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THE BABEES' BOOK



ELIZABETH TINGLE FAIRBANKS

THE BABEES' BOOK

MEDIEVAL MANNERS FOR THE YOUNG

DONE INTO MODERN ENGLISH FROM
DR. FURNIVALL'S TEXTS BY
EDITH RICKERT

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NEW YORK
PRIVATELY PRINTED
CHRISTMAS 1913

DEDICATED TO

E. T. F. .

AND

E. T. F.

A Matter of Manners

IN *this present day, when chivalry has achieved at last its perfect bloom, it is hard to realize that but a scant four centuries ago the children of even the very best families in England had to be taught their table manners.*

Today the graces of deportment come by nature to our youth; and the generation that has produced the immortal Rollo, can not comprehend the rude manners of the "bela babee," or beautiful well-born boy of Queen Elizabeth's time.

O, tempora! O, mores! How the times change and manners multiply! But throughout the centuries—on the lengthening road of which we shall plant another milestone presently with feasting and merry-making—good manners and bad have ever gone hand in hand. And ever has he of the mind conscious of virtue looked smugly down on the artless and indifferent vulgarian.

"The Babees' Book," from which some quaint extracts are here reprinted, is from old Dr. Furnivall's collection of "Divers treaties touching the Manners and Meals of Englishmen in

former days." It gives a moving picture of the domestic life of the Middle Ages. The present translation out of the archaic language of the Fifteenth Century into intelligible English has been made by Edith Rickert, who seems to have preserved with skill and fidelity the spirit and form of the antiquated original.

It will perhaps amuse the good little Rollo of today to know just how his ancient cousin was taught to behave at table; and it will interest his elders to observe that the fundamental basis of good manners lay then as now in cleanliness, self respect, reverence and consideration for the feelings of others.

C. M. F.

Christmas 1913.

THE BABEES' BOOK

OR

A LITTLE REPORT OF HOW YOUNG PEOPLE
SHOULD BEHAVE

MAY He who formed mankind in His image, support me while I turn this treatise out of Latin into my common language, that through this little comment all of tender years may receive instruction in courtesy and virtue.

Facet saith that the Book of Courtesy to teach the practice of virtue is the most helpful thing in the world, so I will not shrink from this labour or refuse it; but for mine own learning will say something that touches upon the matter.

But oh, young babies, whom blood royal hath endowed with grace, comeliness, and high ability, it is on you I call to know this book, for it were great pity but that ye added to sovereign beauty virtue and good manners. Therefore I speak to you specially, and not

to old men expert in governance, decorum, and honest manners, for what need is to give pangs to Hell, joy to Heaven, water to the sea, or heat to fire already hot?

And so, young babies, my book is only for your instruction; wherefore I pray that no man reprehend it, but amend it where it is at fault, and judge it not, for your own sake. I seek no other reward but that it may please men and give you some ease in learning. Also, sweet children, if there be in it any word that ye ken not, speer while ye may, and when ye know it, bear it in mind; and so by asking you may learn of wise men. Also, think not too strangely that my pen writes in this metre; for such verse is commonly used, therefore take heed.

And first of all, I think to show how you babies who dwell in households, should 'have yourselves when ye be set at meat, and how when men bid you be merry, you should be ready with lovely, sweet and benign words. In this, aid me, O Mary, Mother Revered; and eke, O lady mine, Facetia, guide thou my pen and show unto me help. For as A is the first of all letters, so art thou mother

of all virtue. Have pity, sweet lady, of my lack of wit, and though untaught I speak of demeanour, support my ignorance with thy goodly aid.

Ah, "bele babes," hearken now to my lore.

When you enter your lord's place, say "God speed," and with humble cheer greet all who are there present. Do not rush in rudely, but enter with head up and at an easy pace, and kneel on one knee only to your lord or sovereign, whichever he be.

If any speak to you at your coming, look straight at them with a steady eye, and give good ear to their words while they be speaking; and see to it with all your might that ye jangle not, nor let your eyes wander about the house, but pay heed to what is said, with blithe visage and diligent spirit. When ye answer, ye shall be ready with what ye shall say, and speak "things fructuous," and give your reasons smoothly, in words that are gentle but compendious, for many words are right tedious to the wise man who listens; therefore eschew them with diligence.

Take no seat, but be ready to stand until you are bidden to sit down. Keep your

hands and feet at rest; do not claw your flesh or lean against a post, in the presence of your lord, or handle anything belonging to the house.

Make obeisance to your lord always when you answer; otherwise, stand as still as a stone, unless he speak.

Look with one accord that if ye see any person better than yourself come in, ye go backwards anon and give him place, and in nowise turn your face from him, as far forth as you may.

If you see your lord drinking, keep silence, without loud laughter, chattering, whispering, joking or other insolence.

If he command you to sit in his presence, fulfil his wish at once, and strive not with another about your seat.

When you are set down, tell no dishonest tale; eschew also, with all your might, to be scornful; and let your cheer be humble, blithe, and merry, not chiding as if ye were ready for a fight.

If you perceive that your better is pleased to commend you, rise up anon and thank him heartily.

If you see your lord and lady speaking of household matters, leave them alone, for that is courtesy, and interfere not with their doing; but be ready, without feigning, to do your lord service, and so shall you get a good name.

Also, to fetch him drink, to hold the light when it is time, and to do whatsoever ought to be done, look ye be ready; for so shall ye full soon get a gentle name in nurture. And if you should ask a boon of God, you can desire no better thing than to be well-mannered.

If your lord is pleased to offer you his own cup to drink, rise when you take it, and receive it goodly with both your hands, and when you have done, proffer it to no man else, but render it again to him that brought it, for in nowise should it be used commonly—so wise men teach us.

Now must I tell you shortly what you shall do at noon when your lord goes to his meat. Be ready to fetch him clear water, and some of you hold the towel for him until he has done, and leave not until he be set down, and ye have heard grace said. Stand before him until he bids you sit, and be always ready to serve him with clean hands.

When ye be set, keep your own knife clean and sharp, that so ye may carve honestly your own meat.

Let courtesy and silence dwell with you, and tell no foul tales to another.

Cut your bread with your knife and break it not. Lay a clean trencher before you, and when your pottage is brought, take your spoon and eat quietly; and do not leave your spoon in the dish, I pray you.

Look ye be not caught leaning on the table, and keep clear of soiling the cloth.

Do not hang your head over your dish, or in any wise drink with full mouth.

Keep from picking your nose, your teeth, your nails at meal-time—so we are taught.

Advise you against taking so muckle meat into your mouth but that ye may right well answer when men speak to you.

When ye shall drink, wipe your mouth clean with a cloth, and your hands also, so that you shall not in any way soil the cup, for then shall none of your companions be loth to drink with you.

Likewise, do not touch the salt in the salt-cellar with any meat; but lay salt honestly on your trencher, for that is courtesy.

Do not carry your knife to your mouth with food, or hold the meat with your hands in any wise; and also if divers good meats are brought to you, look that with all courtesy ye assay of each; and if your dish be taken away with its meat and another brought courtesy demands that ye shall let it go and not ask for it back again.

And if strangers be set at table with you, and savoury meat be brought or sent to you, make them good cheer with part of it, for certainly it is not polite when others be present at meat with you, to keep all that is brought you, and like churls vouchsafe nothing to others.

Do not cut your meat like field-men who have such an appetite that they reck not in what wise, where or when or how ungoodly they hack at their meat; but, sweet children, have always your delight in courtesy and in gentleness, and eschew boisterousness with all your might.

When cheese is brought, have a clean trencher, on which with a clean knife ye may cut it; and in your feeding look ye appear goodly, and keep your tongue from jangling,

for so indeed shall ye deserve a name for gentleness and good governance, and always advance yourself in virtue.

When the end of the meal is come, clean your knives, and look you put them up where they ought to be, and keep your seat until you have washed, for so wills honesty.

When ye have done, look then that ye rise up without laughter or joking or boisterous word, and go to your lord's table, and there stand, and pass not from him until grace be said and brought to an end.

Then some of you should go for water, some hold the cloth, some pour upon his hands.

Other things I might commend you to do, but as my time is brief, I put them not into this little report; but overpass them, praying with a spirit that rejoices in this labour, that no man abuse me; but where too little is, let him add more, and where too much, let him take away, for though I would, time forbids that I say more. Therefore I take my leave, and inscribe this book to every wight whom it may please to correct it.

And, sweet children, for love of whom I write, I beseech you, with very loving heart, that you set your delight upon knowing this book; and may Almighty God that suffered bitter pains, make you so expert in courtesy that through your nurture and your governance you may advance yourselves to lasting bliss.

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