W HAT a fine art indeed manners is—so fine that the point of it escapes most people! It is much to be feared that the British have no gift in this direction. Even in their most cultured circles there is a certain want of perception. Everywhere you find restlessness, anxiety to do the right thing, apologies for not having done it, or tiresome chatterboxings, or curiosity, or a show of cleverness: egotistic wrigglings of all kinds, very much opposed to the calm unselfconscious equality and real dignity of the best manhood and womanhood. The British have splendid qualities—truth, tenacity, slow-accumulating feeling—but they have not the gift nor the grace of expression. Perhaps, however, it is hardly fair to expect dignity of manner from people who are occupied in that unworthy scramble for the gold and glitter of outside life which characterises the Western lands; or expressiveness from a “society” that dresses as ours does—the men looking like blackbeetles in their horny monotony of garb, and the women obviously preoccupied in scoring points of elegance over each other.

The Orientals achieve a greater success in this line. They show more both of charm and dignity, and a truer instinct for dress. And among them, the Japanese (if one can call them Orientals) stand pre-eminent. This marvelous people seems to have the gift that we lack. They have understood to its core the Law of Economy in Art. In their whole handling of life; in their ultra-simple house-construction, furniture, dress, in their pictorial art, in their manners, they have known how to produce results with the least possible expenditure of material; they have shown the lightest, most skilful, touch on life.

That it is “so difficult to dress with distinction” is the bitter cry of the western “lady” to-day. And certainly when the fashions are changing four times a year, and every Jemima in Paradise Alley takes in her fashion journal, one realizes what a struggle it all is, and how deserving of sympathy these wealthy sufferers are! It is indeed a fact that any woman who wants to hold her own in the fashionable world has almost all her time consumed either in social functions or in arranging about her costumes for them. Under the circumstances one can hardly expect her to wear the said costumes with pleasure to herself or her friends.
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Not that the defects of the democratic scramble, and defects of manners generally, may not be found among the masses of the modern peoples: but in their case—where there is generally some real hard daily work to be done—one plainly sees how the needs of actual life and the world plane off excrescences. The workman may be narrow and vain, as anyone else, but the necessities of his labor soon call him to order: he gets, through his work, a sense of proportion between himself and the world, which lies very much at the root of manners; whereas your "gentleman," having nothing particular to do, is quite satisfied to stretch himself in your chair and deliver himself of endless platitudes—and is only astonished at your rudeness (not perceiving his own), when you go about your business and do not listen to him.

CERTAINLY work, solid, useful work, is a greater rectifier of human conduct, manners, and everything else. Fitting into the great sphere of our fellows in that way we can not go so very far wrong, and I sometimes think that everything—bluntness, eccentricities, brutalities, crimes, and all—have to be forgiven to those whose lives are in the main usefully occupied. Thoreau says that there is nothing like manual labor for taking the vain twists and kinks out of one's tongue and wrists. "Learn to split wood at least. Steady labor with the hands, which engrosses the attention also, is unquestionably the best method of removing palaver and sentimen
tality out of one's style, both of speaking and writing." And rare as is the charm of really good manners, it is most often I think to be found—sometimes quite in perfection—among manual workers: a real and free exchange of human interest, the art that ceases to be art and becomes nature.

That concealment or forgetfulness of itself in which, it is said, art largely consists, is also a necessary element of good manners. One of the great points seems to be a kind of unconsciousness. It is bad manners, doubtless, to insist on going first through a doorway, but it is almost as bad to be always insistent on the other person going first. If you can persuade your companion to pass through absolutely without knowing or thinking who precedes, you have effected a triumph. If you can attend to your guests' wants at a meal without making them aware that you are noticing what they eat, that is good;
but beyond this you are on dangerous ground, for to be a little neglected is pleasanter than to feel that one is being inexorably watched. But most people who study civility are so afraid of being thought impolite, that they will make their friends feel uncomfortable rather than run this risk. They are really thinking of themselves more than of their friends. Anyhow, the dust of life is bad enough, and the art of manners should consist in laying rather than in raising it.

In this respect the teaching of manners and rules of manners to children has to be carried out with caution, and should always be referred to foundation principles of natural courtesy and consideration for others, rather than to conventional regulations—which only breed a selfish timidity in the young mind. What a wonderful thing it is to meet a man or woman whose manners are instantly open and free—not effusive, of course, but opening up a direct road (as far as the occasion needs) between him or her and yourself! How grateful you feel for being delivered for once from the shinbreaking barriers and thorny entanglements of ordinary intercourse!

It is true there are some people who seem rather to enjoy these entanglements; who treat manners in the height of ceremoniousness, as a matter of elaborate study, and something like a game of chess. To make a move of gracious courtesy and politeness—but which is capped in a few moments by a similar move on the other side; then again to effect a subtle stroke, which you think can hardly be eclipsed, saying inaudibly, "check"—only to be replied to by a compliment almost impossible to parry—all this is amusing of course; but it can hardly be dignified with the name of good manners. It is only a good game—for idle people to play at.

It IS not good manners because it is not true. Manners rest on the two fundamentals of human intercourse—truth and sympathy. You must learn to say (or act) what you yourself mean, and you must learn to understand and consider the other person's needs. The whole of manners rests on these two things. The second condition gives an enormous range and variety—making it impossible to fix any rule for what may be best under diverse circumstances. If you want to gain the confidence of a plow-boy you must learn to lean over a gate with him for five minutes without even a word pass-
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ing between you. This might not be the pink of breeding in a drawing-
room. Most townspeople could not do such a thing to save their
lives: but if you do it you will have effected an understanding better
than words with the rustic, and he will be your friend ever after. All
people have their needs belonging to their class, trade, race, and
their individual needs as well—which if you understand you can in-
fallibly tame and domesticate them.

But there is something more—something even more necessary
perhaps than sympathy with others—you must be true to yourself.
To-day manners are meager and poor because everyone hastens to
conceal himself—no one expresses forthright his own feelings, his
own nature and needs. It is an elaborate system of lying, of skul-
king, of dodging behind conventions. How often do you give a bit of
your real self to your neighbors? and what are those moldy scraps
—picked up on the common road and stored in your wallet—which
you have the face to offer them instead? And they, poor things, are
hungering for a touch of Nature too—but you deny it them!

It is generally allowed that many animals, savages, and rude un-
cultured people have more dignity and grandeur of behavior than the
ordinary civilized. Somehow, because consciousness in such types
does not return on itself, they act out their own quality unhindered
and become touched with the majesty of that Nature of which they
form a part. I was once at some large clerical meeting or other, in a
private house. Vicars and curates, deans and canons swarmed. How
Christianly sympathetic we all were—so deferent with subdued voices
and meekly conjoined fingertips—but where! Oh, where! was the genu-
ine human animal, where the authentic divinity? Then, casually, a large
St. Bernard mastiff, one of the family, strolled into the room. Im-
mediately he became the center of attention. How glad everyone
was of his presence—what a relief! He allowed himself to be caressed
and complimented, as by right—for he certainly had the most digni-
fied manners of anyone present (including the bishop)—and then
quietly stretched himself on the floor and went to sleep!

To speak, to act, to live out yourself is very hard, very difficult—
especially when (as is quite necessary in the case of human beings) it
has to be done with a full effort to understand and consider the needs
of others. There is no royal road—of birth or convention—to this,
but a sincere facing of the facts of life is about the only guide.

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I have heard people say—as in a kind of awe at the magic of birth and breeding: “Ah! but you can always tell a gentleman when you see him or a lady when you see her.” But there is no magic in the matter. For any trade always knows its own. A cutler knows a cutler, and a coalminer a coalminer—however far they may be from their work; if you have once been on the road yourself you will always be able to recognize a tramp: and a person whose profession has consisted in dining out will know instantly from a trick of speech or the handling of a table-napkin whether the other person belongs to the same profession or not. Each trade has its earmarks which to those who know them are infallible.

IT IS not, perhaps, generally recognized how instantaneous this kind of detection is, and how vain in consequence the so common attempt to conceal oneself. Think of anything that you thoroughly knew—your own trade for instance; and then think how quickly, if any fresh person appears, you can tell—as by a kind of instinct—how much he knows about the subject. If you are a good musician you know the moment the girl touches the piano—almost before she has played a couple of bars—what her musical capacity is, and which Polonaises of Chopin (if any) she might attempt to play. A man appears before you and talks about his carpentering skill. If you do not know the trade he may impose upon you, but if you are a joiner yourself it is quite sufficient to see him take up a rabbeting-plane or a plow and look at it, and you do not require to ask him any questions, or to run the risk of his telling you any lies!

This being so, and the expression of oneself being a necessity of one’s being and in some form or other quite inevitably, it seems much the wisest, most dignified and sensible thing to do, to deliberately achieve that expression for oneself—to bring oneself, alive and gracious, into the world, instead of waiting to be disemboweled! To work out one’s own character, to give it full and perfect play and expression is one of the greatest of the arts—and manners is one of the means of this deliverance.