

For fruit of neutral tint, such as pears, nuts, and greengages, on white china dishes, wreaths of nasturtiums make very pretty ornaments, in which case I would like a dark-green centre mat, and no foliage on the table. For a bright-coloured dessert, hops are a pretty decoration, some large bunches and graceful sprays being placed in tall vases in the centre of the table, others laid on the cloth outside the dishes of fruit. Brambles answer the same purpose, and seeding clematis can be twined round the dishes; but it is a fancy of mine, probably not shared with everyone else, that poisonous berries, such as those of the bryony and nightshade, should never be found on the same table as fruits intended to be eaten.

September brings in a much richer natural scale of colour than even the summer months, and possibly at no time are striking effects so easily obtained as now, with the help of fading leaves.

The glorious colouring of the virginia creeper, common alike in town and country, blends well with almost any tint of flowers, and particularly with white or pale dahlias, phlox, Japanese anemones, or lilies; or it is sufficiently effective for a dinner-table if used alone, or with white clematis, trails of it in low glasses winding in and out round the bases of taller vases, in each of which are two or three of the larger and brighter leaves. As a centre-piece, or a sitting-room ornament, a bunch, loosely arranged in any large piece of old china, particularly blue-and-white, never fails to please the eye.

With deeper-toned flowers paler leaves make a better contrast; such as those of the lime-tree, which now turn golden.

The feathery wild clematis, seeding now, and called by country people old man's beard, or traveller's joy, combines softly with the dark red leaves of its neighbour the hedge maple, or the brighter berries of the hawthorn and of the wild rose, or, in a quieter key, harmonises with purple elderberries.

The leaves of the white beam turn at this season a deep purple, and with its red berries I have made a charming arrangement of old man's beard and pale lilac scabious, all gathered within a few yards of each other on the South Downs.

Trails of bryony with changing leaves and berries might take the place of the white beam with more brilliant effect.

Berries do not easily combine with flowers unless all are taken together direct from the hedgerow or common.

Gorse is in some places at its full splendour, and to country people supplies brilliant groups for the fireplace (when the weather still allows flowers to take the place of fuel), the hall, or other parts of the house where bright colouring is welcome, and where one is not likely to come unduly near the thorns. Bracken is of course its most congenial companion; but where the local background is light, a branch of fir will throw it into relief; and should the vase or jar holding it be high, a few brambles may pleasingly hang down from the brim. Harebells are too fragile-looking to find a place in such a group; but in a room where a large piece of gorse forms a prominent object, small bunches of harebells, with fine grass, delicate ferns, and sprays of little moorland weeds, numbers of which are now turning red or yellow, may be fitly placed on mantelshelf, tables, and brackets. Heather, bracken, and gorse are of course natural neighbours; but skillful cutting and handling, with some risk of torn fingers, are necessary to make all rest gracefully together in one vessel. When achieved, however, the result is always popular, and has also the merit of lasting fresh a long time.

The bamboo screens which I mentioned in June may be charmingly dressed with small pieces of gorse, heather, and bracken, with the addition in the topmost holes of mountain ash—otherwise rowan—berries. Large bunches of the latter also make good single groups, and small sprays of them and their pretty leaves may be introduced into a table decoration in the following manner:—Put for the centre a growing fern of vivid green—such as the oak, the beech, or the mountain fern—into a pot of dark green, brown, or very dull red pottery; round that have four glasses about eight inches high, holding each a well-grown cluster of the berries, and one or two leaves just changing into scarlet; then between place small glass globes, or, still better, tiny pots of Devonshire or Vallauris ware, holding

harebells and small fern leaves. To a long table this may be adapted by having six groups of berries in all, and a bunch of harebells opposite each cluster of wineglasses. The cow parsnip, hemlock, and other umbelliferous plants, are useful for large decorative masses, and as they are never sold in shops, and therefore must be gathered by the artist, the latter will have an opportunity of noticing what other plants are plentiful in their vicinity, and will, therefore, probably assist to bring out their beauty in rooms. I mentioned last month how prettily fool's parsley weat with poppies and dandelions, and this is only an instance of how these pale greenish-white heads of tiny flowers refine others of stronger form and colouring. The foliage, too, of this class of plant is marvellously complex and beautiful, and is often useful in wild arrangements where the flowers are hardly wanted.

Striking effects can be made this month with aquatics, combining, say, a few tall bulrushes, some scarlet-seeded iris pods, sedges, and large flowering grass. But I must here enter a protest against the prevalent idea that such groups will last all through the winter; they will last indeed, but as poor dead mummies, not as living beings; and nothing in this way is sadder to see than some once beautiful bulrushes standing neglected in a corner months after all their life has departed, their sword-like leaves hanging down limp and yellow, the rich, warm, brown pollen shed off in patches on to the carpet, and being slowly replaced by the dirty, unwholesome dust of the room. Field grasses look just as miserable; and the only things used in this way which do not are heather, the seed-pods of honesty, and Cape gooseberry, and the large pampas grass, all of which can be easily washed; but even they contradict the essential reason of our having flower decorations at all; which is, the need of bringing some of the living beauty of outdoor nature into our homes.

There is a meaning in the tint and form of the least conspicuous vegetable, and even if we cannot discover what this is, we can at least be careful not to utterly falsify and destroy it.

A PEEP BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE G. P. O.;

WITH SOME THOUGHTS ON LETTER-WRITING.



THIS age of pens, ink, and paper, when letter-writing is no longer the privilege of the few, but the property of the many, what a small proportion of those that scribble off letters "in haste" think

of the wonderful machinery at work which takes anxious and unwearied care of all the multitudinous correspondence that pours hour by hour into the G. P. O. Let us see what becomes of all these letters, when, as we carelessly drop our portion of them into the letter-boxes, they become "the property of the Postmaster-General."

It was after five o'clock on a spring evening that we made our way through St. Paul's Churchyard, on a visit to the G. P. O. of London. We had got an order to see the Telegraph Department and the great sorting

rooms. It was a pity we could only afford a cursory visit to the former—that vast and wonderful place, with its hundreds of clerks busy night and day—for the offices are never closed. Ceaseless was the hum of the machinery as the ciphered paper poured out in long lines, and was as readily translated to us by our guide—scraps of news from all parts of the world, the latest electioneering triumphs, and the last rise or fall on the Stock Exchange—hopelessly intricate to the uninitiated it all seemed. But our anxiety to get a peep behind the scenes over the way interfered with our desire for further information from the telegraph clerk.

We took our stand close behind the great receivers; through the slit one could see into the street outside, thronged with passengers eagerly pushing their way to deposit in safety the letters, cards, and papers, which fell in one unceasing stream into the receivers, and were as quickly carried away by busy hands to the sorting room. A comical story was told us, illustrating the nervous haste which sometimes befalls late comers. One evening the clock

was on the stroke of six, when an errand-boy was seen running breathlessly up the steps to reach the box before it closed; in one hand he had a pair of fowls, while in the other he held a document for post. The excitement was too much; in went the poultry with a thud; at the same moment the lid closed, and the poor youth was left staring disconsolately at his master's letter still in his hand!

The first process with our letters, after taking them from the receivers, is called *facing*. Thousands are thrown on the tables, and with great rapidity "faced," *i.e.*, the letters are put in large bundles, each postage-stamp being at the right-hand corner of the letter. Those letters which have the Queen's head in any other position on the envelope are thrown aside as *blind*, and must be sorted in a separate packet. One always looks upon a badly-stamped letter as a vulgarity; but it would be well if people remembered all the additional trouble given to the Post-Office officials when they put on stamps in irregular ways.

The "facing" complete, the next thing is to *deface* the stamps. This is done very quickly.

A clerk takes a large packet of faced letters, draws them rapidly, one by one, under the post-office stamper, which at the same time defaces the stamp, and gives the postmark. The operation is almost as speedy as the action of the needle in a sewing-machine. Here again one may remark that the habit of using two ½d. stamps, instead of 1d. one, frequently makes a double impression necessary, as unless the clerk be an expert, he fails to mark the two heads. I know of one friend, who for the mere preference of colour habitually uses ½d. stamps. It would add much to the labour of the clerks if everyone had such artistic scruples! After this comes the sorting of letters into railway districts (the Great Eastern, South Western, etc.), and into towns, while the local post-offices carry out the sub-divisions of streets and villages. Newspapers and pamphlets are in another department altogether. These are legion; and when one remembers how quickly the waste-paper baskets at home are filled, it did not surprise us to hear that 5,000 or 6,000 circulars of one insurance company alone pass through the Post-Office every day; and to give some idea of the amount of work in this place, I may mention, as a fact, that 195,360 missives, including letters, postcards, and parcels, have been left at the office of one well-known weekly paper at one delivery!

But there is a certain section of the great sorting-room which gave us much interest and amusement—"The Hospital" it is called. And a good name it was, for there, on a table, lay a confused mass of bruised and broken-limbed "patients." Some, indeed, seemed injured beyond recovery; but the surgeon, with his instruments, gave the sufferers all the help of his professional skill, as, armed with sealing-wax, twine, and brown paper, he bound up wounds and set broken bones. Here was a box of lovely flowers from Pau, the lid half gone, and the anemones hanging out, their beautiful blossoms dragged and faded; another box of flowers from the Sunny South, with stamps complete indeed, but no address of any sort, the label which had been attached to it gone, and as our guide pointed out, no name on the parcel *itself* to ensure its safety; side by side with children's socks and knitting cotton was a dinner knife, the handle carefully papered, but the blade protruding a long way beyond bounds; a live canary in a cigar case, and a pair of scissors rolled up in a sheaf of postage stamps. A strange medley it was; but the wards of that "Hospital" admit many extraordinary patients in the course of a year.

"How about the Queen's letters?" some of our party asked. "Does Her Majesty's private correspondence travel side by side with Sarah Jane's mis-spelt letter to her young man? And is it possible for regal despatches to be jostled with vulgar familiarity by tradesmen's bills and ½d. postcards, in one common bag?" Or again—"Surely the Queen need not stamp her own letters?" Well, the letters from Windsor or Balmoral, as the case may be, do perhaps receive extra care, having a bag appropriated to their special use; but the postage must be paid in her case as well as by the humblest of her subjects. None of the Royal Family—except the Duke of Cambridge, who holds an official appointment—is exempted.

Of one thing more I must speak, and that is the book which contains copies of curious addresses received from time to time, as well as specimens of strange and illegible handwriting. How clever the expert must be to decipher those extraordinary scrawls! Some of our most eminent men, known all over the world as authors or politicians, write after a method such as no one except those well versed in the art of calligraphy can read. We thought the comical addresses in that book, and the ready wit of some of them, would afford "Mr. Punch" many an amusing cartoon.

As I passed the hundreds of men at work, drinking their tea as best they might in the press of business (the cups standing on the sorting shelf), I could not but think how much we owe this wonderful organisation which carries our letters to and fro, no matter how remote the home, or how insignificant the little village in which we live; yet from the great heart in London pulsates the life which is felt in the very lowliest hamlet of our land, and communicates this life in a wonderful way through all the complex system of our nineteenth century civilisation. How perfect such a system is may be inferred by the very surprise and annoyance we feel at the slightest interruption in the circulation; should, for example, one of these many millions of letters be mislaid for a day, or be even a post later than we expected. We write, I fear, far too many letters. No doubt the penny post brings in a large revenue to the Crown; but yet I think the increasingly cheap postage does but encourage a prodigality of stamps and paper, and often the time thus wasted might be much more usefully employed. However, the fact remains, that letter-writing is a large part of our business or pleasure all our lives, and I think it would not be unprofitable if our readers gave some thought to a subject of very general interest.

What a vast variety of letters are written in the course of a year! The types and subjects of such letters would take a paper all to itself. Letters of condolence or congratulation—in this world pleasure and pain are closely intermingled—letters of censure or of praise, letters of business, letters of advice.

Then there are the different stages through which our correspondence passes; first, the laborious effort of early childhood, penned in large round-hand to the dear father or mother, when the one cause of anxiety is "What to say next."

A few years later comes the gushing period, when as the bosom friends part they vow "to write often," and Her Majesty's mails carry rapturous epistles from one "dearest girl" to another. The words are usually deeply underlined, and often the touching request at the close to "burn this" is the best thing that could be done with it. I regret to say the custom of underlining the words does not always pass away with this stage, which is usually got over in the "teens," for the habit sometimes remains through life. Used in strict moderation, underlining adds point and meaning to words, which might otherwise be lost; but beyond that it only serves to make the letter ridiculous. The writer has occasionally received letters, that, if read aloud with all the emphasis requested, the strain of voice and lungs would be quite serious!

I will not now stop to speak of that large class of letters, which they are few who have not written at some portion of their lives—I mean "love-letters;" and yet, let me observe that this section is by no means limited to the category of letters of courtship or betrothal; they are the experience of many in their married life. No one who has read Charles Kingsley's memoir can fail to see how many "love letters" passed between him and Mrs. Kingsley, and theirs is far from being an isolated case. Only let me give a word of warning here. I hope no girl who reads this is carrying on a secret correspondence against the wish, or without the knowledge of, her parents. A wise mother will never ask to see all her daughter's letters; there are many little things, in themselves quite harmless, which she and her friend regard as their own special property; but that is a very different thing from a clandestine correspondence carried on with a friend of either sex; it may have the charm of romance, but it is a very false counterfeit for the name.

Letter-writing is far from being a pleasure to all. Some have an inability, and consequent dislike to, writing letters; all their life it is more or less of a drudgery. To be able to write a good letter, to say the right thing at the right time, is indeed a blessed gift, and one to be greatly coveted. I believe it can, in a measure, be acquired, though without doubt "the pen of a ready writer" is bestowed by nature. But let us see how the sins of omission into which those who "hate writing" so grievously fall can be avoided. When a letter of congratulation is received, or when it accompanies some trifling present, answer it *at once*; delay but increases the disinclination to write. Let us hope none of our young readers forget to acknowledge a gift, however small; be sure the donor on the occasion is not likely to have such a bad memory, and may feel hurt by the neglect. Then, be careful, if opportunity arises for a letter of condolence, that it be not put off to a more convenient season. A large property was once lost, willed away by an offended relative solely through pique that such a letter of sympathy, at a time when it was looked for and expected, was left unwritten.

To those happy people who can write with ease, and enjoy it, I would say, use your gift to the best advantage; a friend that writes is worth twice over one that does not, no matter how sincere the friendship may be; and don't forget a class of letters which have a special value—those which bring cheer and sunshine into lives that have little in them of brightness or variety—a friendly note it may be to an old nurse, or some ailing invalid.

It is true these letters take time; but surely they bring many a blessing to the writers, and are a giving forth to those from whom we do not hope to receive.

The societies now formed to ensure kindly letters, at special seasons, to patients in hospitals, or to lonely men and women elsewhere, plainly testify to the power for good there is in this individualising effort for others.

The Romans had a proverb—*Litera scripta manet*—The written letter remains. I fear very few of our letters nowadays deserve to survive. When a letter used to cost two and sixpence for postage, it was worth while taking pains with it; but now we have scarcely time to read the letters we receive, and some people would never dream of keeping them. At all events, let us be careful what we write about others. In conversation, the voice and manner more than half convey our meaning, and many a seemingly severe word is softened by the twinkle of the eye which accompanies it. But our written words—there they lie, to rise up in judgment against us. And then again, don't waste time writing nonsense. Not that a playful, chatty letter, which conveys a true idea of whatever is amusing to the writer, is to be avoided. Far from it; it is as the cheerful countenance, which doeth good like a medicine; and this world would be a dull place indeed were such mirth banished from it. But if "foolish talking" is to be condemned, surely foolish writing is much less "convenient."

Have you not at times, in looking through a drawer or old desk, come suddenly upon a letter, the very handwriting of which has seemed like a voice from the dead? The writer years before has passed to the "silent land;" but you read it, and it is as though that voice were sounding again in your ears, and as though you were holding converse together once more. Make sure that the voice from your pen, if thus heard in after years, be one of sweet and loving harmony rather than a discordant note, which will vex and disturb the soul of the survivor; for surely, even after a lapse of years, it shall be true that "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

A. J. HAYES.