

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE ROYAL ROAD TO AFFABILITY

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

It is said by the publisher of the famous Book of Etiquette that nearly half a million people have paid \$3.50 each for that ineffable Baedeker of manners—which, if neither the publishers' veracity nor our arithmetic is impeachable, means that almost two million dollars have been expended by those who wish to learn the correct thing to do when one's parrot becomes Rabelaisian while the pastor is calling, or what to say to Llewellyn when he draws the attention of the luncheon party to the obvious fact that Uncle Joshua's toupee has become displaced. Doubtless the publishers are right when they tell us that this is an indication of the truth that the Guide is "the recognized authority on the subject of Etiquette among people of culture, refinement, and good breeding everywhere." No doubt it is; and we linger a moment, in passing, upon the mental picture of (let us say) Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer and President Lowell poring over those sublime chapters while they confront the agitating social problems incident to "the coming wedding, dinner, dance", seeking that "ease, poise, confidence in oneself" which is promised as the reward of a diligent study of the Guide.

It is an inspiring thought—the thought of one out of every two hundred persons among the 100,000,000 of our population deep in those pages, seeking light from the only authentic source of illumination upon those problems of social deportment which will some day be mastered by us all as the Guide continues its peaceful penetration of the home, the office, and the lodge. A nation one hundred per cent refined, one hundred per cent well bred, one hundred per cent cultured: the vision is breathtaking.

It is far from being an inaccessible ideal. We can, without much straining of the spiritual eyesight, discern an America universally and impeccably refined. Americans have two transcendent passions: the passion for organization, and the passion for social emulation. It is as natural for citizens of These States to form themselves into Junior Orders of American Mechanics, Pythian Sisters, Degrees of Pocahontas, Mystic Shriners, and Improved Orders of Red Men, as it is for Englishmen, with their hankering after privacy and their incurable individualism, to be averse from such group manifestations. Now, imagine these American fraternities, sisterhoods, and associations of one kind and another—from the Improved Order of Red Men to the Colonial Dames—adopting as a common object the acquirement of Complete Refinement. Can you conceive of their being thwarted? If you can, you have failed to note the appalling certainty and swiftness with which the American achieves conformity. For, to those things which, according to the sayings of Bhartrihari, “are insatiable of one another”—“ocean, of rivers; death, of mortals; fire, of fuel; woman, of man”—should be added this other: “Americans, of conformity.” That dread of saliency which restrains an American from wearing a straw hat on a warm October day is the same phobia which makes it impossible for him to conceive that there is more than one course of action open to the Well Bred Man when the waiter anoints his shirtfront with *sauce piquante*.

But the Baedeker of Manners concerns itself, after all, chiefly with conduct; What to Say is indicated only when saying is almost equivalent to doing—as when introducing one’s son by a second marriage to one’s divorced wife. There has been, up to the present time, an uncultivated territory in the campaign for refinement. Our mentors have forgotten that we must converse. But now we need no longer remain in ignorance of the art of successful conversation. Have you ever attended a dinner party “where there have been awkward gaps in the conversation”? Have you ever spent a half-hour with a debutante, a Prime Minister, a Prohibitionist, or a man whose hobby was the early history of the Baptist Church, and been “at your wits’ end to know what conversational leads to advance”? Would you

learn how to converse easily, gracefully, interestingly, rewardingly—in a word, successfully? Then make haste to visit your bookseller and provide yourself with *What To Talk About: The Clever Question as an Aid to Social, Professional, and Business Advancement*, by Imogene B. Wolcott.¹ Therein you will learn what to talk about to accountants, actresses, babies, brides, clergymen, debutantes, decorators (interior), detectives, elderly people, judges, lumbermen, matrons (society), newspaper men, nurses, “parents of a baby”, “parents of a family”, private secretaries, druggists, grocers, scouts (boy and girl), stenographers, trolley officials, welfare officials—and a host of others. Moreover, you will learn what to talk about to those whose hobby is astrology, bees, bowling, cats, eugenics, fancy work, flying, jiu jitsu, metal work, spiritualism, stamps, weaving, ice hockey, yachting. Furthermore, you will be instructed in the art of conversing with “those who have lived in or traveled to” Algiers, Atlantic City, Deauville, Glacier National Park, the Holy Land, Indianapolis, Newport, Niagara Falls, Palm Beach, Russia, St. Louis, Wales, and the Vacation Spots of New England.

The method is simple. Let us say that you wish—that you are obliged—to talk to a “matron (society)”. What shall you talk to her about? Nothing could be simpler. You have your copy of *What to Talk About* (price: \$1.90) with you in the taxi. You can read it without much difficulty by the street lights. The introduction tells you how to proceed: “Turn to page 70 and look at the questions listed under the heading: *What to Talk About to Matrons (Society)*.” You turn; you look. There is a brief introductory paragraph, designed to make it easy for you to recognize the distinction between a “Matron” and a “Society Matron”: “An Englishman describes the society matron in this manner: ‘Incredibly lovely and well-dressed, not only devoted passionately to pleasure and the arts, but in the vanguard of a thousand movements. She is the arbiter of national elegancies, and, Heaven knows, she may be the guardian of national destinies.’” Now that you are prepared to recognize her, here are several of the things you would do well to say to her:—

¹ G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London.

Do you think it was any easier to entertain successfully in the days before prohibition than it is now?

* * *

Haven't you found it true that nine times out of ten, the man of the family will wait until dinner is announced before going upstairs to wash his hands?

You will probably not need to remember the second *Clever Question*; the first will suffice, until it is time for the Society Matron to turn brightly to the Undertaker on her other side (were not ladies instructed, in the old days, to "turn with the roast"?). Well, the Matron has turned, and, having learned from *her* copy of *The Clever Question* what to talk about to Undertakers, is busy with interrogations about the recent flurry in the tombstone market and the recreations of gravediggers. It is now your part to deal with your neighbor on your left.

But here, it may be, you perceive a difficulty, just as we did. Suppose you don't know (we are assuming that you yourself, for the moment, are a Society Matron)—suppose you don't know whether the neighbor on your other side is a Detective, a Dentist, a Meat Man, or a Trolley Official? *Clever Questions* has foreseen this difficulty. But first you are warned: "Don't begin a conversation with a clever remark. In fact, it is dangerous to be clever at all unless you are among well-tried friends. . . . Don't pretend to know more than you do, or to like what you don't. Express your own mind honestly. . . . Personal remarks are in good taste if they are pleasant. If you admire a woman's string of beads, or think that she is a good influence in the Ladies' Aid, tell her so."

But is your neighbor a Dentist or a Meat Man? You are wondering. Your course of action is plainly marked out: "If you don't know a man's line, ask him point-blank. If you don't know anything at all about his business, tell him so, and risk being thought an ignoramus. This is better than appearing uninterested. If you ask him, he will gladly explain the nature of his work and its outstanding problems." You proceed according to rule:

"I beg your pardon, but what is your line?"

"I am a Detective, madam."

"Indeed! How very interesting!"

You have your *Clever Questions* on your lap. Feigning to have dropped a pea, you stoop to find it. The detective stoops too. While he is searching for the pea, you turn swiftly, and with the sureness bred of long practice, to page 42, *What to Talk About to Detectives*. Here you are: "What are some of the various methods of procedure in finding a criminal?" As the detective abandons the pea and comes up for air and sociability, you apply your Conversation Opener (it is No. 3 on the list).

But suppose he has answered: "I am a Dentist." You proceed as before, with the following as your indicated Conversation Opener:

What is the most important tooth in one's mouth?

If this fails to produce results, you may try the following:

Should a dentist confine his efforts to care of the teeth?

He will probably answer, Yes; in which case, you may come back with an eloquent recommendation of the delights of basket-weaving or dermatology as side-lines.

The scope of this assemblage of *Clever Questions* is extraordinary. There are 286 pages of them, of which we take leave to exhibit a few more, chosen at random:

For a Trolley Official:

What do you think of the one-man car?

For a Druggist:

What proportion of your business is selling drugs?

[If your neighbour should appear to resent this question for any reason, pass quickly to the next:

What would you do if a man came into your store to purchase some bi-chloride-of-mercury tablets?]

For an Electrical Supply Dealer:

Why does an electric iron cost so much more to run than an electric fan?

For an Elderly Person:

Does fear of death become stronger or less strong as one grows older?

[If this seems tactless, try the following:

What is the secret of your contentment?]

For the Parents of a Baby. This is important, so we shall exhibit the author's prelude, since it establishes the desirable

mood in the interrogator: "A baby will make love stronger, days shorter, nights longer, bank roll smaller, home happier, clothes shabbier, the past forgotten, and the future worth living for". This may be committed to memory, and used as an introductory quotation. Here are the *Clever Questions* for the Parents. As they depend on the baby's age, it is highly important to know the facts in the case, and not to mix them up.

Has he smiled yet? (1 month)

Can he hold up his head? (4 months)

Can he sit alone? (6 months)

Can he sing and dance? (19 months)

Can he make sentences? (25 months)

But you will, of course, need to converse on other occasions than at dinners and luncheons. Instead of being obliged to talk to a Parent, you may need to talk to Baby himself. Bear in mind this preliminary warning: "In meeting a baby, one should behave as much as possible like a baby oneself. . . . Abstain from cooing, grimacing, tickling, and the like, and model your deportment on the dignified but friendly reticence that one baby evinces in meeting another." But what to say? The difficulty is imaginary. If the baby is under three years old, seat him on your foot, and recite to him the immortal trotting rhymes that we all know by heart, beginning—

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake,
Baker's man!

If he is over three years old, hold him firmly by his little neck-band while you recite to him a poem by Mr. Vachel Lindsay, which you will find quoted in full in *Clever Questions*. It seems a drastic prescription, but it is not our part to reason why.

You are aided in this priceless book, as we have intimated, by other guides than classification by occupations. There are classifications by Hobbies and by Geographical Residence. For example, you have learned, by delicately heedful probing or by blunt interrogation, that the patient is a Meat Man hailing from Palm Beach whose hobby is Butterflies. Referring in order to pages 94, 125, 236, you proceed confidently as follows, your questions falling into this order as easily (in Mr. Kipling's words) "as one thing leads to another":

Is frozen meat perfectly wholesome?

* * *

Do butterflies have a home life as do birds, bees, and ants?

* * *

How long does the season last in Florida?

You can see that the method is capable of infinite extension. Using *Clever Questions* as a model, you can easily draw up your own formulas to suit almost any conceivable situation; so that, in case you should ever find yourself confronting an Osteopath from Niagara Falls whose hobby is Rabbits, you will know precisely what to say. . . . Already we can hear you rehearsing the formula to yourself:

Do you agree that Niagara—or the Thunder of Waters, as the Iroquois Indians named it—is one of the world's most impressive spectacles?

* * *

Are rabbits hard or easy to raise?

* * *

Of course I don't mean "from the rabbit's point of view"! I mean—
The possibilities, you perceive, are infinite.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.