

THE COMPLETE LETTER WRITER.

CHAPTER I.

LETTER WRITING.

LETTER writing is fast becoming one of the lost arts. The means of rapid communication, and more frequent personal intercourse, have increased almost miraculously during the present century. The railway, the steamship, the telegraph and the telephone, the science of phonography and that most wonderful instrument the type-writer, are all helping to crowd letter writing out of the ordinary occupations of life. Years ago, letter writing was a part—and often a very large part—of the most serious business of life. To many, who had leisure and whose minds were cultivated and well informed, writing long letters was a luxury only equalled by the joy of receiving a long letter from some dear and distant friend. But in these busy days, brief notes—hastily written—telegrams, or telephonic messages have to take the place of the old-fashioned letter. Half a century ago—before the advent of Sir Howland Hill and cheap postage—men and women wrote “letters,” now they write “notes,” and often a good half of these brief missives is occupied in apologies

for their brevity on the ground of pressing business or shortness of time.

Much of the best literature of the world has taken the form of letters, and even to-day a series of well-written letters in our public journals or magazines, on any matter of public interest, never fails of a great company of readers. Men were in the habit in the old days of putting themselves into their letters. Their epistles were not mere records of passing events, or expressions of opinion, but in many instances a man so wrote that a careful reader observing what was between the lines, would be able to judge very fairly of the true character of his correspondent. The letters of great men have been doubly valuable from the fact that their authors were not only able, but could hardly refrain from impressing their own personality on the written page. Take, as a notable and familiar example of this statement, the letters of the Apostle Paul. The best way to gain a true knowledge of that remarkable man is to study him as he has revealed himself in his letters. His letters to the Romans and to the Ephesians manifest his breadth of mind and the range of his scholarship; his letters to the Corinthians unveiled the deep spirituality of his nature, while his matchless epistle to the Phillipians shows that he had a heart as large and as tender as a woman's.

It is a rule—with scarcely any exceptions—that our most intimate and trustworthy knowledge of great men comes to us through their letters. The old-worn phrase,—“Show me the company a man keeps and I will show you what kind of a man he is,”—may

be well supplemented by another,—“Show me the letters a man writes and I will show you what manner of man he is”;—for if there is any man in him he will put it into his correspondence.

Suppose by way of further illustration we cite the case of a man of more recent times. Oliver Cromwell—Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England in the seventeenth century—was slandered and traduced more than any man of his day. His motives were impugned, his noblest deeds and his most daring exploits were laughed to scorn. For two centuries he was under the ban of prejudice and abuse. But Cromwell's letters and speeches have saved his reputation and turned the current of public opinion. Thomas Carlyle spent years in digging out from the literary debris of the seventeenth century these remarkable epistles and speeches; and in doing this he did good service to the cause of truth and rescued the character of the great Protector from the obloquy under which it had so long rested. The letters of great and gifted men are their truest and most impartial biographers.

“The Spectator,” which was commenced on the 1st of March, 1711, contained a series of the most beautiful and exhaustive essays ever presented to the reading public; these essays took the form of letters, and the men who wrote them—Addison, and Steele, and Pope—well deserved the title of “Men of Letters.” The severest political strictures ever written were “The Letters of Junius,” though who Junius was, remains a mystery to this day.

It is true that the day of professional letter-writ-

ing is passed, and the brief, terse message sent on electric wings has taken the place of the old, formal, stilted letter. But letters have still to be written. Business matters cannot always be telegraphed or telephoned, it is still necessary to write business letters. And as long as we have friends and affections, as long as our hearts glow with rejoicing at the welfare and success of our friends, or are sad at the knowledge of their distresses or misfortunes, so long we must write letters of congratulation or condolence. It is a very poor sort of affectation that regards the writing of letters to friends as unnecessary. It seems a fine thing to say, that it is a poor sort of friendship that depends on the letter-carrier for its continuance, and that if friendship cannot live without letters it had better die. The man who talks after this fashion is either making poor excuses for downright laziness, or he has a very poor notion of the claims of friendship. A man who lets his mother's birthday pass without a loving, filial letter, should read some of Norman McLeod's letters to his mother on such occasions, and he will feel ashamed of himself. A man who has sisters living far away and allows years to pass without a single line, may make up his mind that what was once a heart is fast becoming a fossil. George Herbert says that "Good words are worth much, but cost little," this is true of letters to our friends. The time and trouble a letter costs is but a very small price to pay for the pleasure a kindly letter imparts, and our friends are not worth much to us if they are not worth frequent and lengthy epistles. The neglect so common in the matter of correspond-

ence is owing to thoughtlessness rather than want of feeling; in this as in a thousand other things,

“Evil is wrought by want of thought,
More than by want of will.”

The truth is, we need only to act in a simple business fashion in this matter, fix dates for writing and adhere to them. If we could school ourselves to the feeling that we are as much bound to pay our bills of correspondence as to pay bills for merchandise, the miserable feeling of being in debt to our friends would not haunt us as it does, and we should not so frequently blush to see at the bottom of some letter, “Why do you not write?”—“Pray write soon!”—And similar pathetic appeals.

Long parting from the hearts we love,
Will shadow o'er the brightest face;
And happy they who part and prove
Affection changes not with place.

A sad farewell is warmly dear,
But something dearer may be found,
To dwell on lips that are sincere,
And lurk in bosoms closely bound.

The pressing hand, the steadfast eye,
Are both less earnest than the boon,
Which, fervently, the last fond sigh,
Begs in the hopeful words, “Write soon.”

“Write soon!” Oh, sweet request of truth!
How tenderly its accents come!
We heard it first in early youth,
When mothers watched us leaving home.

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And still, amid the trumpet joys,
That weary us with pomp and show,
We turn from all this brassy noise,
To hear this minor cadence flow.

We part, but carry on our way
Some loved one's plaintive spirit-tune,
That, as we wander, seems to say—
Affection lives on faith—"Write soon!"