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SOME HINTS ON LETTER-WRITING.

THERE are few things which give a greater insight into character than letter-writing. Seraphina's gold-edged, scented *billets-doux* and Mr. Brummigan Brown's stiff soldierly notes are exactly symbolical of their different tastes and ideas; romantic, soul-stirring tendencies are apparent in the former, stern, business-like qualities in the latter.

Letter-writing should form an important branch of education; its power is immense, its solace considerable, and it can form one of the most delightful or one of the most irksome occupations in the world, both to the writer and to the recipient.

Very often have I asked and heard asked: "What rules should one carry out in order to write a good letter?" The same answer has been invariably given: "Write as you speak." Now though this is an excellent piece of advice (in so far as one should write simply and easily), practically it is not perfect, for one should write better than one speaks. Inaccuracies, obscurities, useless repetitions and all those negligences which one easily forgives in conversation are unpardonable in a letter, because the writer has had time to reflect, to choose her ideas and expressions, to give them a more agreeable turn, and to re-read what she has written. Imprudences are above all things inexcusable in a letter, for what one says can be lived down, what one writes remains.

Two excesses to be guarded against in letter-writing are:—Firstly, the writing with too much art, that is to say with the idea of showing-off one's knowledge and style. Ultra-refined thoughts, big sonorous words, pompous descriptions, sparkling figures and, in fact anything that savours of affectation or self-importance should be avoided, as also should the negligent or careless style which is little better. Secondly, the language in one's letter should be plain and simple, but one should never descend to mere triviality or vulgarity.

Grammatical errors are unpardonable. They proclaim profound ignorance, a neglected education, and give a decidedly unfavourable impression of the writer.

When writing a letter never forget who you are and to whom you address yourself. Let the pen talk freely but discreetly. To write a good letter demands tact, sentiment, facility, and above all unselfishness. One should never lose from view the age, the sex and the rank of the person to whom one writes. Like Racine, one should always have the talent not to show people how clever you are but to make them feel how clever and interesting they themselves are.

In letters there are certain rules which politeness and good breeding demand:—

Never cross letters.
Never abbreviate words (except in business correspondence).

Never send letters covered with scratches-outs, or blots.

Never leave letters undated.
Never be rude.
Never say what is not true.



A WELCOME LETTER.

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Never relate episodes which are not worth knowing.

Spell correctly.

Write legibly.

Never use slang.

Never use long or uncommon words when shorter ones do as well.

Make it a rule never to destroy the letters written to you until answered, then, however interesting the news you may have to impart about yourself leave it to the end. Fill at least the first page of your letter with answering questions which may have been asked you, touching on points of interest in the letter written to you, and remarking on the news imparted. Then, and not till then, say what you have to say about yourself. Letters like this always please because they show an interest in one's correspondent, and the sender is always flattered to know that news imparted has been noticed and commented upon by the recipient.

Always, then, guard against egotism. The crying fault of most letters is the overflowing in them of one's self, one's own thoughts, sayings and doings and the utter unmindfulness of those topics which interest the person whom one is addressing. How often one meets people who, never for a moment, think or speak of anyone or anything but themselves! They are so full of themselves, so interested and so fond of themselves, that they never for a moment dream how annoying they are to others. They doubtless imagine in their artless simplicity that everyone else finds them as enthralling and fascinating as they do themselves!

Never be long-winded in your letters. Say what you have to say as shortly and precisely as possible. Never charge your letter with useless details. Remember that "brevity is the soul of wit," and, consequently, things said too lengthily lose all piquancy and become insipid and insupportable.

"He who doesn't know how to limit himself, doesn't know how to write;" says a well-known author, and there is certainly a great amount of truth in the remark.

Well-written letters are always full of happy turns and natural expressions, and above all a general feeling of urbanity and refinement. Madame de Sévigné, whose letters are so justly famous, might serve as a model of simplicity. In one of her letters to the Count de Bussy she begins thus—

"You ask me where I am, how I am, and how I amuse myself. I am in Paris, I am well and amuse myself with trifles."*

Of course she immediately afterwards enlarges upon this rather laconic style, and I think this prompt way of answering questions asked, and elaborating upon them afterwards, is an excellent plan.

Dr. Blair in his remarks on letter-writing says—

"Its first and fundamental requisite is to be

* "Vous me demandez où je suis, comment je me porte, et à quoi je m'amuse. Je suis à Paris, je me porte bien, et je m'amuse à des bagatelles."

natural and simple; for a stiff and laboured manner is as bad in a letter as it is in conversation. This does not banish sprightliness and wit. These are graceful in letters just as they are in conversation when they flow easily and without being studied, when employed so as to season, not to cloy. One who either in conversation or in letters affects to shine and to sparkle always will not please long. The style of letters should not be too highly polished. It ought to be neat and correct, but no more. The best letters are commonly such as the authors have written with the most facility. What the heart or the imagination dictates, always flows readily; but where there is no subject to warm or interest these, constraint appears."

There are many different classes of letters. There are the letters of thanks, of reproach, of condolence, of excuse, of counsel, of demand, and of felicitation, each of which requires a special style of writing. The more usual divisions of letters, however, are under the heads of friendly, formal, and love-letters.

How delightful are the first-named. Those charming epistles written between friends or the members of one's family. Letters which are sure to be understood, sure to receive a warm welcome, and sure to be favourably criticised no matter whether they are well or badly written; no matter whether they are gems of literature or full of grammatical errors and orthographical mistakes. Writing a letter of this description is almost as good as calling on a dear friend and having a cosy chat. A chat in which conventionalities are dropped and feelings given full vent without fear of criticism or misunderstanding. What a contrast between these and those formal notes which one is called upon to write every now and then. Notes which politeness demands often at the cost of a vast amount of mental labour.

Is there any misery worse than that of having to set one's self to compose a well-worded, correctly phrased, polite epistle? I remember once reading in a magazine a most amusing account of the agony and aberration of intellect that these elegant little epistles occasion, and an appeal by the writer to Mr. Brunel to set to work at once and invent a sort of mute barrel-organ capable of inditing over and over again (like the tunes on that instrument) a catalogue of polite epistles calculated for all the ceremonious observances of good breeding.

"What an unspeakable relief," continues the writer, "to be able to grind out an answer to one's dear five hundred friends."

Well, the idea is not a bad one, and I'm sure if Mr. Brunel could achieve the task he would be voted a general benefactor. Formal invitations, acceptances, etc., are generally written in the third person. The date is usually placed at the end.

On the subject of love-letters I have only to quote the well-known words that, "To write a good love-letter one ought to begin without knowing what one means to say, and to finish without knowing what one has written. Perhaps one of the most charming love-letters

ever written is that of John Keats to Fanny Brawne. The following is an extract:—

"Sweetest Fanny,—You fear sometimes I do not love you as much as you wish! My dear girl, I love you ever and ever, and without reserve. The more I have known you the more have I loved. In every way. Even my jealousies have been agonies of love, in the hottest fit I ever had I would have died for you. You are always new. The last of your kisses was ever the sweetest, the last smile the brightest, the last movement the gracefulest... My mind has been the most discontented and restless one that was ever put into a body too small for it. I never felt my mind repose upon anything with complete and undistracted enjoyment—upon no person but you."

The reading and study of good letters is very useful and instructive besides helping to make one's style agreeable. Many people are of opinion that the secret of the epistolary style belongs to women alone; but, though this may be true as far as tact, sentiment, and facility go, one cannot read the letters which remain of Cæsar, the correspondence of Cicero, besides the more recent epistles of Fenelon, Gray, and Cowper, without seeing that for knowledge of human nature, depth of learning and profound study men hold the palm, women's letters, charming as they are, being generally surface work.

A great writer speaking about letters advises one to intercouse freely and with abandonment, but "to permit the night to carry counsel. To re-read the next day what one has written over-night, and to let the fire do prompt justice to that of which the reason disapproves. An imprudent word can be forgotten, or at anyrate excused, an imprudent letter is seldom effaced and seldom forgiven. One has had time to reflect, therefore is one doubly culpable. *Verba volant. Scripta manent* (Words fly. Writing remains)." The same writer speaking about women's letters says that "However long may be her letter, she never puts her dearest thought until the end." A quite natural and charming idea it is, too, keeping the best for last. Women are also credited with possessing a weakness for postscripts.

Before concluding I do not think it is out of place to quote Boileau's celebrated advice to would-be writers—

"Avant donc que d'écrire, apprenez à penser; Selon que votre idée, est plus ou moins obscure,

L'expression la suit, ou moins nette ou plus pure.

Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement Et les mots pour le dire arrivent aisément."*

And indeed thought, which is at basis of all arts and sciences, is the most important factor in writing of all descriptions, be it epistolary, lyric, epic, or dramatic.

* Before writing learn to think, then, according to your ideas being more or less obscure, will your expression of them be more or less pure. That which one conceives well announces itself clearly, and the words arrive easily.

