

Common Devices and Etiquette for a Debutant: Surviving Extreme Awkward Situations in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Society

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To overcome or save “Un ange a passe” moment without causing any awkwardness or embarrassment among persons present was one of the highly valued social skills of late Victorian and Edwardian Society and is still prized today. As Oscar Wilde said, ‘the man who can dominate a London dinner table can dominate the world’. Indeed Wilde used his mesmerizing conversational skills and charm to effectively to become a top celebrity of his day, how much more important then was it for a debutant to possess minimal skills to survive extreme awkward situations which she might face?

Considering as well the challenges of not being too clever, too talkative and neither being obviously well informed or over-witted, but instead should present themselves as smartly naïve and yet responsive. To be accomplished in this regard would make the debutant both acceptable to hard-core Victorian elderly chaperons, while also being charmingly spontaneous, acceptably fashionable and amiably encouraging to desirable suitors, all the while being careful so as not to frighten any of them away. By attaining these skills, it was possible that she could make her way up the social ladder to become a member of the uppermost echelons of society. However, where and how on earth could she acquire these essential skills? Were they easily purchased? Could securing the services of a reputable chaperon, a shrewd dressmaker or having contacts in within the theatrical environment allow the ambitious new-comers to display their conspicuous respectability that was demanded? The Society undoubtedly called for and drove huge substantial economic resources coupled to this were consciousness and a manner of operating, how was this wisdom accumulated and complied, how did these etiquettes survive?

This paper examines how these skills were introduced, acquired, and passed on by young ladies in the super conversational late-Victorian and Edwardian Societies and the skillful usage of these commodities as communication devices to enable them to be better at ease in various difficult situations by investigating manner books, women’s magazine, commodity catalogues, and discourses in the literary works and memoirs of ‘Society’ ladies.