**Class and Behaviour in Victorian Times**

**The Upper and Upper-Middle Class**

From the slightest burp (social ruin if it was heard) to how a gentleman spoke to a young lady, Victorian society was greatly concerned with every aspect of daily life.

From the moment the upper class left their beds, their days were governed by do's and don'ts. The horror of social ostracism was paramount. To be caught in the wrong fashion at the wrong time of day was as greatly to be feared as addressing a member of society by the wrong title.

It was important to know whom you could speak with - especially if you hadn't been properly introduced. For a woman, being asked to dance by a complete stranger could pose an etiquette problem which might have repercussions for days. Young ladies were constantly chaperoned. To be found alone with a gentleman who was other than family was tantamount to social death. Her reputation would be ruined and her gentleman companion would find himself the object of gossip, and most usually derision.

The established career for society women was marriage - full stop. They were expected to represent their husbands with grace and provide absolutely no scandal. Charity work would be accepted, but only if it was very gentile... sewing for the poor, or putting together food baskets. Gentlemen had to keep track of when it was proper to either smoke or have a glass of sherry in front of ladies. When to bow and to whom to tip your hat could cause gossip if the wrong decision was made. Members of Victorian society kept busy with parties, dances, visits, dressmakers, and tailors. Keeping track of what other people in your social class were doing was also a full-time occupation.

**The People in the Middle**

Being a servant in one of the grand Victorian houses was a position which would guarantee shelter and food. However, there was etiquette to be learned. The upper class was never to be addressed unless it was absolutely necessary. If that was the case, as few words as possible were to be uttered. Using the proper title was of the utmost importance. "Ma'am" or "Sir" was always appropriate. If "Ma'am" was seen, it was necessary that you 'disappear', turning to face the wall and avoiding eye contact.

Life was easier, though, amidst your fellow servants. Although private fraternization was frowned upon, it wasn't against the rules for those 'below stairs' to enjoy singing, dancing, and other social activities together. Quite often the 'upper class' of the servant world, the butler and housekeeper, would put aside their lofty roles in the household and join their fellow servants in gaiety. But come the morning, they would reign supreme once again.

Having a profession was another way of being a member of the middle class of Victorian society. Shopkeepers, doctors, nurses, a schoolmaster, or parish priest were all notable professions. Often times, the only difference between being a member of the upper-middle and the middle class was the amount of wealth you had gathered, and how it was flaunted. Another indicator was the number of servants you employed. Having more than one servant was a sure sign that you had money.

**The Lower Class**

Victorian society did not recognize that there was a lower class. 'The Poor' were invisible. Those members of England who worked as chimney sweeps, rat-catchers, or spent their days in factories had no place in the echelon of the upper class, although their services would be needed from time to time. The prevailing attitude was that the poor deserved the way they lived. If good moral choices had been made, the poor wouldn't be living the way they did. The best way for society to deal with the poor was to ignore them. They were 'burdens on the public'.

There were people who cared, however. Unfortunately, in trying to help the lower class, conditions usually did not improve. Workhouses were developed, but the living was horrendous and it was almost better to be back on the street. Being just too busy trying to survive, etiquette played little part in the poor's daily existence. But that's not to say that pride wasn't available. There was a 'social stigma' to applying for aid, and some families preferred to keep to themselves and figure out their own methods of survival. Although Poor Laws were put into place, it wasn't until after the Victorian age ended that 'the lower class' was able, through education, technology, and reform, to raise itself, in some cases literally, out of the gutter.