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The Fine Art of Introduction

How to Introduce According to Recognized Formula

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

WITH the approach of the winter season, conversation as an art is again in order. It is a thing that we all need to consider. Some of us are asked out to dinner merely because we talk. Others, chiefly because we do not. It is a matter in which we can help one another. Let us discuss it. We will begin at the very beginning and consider—

The Forms of Introduction

Nothing is more important in introducing two people to each other than to employ a proper and fitting form of words. The more usually recognized forms are easily learned and committed to memory and may be utilized as occasion requires. We pass over such rudimentary formulas as "Ed, shake hands with Jim Taylor," or, "Boys, this is Pete, the new hand; Pete, get hold of the end of that canthook." In fact, we are speaking only of polite society as graced by the sex, the only kind that we care about.

The Third Avenue Procedure

A very neat and convenient form is that in vogue in Third Avenue circles, as, for instance, at a fifty-cents-a-head dance (ladies free) in the hall of the Royal Knights of Benevolence.

"Miss Summerside, meet Mr. O'Hara," after which Miss Summerside says very distinctly "Mr. O'Hara," and Mr. O'Hara says with equal clearness "Miss Summerside." In this circle a mark of exquisite breeding is found in the request to have the name repeated. "I don't quite catch the name!" says Mr. O'Hara critically; then he catches it and repeats it—"Miss Summerside."

"Catching the name" is a necessary part of this social encounter. If not caught the first time it must be put over again. The peculiar merit of this introduction is that it lets Miss Summerside understand clearly that Mr. O'Hara never heard of her before. That helps to keep her in her place.

In superior circles, however, introduction becomes more elaborate, more flattering, more unctuous. It reaches its acme in what everyone recognizes at once as

The Clerical Method

This is what would be instinctively used in Anglican circles—as, for example, by the Episcopal Bishop of Bumph in introducing a Canon of the Church to one of the "lady workers" of the congregation (meaning a lady too rich to work) who is expected to endow a crib in the Diocesan Home for Episcopal Cripples. A certain quantity of soul has to be infused into this introduction. Anybody who has ever heard it can fill in the proper accentuation, which must be very rich and deep.

"Oh, Mrs. Putitover, may I introduce my very dear old friend, Canon Cutitout. The Canon, Mrs. Putitover, is one of my dearest friends. Mrs. Putitover, my dear Canon, is quite one of our most enthusiastic workers."

After which outburst of soul the Bishop is able to add, "Will you excuse me, I'm afraid I simply must run."

Personally, I have never known or met a Bishop in society in any other situation than just about to run. Where they run to, I do not know. But I think I understand what they run from.

The Lounge Room of the Club

Equally high in the social scale but done quite differently is the Club Introduction. It is done by a club man who, for the life of him, can't remember the names of either of the two club men whom he is introducing, and who each, for the life of him, can't think of the name of the man they are being introduced by. It runs—

"Oh, I say, I beg your pardon—I thought, of course, you two fellows knew one another perfectly well—let me introduce—urr — — — wurr — — —"

Later on, after three whiskey and sodas, each of the three finds out the names of the other two, surreptitiously from the hall porter. But it makes no difference. They forget them again anyway.

Now let us move up higher, in fact, very high. Let us approach the real thing.

Introduction to H. E. the Viceroy of India, K.C.B., K.C.S.I., S.O.S.

The most exalted form of introduction is seen in the presentation of Mr. Tomkins, American tourist, to H. E. the Viceroy of India. An aide-de-camp in uniform at the foot of a grand staircase shouts "Mr. Tomkins!" An aide-de-camp at the top (one minute later) calls "Mr. Thompson"; another aide, four feet further on, calls "Mr. Torps."

Then a military secretary, standing close to His Excellency, takes Mr. Tomkins by the neck and bends him down towards the floor and says very clearly and distinctly "Mr. Torpentine." Then he throws him out by the neck into the crowd beyond and calls for another. The thing is done. Mr. Tomkins wipes the perspiration from his hair with his handkerchief and goes back at full speed to the Hoogli Hotel, Calcutta, eager for stationery to write at once to Ohio that he knows the Viceroy.

The Office Introduction, One Sided

This introduction comes into our office, slipping past whoever keeps the door, a packet of books under its arm. It says—

"Ledd me introduze myself. The book proposition vidge I am introduzing is one vidge ve are now pudding on the market . . ."

Then, of two things, one—

Either a crash of glass is heard as the speaker is hurled through the skylight, or he walks out twenty minutes later, bowing profusely as he goes, and leaving us gazing in remorse at a signed document entitling us to receive the "Masterpieces of American Poetry" in sixty volumes.

On the Stage

Everything on the stage is done far better than in real life. This is true of introductions. There is a warmth, a soul, in the stage introduction not known in the chilly atmosphere of everyday society. Let me quote as an example of a stage introduction the formula used, in the best melodramatic art, in the kitchen-living-room (stove right centre) of the New England farm.

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"Neighbour Jephson's son, this is my little gal, as good and sweet a little gal, as mindful of her old father, as you'll find in all New England. Neighbour Jephson's son, she's been my all in all to me, this little gal, since I laid her mother in the ground five Christmases ago—" The speaker is slightly overcome and leans against a cardboard clock for strength: he recovers and goes on—"Hope, this is Neighbour Jephson's son, new back from over the seas, as fine a lad, gal, if he's like the folk that went before him, as ever followed the sea. Hope, your hand. My boy, your hand. See to his comfort, Hope, while I go and read the Good Book a spell in the barnyard."

The Indian Formula

Many people, tired of the empty phrases of society, look back wistfully to the simple direct speech of savage life. Such persons will find useful the usual form of introduction (the shorter form) prevalent among our North American Indians (at least as gathered from the best literary model):

> "Friends and comrades who are worthy,
> See and look with all your eyesight,
> Listen with your sense of hearing,
> Gather with your apprehension—
> Bow your heads, O trees, and hearken.
> Hush thy rustling, corn, and listen;
> Turn thine ear and give attention;
> Ripples of the running water,
> Pause a moment in your channels—
> Here I bring you,—Hiawatha."

The last line of this can be changed to suit the particular case. It can just as easily read, at the end, "Here is Henry Edward Eastwood," or, "Here is Hall McGivern, Junior," or anything else. All names fit the sense. That, in fact, was the wonderful art of Longfellow—the sense being independent of the words.

The Platform Introduction

Here is a form of introduction cruelly familiar to those who know it. It is used by the sour-looking villain facetiously called in newspaper reports the "genial chairman" of the meeting. While he is saying it the victim in his little chair on the platform is a target for the eyes of a thousand people who are wondering why he wears odd socks.

"The next speaker, ladies and gentlemen, is one who needs no introduction to this gathering. His name" (here the chairman consults a little card) "is one that has become a household word. His achievements in" (here the chairman looks at his card again, studies it, turns it upside down and adds) "in many directions, are familiar to all of you." There is a feeble attempt at applause and the chairman then lifts his hand and says in a plain business-like tone—"Will those of the audience who are leaving kindly step as lightly as possible." He is about to sit down, but then adds as a pleasant afterthought for the speaker to brood over—"I may say, while I am on my feet, that next week our society is to have a real treat in et cetera and so forth—"

But I am getting far away from conversation. I must get back to it, and on some later occasion I will discuss what to say when the introduction is over.

STEPHEN LEACOCK

Because he and Lewis Carroll have proved that scholars, and professors of high intellectual attainments, can be as whimsical and amusing as anybody; because his books on political economy are as readable as most novels; because he has given Canada a really great and contagious humorist, and finally because he and P. G. Wodehouse are invariably guests of the highest honor at Vanity Fair's monthly editorial dinners

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