

Victorian Ball Etiquette: Just for Fun!

As was the case with every other form of social engagement of the Victorian period, formal balls had strict codes of behavior, much of which seems foreign to those of the 21st century. A standard for these dances was the use of a dance card. Prior to the beginning of the music, gentlemen would have requested a dance from a number of ladies in attendance. A gentleman would never have danced only with his spouse or other companion for the evening; rather, he would have exhibited politeness by offering his company to different ladies for each dance, other than the Grand March and Last Waltz, which would be appropriately kept for one's companion. Ladies would NEVER have asked gentlemen for a dance! However, if our gentlemen are shy, feel free to encourage them, but please share with unaccompanied ladies.

In addition to the rules of behavior related to the dance card, these additional standards of behavior were expected to be followed:

1. A lady should not refuse an invitation of a gentleman to dance, unless she has already accepted that of another.
2. A gentleman should ask a lady to dance by saying, "Will you honor me with your hand for a waltz?" or "Shall I have the pleasure of dancing this set with you?"
3. Neither a married nor a single young lady should leave the ballroom unaccompanied; the former should be accompanied by one or two other married ladies and the latter by her mother or someone to represent her.
4. While dancing, ladies should wear a smile and exhibit a slight inclination of the head.
5. A gentleman should always return the lady to her place and each may bow slightly in acknowledgement.
6. A lady should not cross the ballroom unaccompanied. A married lady should be accompanied by a lady friend or relative; however, an unmarried lady should always need to have her mother accompany her.
7. Gentlemen should always wear white gloves and ladies white or colored gloves that coordinate with her gown. They are removed only at suppertime.
8. A mere dance with a lady does not give the gent a claim to her thereafter for any additional dances.
9. Ladies should avoid too much chatter or whispering.

