LETTER-WRITING.

"The polite Letter-writer,"[1] and "Every man his own Correspondent,"[2] I have never read. They are doubtless two bewitching books, able to transform any stick of a gentleman into at least a three-penny post. I am the more particular in disclaiming all knowledge of these Letterary authors, as I would not my reading public should imagine me guilty of plagiarism. Believe me, I am quite virtuous.

Something I have to say touching most sorts of letters—not all. For instance, I have nothing to say of Lawyers' letters, those peremptory "how don't you do's," Charons[3] of Fleet-ditch, purveyors of bread and water, whose words run through the heart cork-screw-wise, outraging a tit-bit at the table, and mixing aloes in our wine:—they cannot reach me,—I am off, away from the land of credit—no dun can knock at my door,—we deal for ready money only. For the same reason I am silent about Tailors' cross-legged scrawls, coming like a needle at the wind-up of one's Christmas merriment, telling us, modest hurrying rogues, they have "a small bill to make up by Saturday next," and "hoping for future favours." I wear my own coat! A man, out of Britain, may live as happy as Job;[4] for recollect Job had no debts. Nor will I speak of the letters of great men deceased, golden authors, or tinselled authorities; they speak for themselves. Nor of mercantile letters—yes, they must have their due; for they uphold our commerce,

and commerce upholds our brave old England, and all her old incumbrances—Alas! poor England! By the head of Hermes,[5] though most interesting compositions to pursy exchangers and young ledger-students, they are unworthy of his votaries! His other votaries, thieves and pick-pockets, can surely write better—though not to my knowledge; fortunately for society at large, and perhaps for myself, I have no correspondence with these "gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon."[6] But look at their every day, or rather their every night language; is it not fanciful? While they decorate their theft of linen from a hedge with the cant expression of "nimming the snow," with many other similar snatches at poetry, I cannot forbear, in an imaginative point of view, placing them far above Mercury's[7] humbler servants. To make short work, I divide merchants into two classes—the laconic and the flummery. Here is a specimen of the first:—

"Gentlemen. Your's 9th received. Contents noted. Arrived, Jenny, Saunders. She cleared the Custom-house yesterday. Her hams not yet landed. Hope they are in good condition. Enclosed last price-current. Since which a spirit in the rum market. Wines, best, run off quickly. Lead heavy. Copper very dull. Tin plates look lively. Much done in tallow. Wax sticks on hand. Feathers, goose, are down. Skins do not get off. Great demand for hemp by the Government. Coffee, very good, this morning, with sundry parcels of sugar, eagerly sought after. Our Exchange, one half, has fallen. Money scarce, and therefore great difficulty with bills. Bristles rising. We are, Gentlemen, &c."

The other style is "tedious as a King," and I cannot "find in my heart to bestow it all on your Worships."[8] It generally contains advice of a bill being drawn, and rings

a bob-major, as thus:—"Honour to acknowledge your esteemed favour—have the honour to transmit—valued on your respected house in favour of our esteemed and valuable friend—not doubting but your respected house will favour us by duly honouring—and, with the most perfect esteem and respect, we have the honour to be, &c."

What a relief to turn from such perpetrations! Come, let us talk of servant-maids. Their letters are always worth something, to themselves or others, as they have neither time nor postage to throw away. They write only when a passion becomes too restless to stay within doors. I take great interest in their unskilful attempts to throw a veil over their impatience. Bad grammar, and worse spelling, a clumsy folding up, eccentric splashings of thimble sealing, and an upside down direction, are, to many persons, their chief recommendations; though, to my mind, these are no more than the scenery and dresses to a good comedy. "They hold, as it were, a mirror up to nature,"[9]—a crooked one, I grant. Here I see many follies, mixed with their share of goodness, and sometimes without, making odd faces as they peep through our language in rags. The purchase of a new bonnet, with Mrs. Mansby's assurance "it is the prettiest thing she ever made, and, besides that, she has not a bit more of the stuff," is followed by challenging, per post, her former fellow servant to make holiday some day next week; and thus, at a trifling expense, vent is given to the exuberance of that vanity, without a becoming share of which neither a scullion nor a princess would look half so charming. In an affair of jealousy, when she writes to the crony friend of a rival, that she intends for evermore to have done with Mr. Jemmy, because she knows he keeps low and disagreeable acquaintances,—how innocent is her revenge compared to the cruel and ignorant Roxana's!

When I read Molly's wrathful story of some vail or perquisite being unjustly withheld from her share of the kitchen spoils, and observe her anger exhausting itself as her fingers become weary of the pen, I cannot but lament that Thetis[10] did not teach her son to read and write, and thus have saved a whole Iliad[11] of fury and slaughter, though it were pity to lose the poem. What a blessed invention is the post, whether two-penny, general, or foreign! It carries off, by a thousand invisible channels, like the system of underground draining, half the disorders of the human heart. Let every one write down his worst, instead of putting it into practice. A spiteful scrawl cannot well do much harm in the world; while, on the other hand, a sheet of paper full of kindness does infinite good to all parties. One of this last description lately fell into my hands, from a cook at Canterbury to her old uncle. She enclosed, kind soul! a two pound note, saved from her quarter's wage; said a thousand affectionate things, and, after wishing him many happy days, she—what think you?—she quoted Shakespear! —"May gudness and you feel up one moniment."[12] Thomson's Seasons[13] lying in the window-seat of a cottage has been pronounced sufficient evidence of the poet's fame; but what is that compared to being quoted by a Canterbury cook? There is another species of kind-hearted writing, where servant-maids almost equal their too susceptible mistresses; but this falls into the next division of my subject, and indeed I am ashamed of having neglected it so long.

Love-letters—here's a theme! In the first place, let every one beware of counterfeits, for such are abroad. Few genuine ones are to be had for love, and none for money. Finely wrought compliments, an epigrammatic style, or any thing that looks like great care and study, is a sure proof of

heresy—that rogue is thinking of the girl's money. Raptures and complaints, sprinkled with something stolen from Ovid[14] or Moore,[15] and crow-quilled on the best gilt-edge, are enough to startle the virtue of any considerate young lady. Folks cannot be too cautious. There is another sort of love writing, much in vogue in this our philosophic age, down-right profanation, taking upon itself to prove that Cupid[16] has found out a new cut to the heart; namely, by sending his arrows first through the brain—it makes me wince to think of it. Such letters are treatises on præternatural history. These sedate persons, who generally wear flannel night-caps because the head should be kept warm, and Angola socks for winter wear because the damp is so bad for the feet—these mock-heroic gentry, I say, absolutely assert there can be no true love except what is founded on the qualities of the mind. At first, as they argue, it must be no more than simple esteem, till ripened into a softer feeling, by a similarity of taste, and a congeniality of sentiment in matters of religion and morality, it haply attains to something of the value of—a plain gold ring and the parson's blessing. A very comfortable doctrine for those with whom it is impossible to fall in love. Just as if Romeo and Juliet[17] ever thought of more than one sentiment in each other's breast; and their love was truer than metaphysics. I must quit such a subject; flesh and blood can't bear it. Now for a hint at what is more to the purpose. It is no such difficult matter to distinguish between truth and hypocrisy in these affairs, as some old people imagine. For the benefit of the rising generation, here are a few infallible signs of an unfeigned passion. Let them always bear in mind that obscurity is the grand point. There ought to be so restless a confusion in the lover, that far from its being necessary his mistress should find his letter intelligible, he

should be, after an hour's respite, incapable of explaining his own meaning; it is quite sufficient if he thought he understood himself at the time. If thou art guilty of a pretence to the drowsiness of reason, "there is no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune."[18] This is a general rule, and as the style is inimitable, there can be no fear of deception. Any attempt, though a flurried one, at sense or connection of sentences, is fatal. Again, a constant interchange of the sublime and the bathos is indispensable; together with certain usual epithets of endearment, in endless repetition; and, here and there, a lively idea of dying. To uninterested persons such effusions may appear insipid, and probably silly, but their opinion is of no importance. In fact, to the parties themselves, if they ever happen to fall out of love, they will certainly be as little amusing as a physician's prescriptions to his patient just happily recovered from a fever. Let not my readers, fair ones I mean, imagine I entertain any disrespectful notions of love, or that my temper is soured by a parcel of billets-doux returned on my hands. All my intention is to show that the young blooming God ought not to expose himself in black and white.

Hate-letters ought not to come next; yet, for the sake of variety, they are welcome. These, whether expressed in reproaches or threats, contempt or indignation, are wonderfully energetic. Of all passions, anger is the most eloquent. It is easier to say a cruel thing than a kind one. Milton's[19] devils talk better than his angels. It is more difficult for love to express itself in words, because it has so much to say; while hatred can utter its heart-full in a breath, and afterwards expatriate on the strength of its own inspiration. An angry man, and a good one at the same time, always writes more bitterly than he would have spoken; this, at first sight, seems unaccountable, as the comparatively slow

motions of the pen must give him the more time for reflection; but I am convinced the cause of this excess arises from having a blank piece of paper before him instead of a human countenance, which latter must be very bad indeed not to awaken some remorse. The greatest provocation to write a hate-letter is in answer to a treacherous friend, who still addresses you throughout in the kindest manner, with a "My dear Sir" at the beginning, and ends with a "Yours, most sincerely." In this case, it may be excusable to dip your pen in gall; but will that do any good? On the contrary, it is more noble, more manly, to pay respect even to the ashes of friendship.

Now are a swarm of notes, like gnats, buzzing about me, all claiming attention to their several merits. One, without a seal, yet pretending to the title of "a letter," boasts of introducing strange gentlemen to one another. A second makes wary inquiries about the "cleanliness, sobriety, and honesty," of a housemaid, footman, or cook. Then a crowd of borrowers perplex me, by requesting the loan of a fish-kettle, or the last Canto of Don Juan,[20] or a trifle to be repaid in a fortnight. And lastly, a very agreeable one offers to bribe me with an invitation to dinner.—I cannot possibly accept it.

At length I arrive at what my fingers have been aching to come at,—letters from a friend; or, if the world will allow it, from many friends. In my opinion, friendship can best express itself by the pen; from which alone the closest friendships have sometimes originated. "The pleasure of society among friends," La Bruyere[21] tells us, "is cultivated by a resemblance of opinion on points of morality, and by some difference of taste in the sciences."[22] Yet this pleasure may exist in parties who can separate for ever without much regret. While that honest, glowing sentiment, of all others

the least selfish, never so thrills in our hearts as when our friend writes to us; and it must be often, and in all his moods, in his hopes and fears, in his joys and sorrows. Not the careless correspondence between two worthy gentlemen in adjoining counties, when a day's ride, or haply a walk, can bring them face to face. No; the letter must have been long on the road, must be stamped with a foreign post-mark, to make it precious; or with an English stamp, to him who is called the "foreigner," wherever he travels away from his endeared associates. It is enough to make sweet the pain of actual banishment. Let those who live out of their own country describe, if they can, the emotion they feel as they burst the seal of such a letter.

It is a frequent complaint with those at home that the one abroad does not write so often as he ought. I suspect there is little justice in it. The one abroad will hardly fail, until wearied out by neglect. He will be wise enough to bait his hook. The fact is—and why conceal it?—there is manual labour, time occupied, and no small resolution requisite, to fill a sheet of paper in a minute character, which, every one knows, is expected between friends; and these are the sole reasons of their deferring it from day to day, with an evil worrying conscience, till at last they are often ashamed of writing. I never have put faith in the phrase of "the pleasure of writing to you;" as I invariably find it used by the worst correspondents; it is a lying bit of civility. Nothing indeed can be more delightful than to stroll about the fields, filling up an imaginary letter; but when we sit at our desks to turn it into a reality, it becomes downright work, and is cheerfully performed solely because it is the means of getting another in return. Besides, an absentee, if he happens to be remiss, should be treated with charity. He requires evidently more attention than those

left behind. They have their ordinary occupations and associations; they miss but a single link in the chain; a traveller has torn himself from all. Again, this feeling must not be omitted in the balance; he who is at a distance has better grounds for the suspicion of being forgotten, while his friends have an assurance that he cannot possibly forget his home.

Some there are whose labours might be spared. I have long ceased to encourage them. They fill the first page with apologies for not having answered me earlier—this is worse than their silence. The next thing is, to echo every circumstance I have related for their amusement; and their sentences, one after the other, set out with—"Your account of"—"How delighted you must have been when"—"I envy the journey you had from"—"As you observe, the climate must be"—and so on to the end of the chapter; and this they call answering me. Then follow loving remembrances from all the family, severally and collectively. And they finish with another apology, far more reasonable than the first, for having "troubled me with so much nonsense." There are others who fly off into the opposite extreme. To execute something worthy of being sent across the channel, and of the postage, is to them a serious matter; quite an undertaking. They tease their brains for a fit subject, ponder on the best things that may be said upon it, and send you, not a letter, but an intolerable essay. A few general rules may be of use. The principal one is, as in conversation, to keep in mind the taste and character of the person to whom you are writing. It is always folly to assert you have "really nothing to say," unless it is your belief you would remain dumb in his company. Never touch on politics to one who cares not for a newspaper; indeed it is well to omit them on every occasion, as they read better in

print. With a matter-of-fact man, you must imagine yourself in a witness-box; no exaggeration, nothing figurative—I would not trust a metaphor; he may be confused, or misled, or, what is worse, suspect you intend to impose upon him. You have no small advantage in addressing a literary man; with him every thing is interesting that is worth telling; however, news of new books, or of a very old one, ought to occupy a considerable space. To a lady, young or old, a story is acceptable; and let it be spiced with love. By the bye, I have to beg pardon of the ladies for not having yet said a word about them. Perhaps, as they have so constantly been praised for their skill in letter-writing, it appeared to me a work of supererogation. I assure them, that, were the world entirely composed of ladies, a gentleman, and then he must be the man in the moon, would know better than to drop any instructions on this point. It is said the reason of their excelling is, that they write as they talk. I insist upon it their writing is superior; at least that their pens run on like their tongues in their pleasantest and happiest moods. Then, a great recommenddation to a traveller, they have the art of bringing to one's mind, home, more than can any master of a house; every word breathes of their own atmosphere, till it is difficult to believe you can be at so great a distance—surely I am only next door! After what I have thus said publicly, I trust I shall be rewarded—secretly, if they prefer it; and no doubt this will increase the number of my fair-handed correspondents. Men's letters are, for the most part, of too stubborn a nature. They will not bend to petty circumstances; or, if they do, it is but a kind of Dutch painting. They either omit them altogether, or paint them with an awkward minuteness, leaving nothing to the imagination. "In your next describe your present sitting-room"—were

the few words which made me feel the force of the writer's friendship, and the interest he took in all that concerned me, far more than a very long sentence which preceded it, where he expressed his regret at our being separated. Of all letters the most magical in their effect are those written in a state of pure enjoyment, full of high animal spirits. Sorrows will have their way, and it is fit they should; but if we are happy, why not make it appear? The gravest philosopher can, if he chooses, clap on his wig with the hind part before; and his profoundest thoughts will lose nothing in being uttered with a laugh. So great an epicure in this science as I am could give as many receipts as that kitchen-favourite, Dr. Kitchener.[23] But at this moment I am all impatience. The post arrived an hour ago, and the treasures of the leathern bag must by this time be sorted.

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EDITORIAL NOTES

[1] *The Polite Letter-Writer; containing a great variety of plain, easy, entertaining and familiar original letters, adapted to every age & situation in Life, but more particularly on Business, Education, and Love*, London, B. and R. Crosby and Co, 1815. Earlier editions existed.

[2] Untraced publication.

[3] Charon is the son of Erebus in Greek mythology. He ferries the souls of the dead over the Styx, one of the rivers of the classical underworld.

[4] Protagonist of the *Book of Job* in the Bible. A righteous and wealthy family man, he is unexpectedly struck by severe calamities that rob him of everything he cherishes.

[5] Hermes is a deity of Greek mythology, protector of heralds, travellers and merchants.

[6] See William Shakespeare, *Henry IV* I, I.ii.27-28.

[7] Roman god.

[8] See William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing* III.v.20-21.

[9] See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III.ii.23-24.

[10] In Greek mythology, Thetis is a sea nymph or goddess of water, mother of the hero Achilles. Her role is significant in the *Iliad* and the myths of the Trojan War.

[11] An ancient Greek epic poem attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* is set during the Trojan War and focuses on the conflicts between Greek and Trojan forces, and the effects of war on warriors and their clans.

[12] See William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII* II.i.112.

[13] *The Seasons* (1726-30) is a series of four poems, each representing one season, by the Scottish poet and playwright James Thomson (1700-48), a key figure in the early development of nature poetry in English.

[14] Ovid, Roman poet.

[15] Thomas Moore (1779-1852), Irish poet and songwriter, famous for his *Irish Melodies* (1807) and *Lalla Rookh* (1817).

[16] Cupid, Roman god of love and desire, often depicted as a playful, winged child with a bow and arrows. In mythology, he causes individuals to fall in love by shooting them with his arrows.

[17] The two young lovers from feuding families in Verona in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Their secret love leads to a series of misfortunes, culminating in their untimely deaths, which ultimately reconcile their warring families.

[18] See William Shakespeare, *Henry IV* I, III.iii.119-20.

[19] John Milton, English poet.

[20] Lord Byron's unfinished satirical poem *Don Juan* (1819-24). At the time of the publication of the last instalment of *The Liberal*, only cantos I-VIII had appeared.

[21] Jean de La Bruyère (1645-96), French philosopher and moralist, celebrated for *Les Caractères* (1688), a sharp critique of French society and its manners.

[22] See chapter 5, "De la société et de la conversation" in La Bruyère's *Les Caractères*.

[23] Probably a tea dealer. See P.P. Howe, *The Life of William Hazlitt* (London: Martin Secker, 1922), p.50.