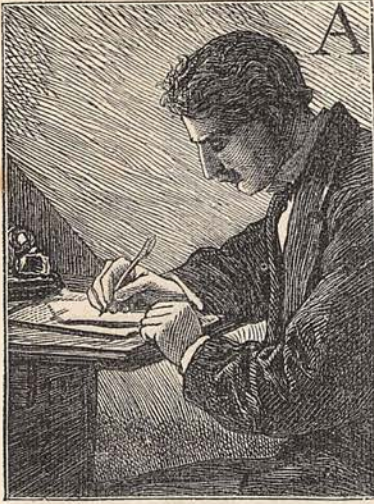


HOW TO WRITE A GOOD LETTER.



FRENCH writer prophesied the other day that the telegram would soon supersede the letter, and that letter-writing would become a defunct art. A most startling speech!—although it must be confessed that the rapid, curt, and careless style so common in modern letters, except where

they happen to be on business, goes far to establish the probability of the prophecy being a true one. Let us, however, do all in our power to avert it; for what would the breakfast-table be without its welcome budget? What, then, are the essentials of a good letter, and how can they be acquired? But first let us briefly review the history of letter-writing, for, as Horace tell us, the best way to teach is not by precept, but by example. If we mark the excellencies of others, we may learn to acquire them ourselves; and if we observe their faults, we may learn not to repeat them. The two most ancient letters extant are undoubtedly that of David to Joab about Uriah, and that of Jezebel touching Naboth's vineyard; though, as they are more in the nature of despatches than epistles, their interest is merely historical. It is not a little singular that the Greeks, who would seem to have possessed all the intellectual qualities necessary for the composition of letters as perfect as their oratory and their poetry, have left nothing of any value in this branch of literature. Those attributed to Socrates, Xenophon, Euripides, Plato, Aristippus, and Alciphron, some of which are indisputably genuine, are little better than rhetorical essays at once awkward and pedantic. The Romans were, however, much more successful, and the letters of Cicero, of Pliny, and we may add of Seneca too, are models of what good letters should be. Pliny is at times a little priggish and affected, and Seneca is too fond of interlarding his pleasant gossip with heavy moral discourses which remind us of Mr. Pecksniff, but Cicero is admirable. The style rises and falls in exquisite harmony with the sentiment, at one time grave, at another time light, full of sparkling epigrams, of pleasant reminiscences, of anecdotes and reflections, and above all, it possesses that delightful air of "naturalness," which he has himself defined as the one thing indispensable to a good letter. Without pausing over the voluminous epistolary collections left by the scholars of the fourteenth,

fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, which are a library in themselves, we may proceed at once to the great English and French letter-writers, who are after all the best models, as well as the most interesting. But it will be more pertinent and more serviceable if we point out the essentials of a good letter, noting what should be especially avoided, and what aimed at, by referring to these great letter-writers for the points in which they are severally eminent.

Letters will obviously fall under three heads—business letters, ordinary letters, and love-letters. With regard to the last there is no need of saying much; if they are acceptable we may be sure they will never be criticised, and will be eloquent enough; if they are not acceptable, the united merits of all the greatest letter-writers who ever lived will never make them either welcome or agreeable. Our busy times have carried the business letter to perfection, and as there is little to teach where all have already learned, a brief summary of its essential attributes will suffice; they are four—brevity, perspicuity, vigour, and discretion. By the last is meant the tact and versatility necessary to secure the attention, and appeal to the particular person you are addressing. You would, for instance, make a distinction between the style you would adopt to a nobleman, and a farm bailiff; to a highly-educated professional man, and a rough matter-of-fact country butcher. The politeness and refinement indispensable in the first case would be thrown away in the second, for the honest countryman might possibly be at a loss to understand the periphrases and circumlocutions necessary for the embodiment of deference and courtesy.

In all cases, however, as Lord Chesterfield well observes, the *suaviter in modo* is of more importance than the *fortiter in re*. Perspicuity is of the greatest importance, for we see every day what mischief is caused by men misunderstanding each other; many a costly law-suit has sprung out of an ambiguous word, or hinged on a careless phrase; and to give a man the opportunity of putting on your words a construction other than you intended is to put into his hands a formidable weapon, which he may some day or other turn against yourself. It occasions loss of time, and very often loss of temper. The fiercest and most rancorous of all theological controversies depended on a single letter of the alphabet. By perspicuity, then, is meant absence of all ambiguity of language and intention, of all obscurity, whether the obscurity arises from excessive brevity or from too copious speech, and lastly the employment of clear and intelligible handwriting—a very important point. The last quality required is brevity. The best receipt for this admirable characteristic is given so pithily by "rare" Ben Jonson, in his "Discoveries," that we cannot do better than allow him to give it in his own words: "Brevity is attained in matter by avoiding idle compliments, prefaces, protestations, parentheses, superfluous circuit of figures; and digressions; in the composition, by omitting conjunctions and such-like idle particles, that

have no great business in a serious letter but breaking of sentences, as oftentimes a short journey is made long by unnecessary baits." The finest specimens of brevity in our language are undoubtedly the despatches of the Duke of Wellington, which can never be read too often or too carefully by those who wish to attain a terse, incisive, and compact style, and to pack in the fewest possible words the utmost maximum of matter.

So much for the business letter. What we are most concerned with, however, is the ordinary every-day letter written either to amuse or instruct—the letter, in fact, which passes from friend to friend, and is one of the luxuries of social life. Of all the many accomplishments possessed by men and women, of all the many great boons conferred on us by education, the ability to write a really good letter is the most valuable as well as the most delightful. Precious, no doubt, is the pleasure a skilful musician can confer; great is our gratitude to a fine and trained reader; and great, no doubt, the interest excited by a skilful sketcher or amateur painter; but greater than all is the enjoyment which it is in the power of a well-written letter to bestow. How welcome when we are happy and in health, how inexpressibly acceptable and soothing when we are ill or depressed, is the friendly gossiping letter! What weight of exhortation, of advice, of warning, of sympathy can this tiny instrument of mighty power bring with it, if nicely managed and opportunely offered! The reception of a letter has often ere now altered a whole life—nay, has even modified opinions which might have changed the face of the world. For this reason have so many great men taken the trouble to leave us precepts about letter-writing, Erasmus, the great Dutch scholar, and the friend of Luther, has written a treatise in Latin, which he entitles "De Epistolâ Conscribendâ;" or, "Concerning the Art of Letter-Writing." Madame de Sévigné; Burke; Howell, the author of one of the most fascinating collections of letters in our language, the "Epistolæ Ho-Elianæ," have all left us instructions touching this important art. Dr. Johnson has an admirable paper in the *Rambler*, which is well worth consulting.

As time is short, and these elaborate treatises not always at hand, we will review the various attributes which they are unanimous in thinking necessary for the composition of a good letter. The first is spontaneity. A letter should be a faithful transcript of the writer's feelings, and should be inspired by the circumstances which surround him. It is this quality which makes the letters of Cicero and those of our own Cowper so fresh and fascinating. They write easily just which comes uppermost; they seek for sympathy with such candour and such charm that they cannot fail to find it. Nothing is constrained; they think naturally, and therefore they write naturally. A letter should be extempore if its aim be to give pleasure. Akin to this, but comprising more in it, is naturalness. Never aim at literary effect or what is called fine writing; if you do so you may please yourself, but you will have no chance of pleasing your correspondent. "We should write as we speak, and that's a

true familiar letter which expresseth one's mind as if he were discoursing with the party to whom he writes, in succinct and short terms," is the excellent advice of old Howell himself, one of the best letter-writers in our language. Self-consciousness is the bane of letter-writing; if you think more of the way in which you say a thing than of the thing itself, you are pretty sure to fail; you will become stilted and unnatural, and there will be such an air of constraint and affectation in what falls from your pen, that it is quite likely that your sincerity will be called into question. A striking illustration of this may be seen in the letters of the poet Burns. When he writes just what he feels, and has no thought of the fashion in which his thoughts should be dressed, he expresses himself gracefully and eloquently; but when, later on in life, he wrote to the aristocratic acquaintances and the grand ladies with whom his poetic reputation had brought him into contact, he became morbidly self-conscious, and thinking that fine people should be addressed in fine language, abandoned his natural style, and assumed a style so turgid and bombastic that it is at once painful and ridiculous. Pope offends in the same way from the same cause.

But above all you should create the impression of heartiness—that is to say, the impression of being keenly interested, not only in what may concern the friend whom you are addressing, but in the incidents you are yourself describing. Nothing is more fatal to a letter than a listless, slipshod languor, unless indeed it be vivified, as it is in many of Horace Walpole's letters, by sparkling epigram, shrewd commentary, and play of wit thrown in with an affected indifference. Such gifts, however, are too rare to be relied on, and are vouchsafed to very few. From spontaneity, naturalness, and heartiness flow the five important qualities of ease, fluency, simplicity, grace, and liveliness, without which no letter can be perfect. As models of these important characteristics, we may cite the inimitable letters of Madame de Sévigné, those of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, those of the poet Gray, and again those of Cowper, all of which are the perfection of what the familiar letter should be. We have all heard of the precept that "art is the art of hiding art"—*ars est celare artem*, as the Latin tersely puts it—and it must not be supposed that the precious attributes to which we refer, natural though they seem when we meet with them, come naturally, or can possibly be acquired without considerable practice.

"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance."

All these qualities are, however, nearly akin, and if a letter-writer be careful to start with spontaneity, naturalness, and heartiness, the others are pretty sure to follow with practice and experience. There are two things which ought to be especially guarded against in letter-writing; one is a didactic tone, and the other a constant air of gravity or seriousness. It is never pleasant to be preached at. If you have exhortation or advice to give, give it indirectly, and remember that the theory of all pleasant letters is that they pass

between equals, and that as you stand on the same level as your correspondent, you cannot presume to assert that superiority which can alone justify "preaching." It is this didactic tone which ruins the letters of Seneca. Were it not for their eternal sermonising and moralisation, his letters would rank among the most delightful in the world. A constant air of seriousness is also very repugnant to the proper spirit of letter-writing. Life is a constant interchange of light and shade; it is full of variations and vicissitudes, and what is true of it as a whole is true of it when contemplated in its parts. Now a familiar letter is but a transcript of one of life's leaves, the record of a few of the incidents in its chequered page, and to make it all serious is either to be misrepresenting or actually falsifying it. Besides, the main object of a familiar letter is to amuse, is to seek sympathy and to give it; a letter full of unrelieved seriousness is as disagreeable as to pass a day with a companion who does nothing but grumble and complain. If you are writing to a friend on the loss of some one near and dear to him—and few of us can escape such letters—be as brief as possible; all you can do is to show that you feel for him, that he is not alone in his sorrow; you can do no more; as Tennyson beautifully and sensibly puts it—

"Words weaker than his grief
Will make grief more."

As an example, however, of what a consolatory letter may be, it would be difficult to find one more perfect than that addressed by Sir William Temple to the Countess of Essex, on the occasion of the death of her only daughter in 1674. To conclude, a good letter, like a good style, must find its inspiration in the feelings of the writer. The style, as a French proverb expresses it, is the man. If you feel strongly, you will express yourself naturally, and you will avoid at once the worst fault possible to composition, affectation. But as in many of the letters which pass between friends there is no room or necessity for the display of strong feeling, while there is always a necessity for being natural and unaffected, you must endeavour to acquire what nature has sometimes no opportunity of giving you. By reading attentively such works as the letters of Lady Mary Montagu, Gray, or Cowper, and by accustoming yourself to analyse the elements which constitute their charm, you will soon be able to write not a good letter only, but one really excellent; and so you will have mastered what everybody must pronounce to be one of the most valuable and delightful human accomplishments. J. CHURTON COLLINS.

TOLD BY HER SISTER.



IT is a very sad story, but I think I must tell it, for I want to show people that Ellen has a great reason for being both unhappy and unsocial at present.

My cheeks grow hot and my heart beats when I think of it; but, of course, no one was to blame—oh!

no, I don't want to say they were, only somehow between them all my Ellen's heart got broken.

The girls pity me a good bit because I am not engaged, but really since this thing happened to my Ellen, I am quite glad to be safe and peaceful at home, with no anxieties, and above all, with no lovers. Oh, what havoc they do make in a girl's life! For my part I don't think they are a bit worth it, and I never mean to have any.

I was always fondest of Ellen, since she nursed me through the scarlet-fever. All the others were afraid to come near me, but she was constantly in and out of the room, giving me drinks and telling me beautiful stories.

God rewarded her for her bravery and goodness; for she never took the complaint, though, of course, every one said she would.

But, before I begin my story, I must say a word or two about my family.

There are five of us—five sisters, and no brother.

Matilda is the eldest, then Alice, then Amy, then Ellen, and I come last. I am called Ruth.

Matilda and Alice have been out the longest, and are, I believe, very much admired; but the beauty of the family is my third sister, Amy; dark-eyed, with curling hair, a blooming complexion, and such a figure! every one pronounces her lovely, and indeed they are right.

Certainly I have sometimes thought her bright eyes a little bit hard; but then I am only her sister, and I know that she has it in her power to make them very glowing and tender indeed.

Ellen is something like Amy, but with fainter colour, lighter hair and eyes, and slighter figure. She is called Amy's plain likeness—quite the least well-looking of the family.

About a year or two before I had the scarlet-fever, a rich aunt of ours came to pay us a visit, and she took a great fancy to our beautiful sister Amy; and before she went away she proposed, as she had no child of her own, to adopt Amy, and to leave her all her money by-and-by. Of course our father and mother were quite pleased, and thought it a first-rate thing, and Matilda and Alice were by no means sorry to have the beauty out of the way.

So Amy left the home, and became Aunt Mary's child.

When she went away no one seemed very sorry, except just my dear Ellen, and she did cry and fret dreadfully.

Then I had the scarlet-fever, on which occasion