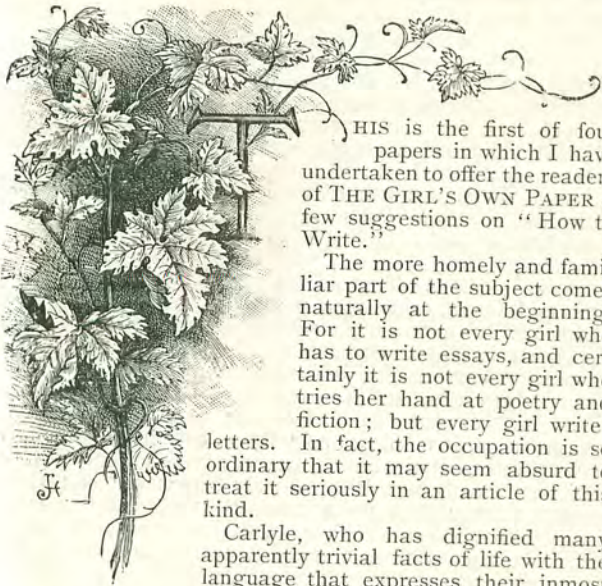


HOW TO WRITE LETTERS.



THIS is the first of four papers in which I have undertaken to offer the readers of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER a few suggestions on "How to Write."

The more homely and familiar part of the subject comes naturally at the beginning. For it is not every girl who has to write essays, and certainly it is not every girl who tries her hand at poetry and fiction; but every girl writes letters. In fact, the occupation is so ordinary that it may seem absurd to treat it seriously in an article of this kind.

Carlyle, who has dignified many apparently trivial facts of life with the language that expresses their inmost meaning, said—

"It is the greatest invention man has ever made; this of marking down the unseen thought that is in him by written characters."

Have my readers ever thought of this when they scribble their long letters to their friends, or write "duty letters," as short as possible, to those who have the right to expect them?

To me, there is always something grave and significant about the posting of a letter. One moment, the written sheet in its envelope is your own; the frailest thing that can be; most easily crushed and destroyed; a nothing, without power for good or ill. You slip it into an orifice, and what was mute and powerless has become vocal and strong; your word has gone from you, and not all the wealth, the energy, the prayers at your command, can recall it. It is a solemn symbol of the eternal consequence of human actions.

"Nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your tears wash out a word of It."

I have known a girl plead with passionate tears for the restoration of a letter she had just cast out of her own control. All she had in the world she would cheerfully have given to get it back, but the humiliating scene was of no avail: it was gone beyond the possibility of recall.

Is not this rather a grim way of treating a subject so light, so commonplace? Yet it does no harm to remember that in the slightest of everyday actions there may dwell a hidden significance.

Letter-writing, then, has a serious side. Tremendous issues may depend on pen and paper. A whole life's happiness, and the happiness of other lives as well, may be ruined by one letter! And, even apart from these gravest considerations, repentance is not rare for hurried lines scribbled in a passion and posted before the writer has had time to cool down. Words spoken in anger, wrong though they may be, carry with them half their own excuse; the speaker is seen to be over-excited, and her apology, when it comes, is readily received and understood. But an angry or unkind letter! It is read, with no obvious heat on the author's part visibly to explain it. It comes probably at the uncomfortable hour of breakfast, and strikes with cold rage; the bitter words on paper look far more bitter than they sound if spoken. The Latin proverb is significant:

Litera scripta manet, verbum ut inane perit.

"The written word remains, the spoken word passes away."

And there the written word does remain, at every hour of the day reiterating its harshness and unkindness with unqualified severity! Probably the writer has long since recovered from her irritation, and regrets having expressed it, but she has given it an existence separate from herself; it goes on proclaiming itself in her absence, and never ceases to wound.

The late Anthony Trollope, whose stories deserve to be remembered, once advised anyone who felt himself justly provoked to write an angry letter and place it in his desk for twenty-four hours. Let any exasperated girl-reader follow this advice, and at the end of the time prescribed she will feel thankful that her angry letter is safely in her own control, and powerless to hurt.

Girls, recollect—and not only with regard to angry letters—that your unspoken word is your servant, your written word is your master!

This exordium may seem to be turning into an article on how *not* to write letters! and it is time to look at another aspect of the subject.

It is an invaluable accomplishment to be able to write a good letter. It may be a precious weapon in forcing one's way through some difficult passage in life; and in any case it will add to the pleasure of all those who are connected with the writer. But "a good letter" is not by any means a stiff and polished production.

Times have changed. When postage was a consideration and letters were rare, they were composed with great care, and were, as a general rule—though not always—less spontaneous than they now are. Guides to the composition of letters, "The Polite Letter-Writer," and so forth, did not seem as ridiculous as they would seem at the present day. Since modern letters are thrown off so readily, people are perhaps apt to rush to the other extreme and forget that, now as ever, it is possible that "*litera scripta manet.*"

What, then, are the characteristics of a "good letter"?

It is perhaps not unnecessary to say a word as to the actual form and mechanism of "the letter." The numerous requests for criticism of handwriting sent to "Study and Studio" seem to show that girls are alive to the importance of this.

A good hand should always be founded upon an exquisite "copper-plate" acquired in childhood, with the turns and capital letters properly formed. Upon this stiffness of perfection comes the light and careless touch that marks the individuality; but alas for the writer who attempts this careless freedom before the mechanical perfection of the copy-book is won! To illustrate the less by the greater, the same thing may be observed in drawing. The broken imperfect line of the child, as Ruskin points out, becomes gradually firm, severe, decided; but, "before he becomes a perfect artist, this severity and decision will again be exchanged for a light and careless stroke," differing from the imperfect line of childhood only by the consummate effect wrought out by apparently inadequate means.

A good hand, therefore, must be founded upon stiff correctness of form, though it will stray far away from that when once the correctness is won.

To my mind, the large scrawl which is, or was, fashionable for women "in society" is fatal to the production of an interesting letter; it is obviously not meant for lengthy communication; there is nothing intimate or flexible about it; it is an unwieldy instrument.

A beautiful hand is worth cultivating, and as youth is the time to cultivate it, I commend my readers to the task. I cannot bear to see a letter written on mean paper, with poor ink and evidently a wretched pen. These "trifles" are not unimportant: they offend good taste and self-respect, even as disorderly, slovenly dress offends it.

Nothing by which I am expressing my personality should be degraded in form. Few people are so poor that they cannot afford decent writing-materials in these days of cheap stationery.

And the pleasure of writing a free graceful hand, with the mechanical accessories of the best, goes far towards the composition of a good letter.

People who ought to know better sometimes spell incorrectly in letters; they omit the first personal pronoun; they write "Your's sincerely" instead of "Yours"; they use ugly abbreviations such as "Dr." and "Yours, etc."; they scent their paper with patchouli; they leave a margin at the end instead of at the beginning of their lines; they cross their pages; they put grey letters into white envelopes, and *vice versa*; they fold their sheets inaccurately. Girls who aspire to be good letter-writers, beware of doing any of these things!

I think that the average French and German girl compares favourably with the average English girl as regards the external neatness of her correspondence.

Granted, then, that the outward form, or body, of the letter is satisfactory, what about the soul that informs it?

It is rather difficult to say what constitutes a good letter writer. Some of the ablest people fail to represent their powers adequately in their letters. For instance, George Eliot's letters appear often heavy and commonplace. Biographers are occasionally led away by admiration for their hero or heroine to publish a succession of letters that are worthless, both as indications of character and as literary compositions.

And yet, laboured composition in a letter is entirely out of place. "In letters, if anywhere, we look for the man, not for the author."

We smile at recalling the "Holiday Letters" that used to be written at the end of each term in private schools:

"MY DEAR PARENTS,—The approaching holiday season brings with it the agreeable duty of reporting to you my progress in the pleasant plains of knowledge,"

or words to that effect, heralded this document. Little children usually begin their early letters, "I hope you are quite well." I have often smiled at the words painfully traced in enormous round-hand, and wished the dear writer would husband all his energy in writing of himself; for by the time the end of that sentence was reached, little power or space was left to say anything else! Children of a larger growth should avoid commonplaces or "writing to order." The chief characteristic of a really good letter of the intimate kind is spontaneity. And yet the spontaneity must be tempered; it must not degenerate into slovenliness or foolishness.

The first thing to think about in correspondence is, what you have to tell your friend; the second thing is, how to tell it in the most interesting way.

There are two methods of telling or describing anything: one in bare outlines; the other in graphic touches which make the statement vivid. Take, for example, this sentence from a letter of the poet Cowper to Lady Hesketh, written in May: "We have blooming scenes under wintry skies, with icy blasts to fan them." A picture is immediately conjured up by this touch. The effect of the ordinary statement, "We are having cold weather for the time of year," would be meagre in comparison.

The correspondence of the power of expression with fact—swift and true as the flash of the electric needle—is what makes a ready writer.

The power of describing fact and incident dramatically, so that others shall see with your eyes, hear with your ears, is worth cultivating.

In those periods of painful separation, which enter into most lives, this power of letter-writing comes as an unspeakable solace.

I had once to part from a dear friend who went to Australia, soon, it was hoped, to return. She married, and remained there, to my loss, but ever since her departure twenty years ago—through the time of her happy, brief married life, her desolate widowhood—her letters have regularly come. Our lives have already been set far apart for twice as long a space of time as that in which they were near together, but our friendship grows and flourishes: we are dearer to each other than of yore. For she writes wonderful letters, not only affording a graphic description

of her immediate surroundings, but admitting me into her closest intimacy. I know how the march of events affects her; what books she reads and enjoys; how her thought grows; how she sympathises in my joy and sorrow; and how her heart regards the solemn mysteries that lie beyond our ken. Each letter, in fact, gives me herself.

Another friend—a school companion of my early youth whom I dearly loved—married and went abroad. We parted with acute suffering on both sides; I knew at the time that I should lose her, for our correspondence never flourished. The news of her death a few years later came with added sorrow because we had missed so much of one another.

Life, at best, is short; it is worth while carefully to tend and preserve all that links us together; to keep "in touch" though we are out of sight.

Some people feel a difficulty in expressing themselves freely in a letter. This should not be, when friendship, close and warm, exists, and probably only a little practice, and the endeavour to put into words what is felt, will remove the constraint. At any rate, when absence renders personal communion impossible, it is important to cultivate this faculty, for one's own sake as well as the sake of others. It is, indeed, remarkable how the pen will sometimes become a magic talisman, an "Open, Sesame!" to unlock the writer's nature and reveal powers of thought, of criticism, of emotion, hitherto only half suspected; these grow in writing them down, until the "best self" in every sense lies revealed. I have known an apparently stupid person become intelligent and eloquent in her letters, and the intelligent woman excel herself, when writing freely to one who cares and understands.

I always feel half ashamed to read intimate letters that are published after the death of the writers; but the Browning letters are certainly most exquisite examples of correspondence that reveals the inmost nature. Cowper's letters, in a lighter style, are charming. Here is another extract from one to Lady Hesketh. As an expression of welcome, natural, easy, and cordial, it is delightful—

"Olney, February 9, 1786.

"MY DEAREST COUSIN,—I have been impatient to tell you that I am impatient to see you again. I shall hear your voice! We shall take walks together! I will show you my prospects, the hovel, the alcove, the Ouse and its banks, everything that I have described. I anticipate the pleasure of those days not very far distant, and feel a part of it at this moment. Talk not of an inn! Mention it not for your life! My dear, I will not let you come till the end of May or beginning of June, because before that time my greenhouse will not be ready to receive us. I line it with mats and spread the floor with mats; and there you shall sit, with a bed of mignonette at your side and a hedge of honeysuckle, roses, and jasmine; and I will make you a bouquet of myrtle every day."

Daughters who are from any cause—school life or marriage—severed from their parents, little know how dear their letters are; they should never grudge them to the home people. And when the family breaks up, as families will, it is important still to live, as far as possible, abreast of each other's lives. It is a thousand pities to let indolence, or other occupations, or slackness, or the thought "I cannot be always scribbling," prevent the keeping up of this intercourse, which mainly falls to the lot of women.

Of course the charm of family correspondence depends on the power to write pleasantly. Some people excel in the art of saying the most irritating things they can find; they rush to tell you bad news, or gossip, or give you disagreeable advice, and you dislike the very look of their handwriting. Any delicate crisis in life is hopelessly marred if they blunder into it with pen and ink.

Much of the courtesy of life depends upon the power to use the pen with grace and appropriateness. There are certain forms to be observed in social intercourse which it is perhaps scarcely within my province to insist upon, such as the speedy answering of invitations, the writing to a hostess immediately after a visit, and so forth: no girl should neglect these laws of behaviour.

Never allow indolence or a habit of procrastination to

interfere with the payment of such social debts; and do not—O do not—use post-cards for anything save the briefest and most informal of messages! I have known real offence given by a message of thanks for a present, sent on a post-card. Do not grudge time spent in writing kind and gracious words; put them inside an envelope, and do not send them forth for all the world to see.

"Nobody reads post-cards!" Is that true?

A member of my family sent a post-card to an intimate friend one summer Friday, saying, "Come and spend a long day in the garden to-morrow."

When the card arrived—delayed in the post—there was written across it in a strange hand—

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."

Somebody had read the message—and read it wrong. But the incident contains a lesson.

It is not a sufficient excuse for delinquencies in correspondence just to say, "Oh, I hate letter-writing!" or "I am a wretched correspondent." "*On aime à faire ce qu'on fait bien,*" says the French proverb; and a "good letter-writer" generally enjoys the exercise of her power.

Who can estimate the influence of a wise letter, sent at the right moment, to aid and cheer?

If any of my readers, in their way through life, see trouble or perplexity they think they could help by a written word, let them not resist the prompting to set pen to paper; to write their very best, and they may find they have done more good than they can estimate. Those who are lonely, bewildered or perplexed, will owe them gratitude. And those in sorrow, whatever they may think at first, do feel their load lightened by the sympathy of friends.

The writing of letters of condolence is not merely a social duty; it is a friendly office that comes to every one in turn. The best way to do it is to seek for a few words only, that will set forth one's own grief and sympathy; not to suggest reasons for the mystery of loss and bereavement; to write, in fact, from the heart.

Tact, unselfishness, and the power of living in the lives of others—these help to make a good letter-writer, even as they help to build up a character of womanly grace and charm.

LILY WATSON.



A HOUSEFUL OF GIRLS.

BY MRS. GEORGE DE HORNE VAIZEY, Author of "About Peggy Saville," "More About Peggy," etc.

CHAPTER II.

THURSTON HOUSE, the abode of the Rendell family, was one of those curiously-constructed houses which are only to be met with in old-fashioned neighbourhoods. It stood directly on the high road, a big grey building which could boast of no architectural beauty, and which indeed presented a somewhat cheerless aspect with its wire blinds and tall straight windows. A gaunt, town-like house—such was the impression made upon the casual passer-by, but appearances are apt to be deceptive, and that same stranger would have speedily altered his impression if he had been taken round the garden to view the other side of the house. It was almost impossible to believe in such a different aspect! From one side, a busy high road, strings of cyclists, *char à bancs* driving past, bearing parties of brawling trippers, clouds of dust, the echo of the drivers' horns, and the continued whirl of wheels; and on the other—deep bay windows stretching out on to a lawn of softest green, winding paths shaded with grand old trees, and, beyond all, a meadow stretching down to the riverside, where punt and canoe stood waiting in happy proximity; and clumps of bamboos flourished in Eastern-like luxuriance.

"Our country house," the girls called the rooms

facing south, "Our town house," those at the front; but though they adored the garden, and spent every available moment out of doors, the busy high road still held an attraction of its own. Mrs. Rendell had her own entertaining rooms at the back of the house, but the girls were faithful to the little porch chamber which had been their property since childhood—a quaint little den built over the doorway, and with a window at each of the three sides, through which an extended view was afforded of the comings and goings of the neighbourhood.

"I love this dear little bower," sighed Lilius sentimentally. "There's something so quaint and old-world about it. I feel like Elaine in her turret-chamber looking out upon the great wide world."

"And it's such sport watching the people pass, especially on rainy days when the wind is high, and they are trying to hold up their dresses and carry an umbrella and half-a-dozen parcels at the same time!" cried Nan with a relish. "Last Saturday was the very worst day of the year, and all the good housewives went past to shop. Chrissie and Agatha and I arranged for a prize to go to the one who guessed rightly who would have the muddiest boots. It was lovely watching them! Old Mrs. Rowe, clutching her dress in front and showing all her ankles, while