

Good Taste Today

When to say "Mrs.," "Miss," and "Mister" is often puzzling in this day of the wholesale use of first names. But the definite rules exacted by good taste are given here

FROM COLLEGE YEARS ON, YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WHO USE FIRST NAMES SHOULD KNOW EACH OTHER REALLY WELL



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mother"—or if necessary "my sister Alice" or "my son George."

No matter to whom these descriptive names are said, they can't be wrong. On the other hand, should Mrs. Stranger when talking to you, speak of her husband as "Mister," this would mean either that her own social background is very provincial or else that she is quite frankly rating you as one outside of her own social group. Which may, of course, mean merely that your meeting is a business one.

The only occasion when a lady speaks of her husband as "Mister" to one whom she has met socially is when this person presumes to call him by his first name and she objects. This is a situation that was never met with until the last few years in any society that could have been called "good." But with the present wholesale discarding of last names by all younger (and even many older) people of social prominence, it is no wonder that strangers are sometimes at a loss to guess who's who, and what they themselves may or may not say.

Perhaps our manners are no more erratic than those of other people, but the extremes to which we go seem fantastic. When Charles Dickens wrote his "American Notes," he especially ridiculed the American wife who not only spoke about her husband as "Mister" but who never called him anything but "Mr. Jones" when speaking to him herself.

Today, we find this just as absurd as he did. And we also find absurd the custom, of not so long ago, which exacted that every well brought up young girl of eighteen, at which age she became a debutante, be called "Miss" by all her partners and even by her most devoted beaux whom she in turn called "Mister," not only until she knew them better, but for life! Only the one to whom she became en-

THE so-called "name of safety" used by every well-

bred man or woman or child, when speaking to a stranger about any member of his family, is "my wife" or "my husband" or "my daughter" or "my

mother"—or if necessary "my sister Alice" or "my son George."

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gaged called her "Mary" and was in turn called "John"!

First names were "bad form" to such a degree that even those who had been playmates in childhood, and called each other by first names when at home or among others of their own group, spoke to each other as "Miss" or "Mister" before strangers.

And yet, absurd as this prim formality sounds today, I'm not sure but that there is something to be said in favor of formality, even to the extreme of teaching little children, as part of their training in deportment, to prefix each other's names with "Miss" or "Master" on the formal occasions of dancing class or a party.

Changes in custom are often erratic, but in the modern trend toward omission of titles almost entirely by those whose right to them is most assured, there is an ironical reversal. This same familiarity in the use of first names, which the smart world would seem to be adopting, is the outstanding hall-mark by which those at the other end of the social scale are handicapped. The sole reason why so many men and women who work prefer jobs in factories or stores to those of domestic employ is that the latter carries the opprobrium of being addressed by first names. One rather wonders whether Mr. Dickens, were he alive today, would think our manners had changed for the better.

As in almost every general precept, there can be found exceptions which seemingly break its rules and yet actually break none. At this moment there comes to mind a gentlewoman of serene loveliness—the wife of a world famous man—and to every one who knows her she is "Mary"; sometimes "John's Mary." But her first name has become a symbol, in a way, of the loveliness which is hers. One can not imagine her as being called by any other name than "Mary," nor could one imagine it pronounced other than endearingly.

But this one exception in no way approaches the middle-aged woman who seemingly thinks that being hailed as "Darling Kitten" by a whole roomful of boys and girls, young enough to be her grandchildren, is

proof of her own youth and popularity! If she had a grain of common sense, she would know very well that behind her back "Darling Kitten" is probably spoken of—if at all—as "Poor old cat."

It is obvious that the real standards of good taste belong somewhere between reserved primness to the point of prudery, and no reserve at all. The woman in Dickens' "American Notes" is at one corner of the triangle, Kitten is at another corner, and "Mary" is at the third corner.

But to return to the opening paragraph of this article: As already said, a lady says "My husband" when speaking to an acquaintance. But to a friend or the friend of a friend, she speaks of him as "John." Yet this does not give anyone else the privilege of calling him John unless otherwise told to do so. In the same way, Mr. Worldly speaks of "Edith" to friends, of course, and also to every woman whom they both know socially. But to a man not an intimate friend and to a woman who is a stranger, he says "my wife." To employees or to clients, as well as to his business acquaintances, he calls her "Mrs. Worldly."

When speaking to strangers about other people, one says "Mrs.," "Miss" or "Mr.," as the case may be. It is very bad form to go about saying "Edith Worldly" or "Ethel Eminent" to those who do not call them Edith and Ethel. And to speak thus familiarly to one whom you do not call by her own first name is unthinkable.

Until the last few years no well brought up child would have thought of calling the friends of his parents by their first names. But today this practice (like that of the hostess who serves herself first) is all too often accepted, by those who are either lacking in sensibility or who are afraid to criticize because they might be thought not modern.

The rule which every child must be taught is that he may never call a grown person by his or her first name—unless told to do so by the grown person. Even so, this is sometimes not fair to the child since it prejudices strangers who are apt to take it for granted that his apparent lack of respect is a shortcoming of his own.

There is a prejudice of good taste against teaching children to call anyone Aunt, Uncle or Cousin when no such relationship exists. Therefore, in many cases, really intimate friends who are devoted to the children and do not like the formality of Mr. and Mrs., and yet do not want to be called by their first names, are given nicknames which either they themselves or the children make up.

The use of first names is proper, of course, between schoolboys and schoolgirls of all ages. But between young men and young women of college ages, first names should indicate that they know each other fairly well; and the degree of friendship implied among those beyond college years should increase in proportion to age.

The question of what a bride is to call her parents-in-law is one that has no definite answer except the old-fashioned one of "Mother Jones" and "Father Jones." Among the moderns, choices of names is purely personal. Most often the father-in-law is called "Mr." but mother-in-law is given a name which means mother, but is not the name by which the bride's own mother is known. Or perhaps she is called "Mrs." until a grandchild's nickname gradually becomes hers. Many ultra modern mothers- and fathers-in-law are choosing to be called by their first names, as are nearly all stepparents of half, or quite grown sons and daughters—depending again, of course, upon their own choice.

In business, the strict observance of convention is necessarily of greater importance than in the social world. The impression made upon clients or customers by the improper manners of a clerk affects the standing of the office as a whole.

A very poor impression of a firm's efficiency is given to a visitor, entering an executive's private office, who hears his secretary call him "Jim" or even "J. B.," or hears him call her "Marjorie." Not only should she address him as "Mr. Smith" but when answering she should add "sir" to yes or no, because this observance is one of the requirements of propriety in business relations. And it is no more proper for a clerk to enter the manager's office and say "Did you ring, Bill?" than it is for the manager to sit in his shirt sleeves at a directors' meeting.