original vulgarism appears. *Les manières nobles* equally forbid insolent contempt or low envy and jealousy. Low people in good circumstances, fine clothes, and equipages will insolently show contempt for all those who cannot afford as fine clothes, as good an equipage, and who have not (as their term is) as much money in their pockets; on the other hand, they are gnawed with envy, and cannot help discovering it, of those who surpass them in any of these articles, which are far from being sure criterions of merit. They are likewise jealous of being slighted, and consequently suspicious and captious; they are eager and hot about trifles because trifles were at first their affairs of consequence. *Les manières nobles* imply exactly the reverse of all this. Study them early; you cannot make them too habitual and familiar to you.