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understanding of some passage in the Word of God. But all is light to him now. The clouds and shadows of the present state have become dissipated, as the morning mists upon the mountains; whilst all the obscurities, in that Holy Book, to the right understanding of which he gave the ripest years of his labour and thought, will now be made clear in the higher exegesis of eternity and the fuller disclosures of the Book of Life.

D. M.

Art. VI.—THOUGHTS ABOUT LETTERS.

IT was a bright day of sunshine, when the ash-buds were showing "black against the front of March," and the first blush of the wakening life of spring was on the beech-trees which clothe the Cotswold Hills in many parts with an ever-changing grace, when I was looking from Birdlip over one of the loveliest views in England.

The Vale of Gloucester, with all its undulations, its villages, and wooded knolls, its meadow-land, and homesteads lay below, under a nearly cloudless sky. The tower of Gloucester Cathedral was distinctly visible—Glevum, that bright city of old times, which has seen so many changes and chances within its walls. Opposite, across the valley, like sentinels on guard, rose the stately Malvern Hills, with their grand mountainous outline, and abrupt termination at the Herefordshire end. Nearer to the left rose the steep sides of Leckhampton, and Cleve Cloud; Cheltenham, lying under their protecting heights, with her many villas and church towers, clearly defined. To the right, the mouth of the Severn shone like burnished steel, and beyond, many miles away, range upon range of low-lying shadowy hills were wrapt in the soft "fine-weather haze" of the spring day.

Near us, though hidden, lay the old Roman remains which were, in 1818, discovered by some labourer who was rooting up a tree. These remains, and the probable history attached to them, led my thoughts to the posts of those days, in contrast to the swift communication of these in which we live, by the touch of that electric chain with which we are darkly bound. For the Roman villa which had been disinterred in the heart of those beech woods was the probable residence of the Post-master; and the buildings, of which traces are left in all directions in the neighbourhood of the villa, were for the breeding and rearing of horses.

The Roman system of communication by means of signals was carried to very great perfection. Stations for horses, such as the

one below us in the wood, were presided over by an officer of high rank, and from the terrace in front the signal-posts on Cooper's Hill, and on Birdlip, where we stood, could be plainly seen, and horses despatched to Painswick by "Green Street," or by the "Salt way" through the wood.

Those beautiful beech woods are said to be a legacy to us from the Romans, and how graceful is the outline of their branches, how stately they grow on the hill-side. As the sun shines through the swelling buds, it sets the carpet of fallen leaves of past springtime all aglow with the golden-bronze colour, richer and more intense than any words can tell. Beautiful beech-trees! they seemed to whisper to me of days past, and days present, as the brisk March wind played through them, and awoke the same music that the Roman ladies heard as they returned in their chariots along the Via Viridariensis (or road through the plantation), and saw the signal on the hill-crest, and knew that the post was returning or going out.

In these days of rapid communication, when letters fly over the country—their name Legion and their speed that of Pegasus—it is hard to realize the absence of what is now so permanent a feature in our daily life, and the existence which was not enlivened by the excitement by the arrival of the daily post.

The Roman system of posting was on an enormous scale, and the whole island was brought under its influence. But scarce and few must have been the opportunities for exchanging the thoughts and ideas, and domestic gossip and chit-chat, which now swell the leathern bags of the modern postman to overflowing!

"The Life of Sir Rowland Hill," the inventor of the penny post, may have enlightened the younger generation as to the increase of letters since the days of their grandmothers, when franks were eagerly sought from members of the Houses of Parliament, and letters were so expensive a luxury that no one cared to pay for them—oftener than need, absolute need, required.

Now, every facility is given for the pen of the ready writer to exercise the gift. To the high-born lady who writes to wile away ten minutes of *ennui* on her thick sheet of ivory note, to the poor girl in service who hopes "these few lines will find her mother well, as they leave her at present," sending the letter off is so easy, that in neither case is there any hesitation in writing it. No doubt, the very facility of despatch increases the number of daily letters many thousandfold. And is this to our gain or our loss? It is well to look at a picture in every light, and to be sure of our position; to see the brightness and the shadow with impartial clearness, if it is possible; so let us try to do this with posts and letters.

I think we are all agreed that the carefully-written and well-thought-out letters of a Cowper or a Newton, the fatherly counsels of Legh Richmond and Simeon—nay, the gossipy but *naïve* descriptive epistles of Horace Walpole, are a thing of the past. These are not the type of the budget which, with unfailing regularity, the postman of to-day delivers in the early morning, at mid-day, and in the evening. In rain or shine, in snow or fiercest heat, the modern postman knows no respite; and year by year the circulation of letters is increasing.

It would be a curious task for one of the good Fairies of olden story to separate the mass of letters at a post-office received in the course of a single day at any of our large towns or cities into heaps, and, by the touch of her wand, separate the necessary from the unnecessary letters—those which *must* have been written, those that *might* have been written, and those which had better never have been written at all.

Of the first of these there would doubtless be a goodly heap, large enough in itself to make the penny postage of to-day a thing to be thankful for. Letters of business which require answers, letters of affection from parents to children—from children to parents—letters of information, letters of inquiry, and, alas! letters, too, which are the bulletins from a sick-room—a preparation, perhaps, for the telegram which is so soon to follow! —letters which raise hopes, and are welcome as flowers in May, letters which put out hope, and are as the darkening of the sun of our very life—bad news that must be told, good news which it is a joy to read; letters of true sympathy and friendly interest in the work, the health, the well-being of a friend, with well-chosen remarks on the topics of the day, in politics, art, and literature—surely letters such as these must go into the heap of those which were *necessary* and good to write.

But this heap, which we are picturing as lying in one room of the Post Office, would be small when compared to the unnecessary heap which the magician's wand has separated from the rest.

Here we find letters addressed to those who may happen to be our "grumbling blocks," in which are to be found a long list of small grievances, and complaints, and worries.

All these grow by the telling, and magnify by the writing to an enormous extent. How often have we all written such, and before the letter was on its flight could have wished to recal it!

There, too, are gossiping letters—family chronicles of "small beer" or trivial incidents, foolish stories of faults and failings, supposed extravagance in our friends. Perhaps the report of the ill-doing of somebody's only son—in which the pen of the writer of these unnecessary letters delight! If a guest leaves the house, it is a signal for describing her—her dress, what she said, what

she did, how untidy in her room and habits, or how precise and particular, what she ate and what she did not eat. A little praise may be mingled with this; but the grace of the hostess is for ever marred, if it should filter round that she posts three or four sheets of this dissection to some relation or intimate friend, as soon as the subject of it is fairly gone. Gossipping tongues are a sad evil; but I am not sure that gossipping pens are not a greater. Words that are written are mightier than words that are spoken. When the thought is once in black and white it may work untold mischief. And here, by the way, let us protest against a too common practice of sending letters to be read by others than those to whom they were addressed. Sometimes a few lines are scored out, and the very fact of the scoring out quickens curiosity. The sheet is perhaps held up to the window, and the words are partly visible. A half-truth is worse than a lie, and it is the half-truth which is sometimes thus sent floating like a poisonous seed to do its work!

Then there are the letters which cause needless trouble, and cannot, therefore, be consigned to the *necessary* heap. Some one is in dire distress for a cook or a housemaid; instantly a letter is despatched to a friend to prosecute immediate inquiries for the right person. The friend energetically does her best, is full of her success, and writes by return of post to say so. Meantime the need has been supplied, a treasure has been secured, and a letter crosses the one written, after some trouble, and in haste for the post, begs that no more trouble should be taken.

It is the same with lodgings and furnished houses; and more especially those who live in watering-places are subject to this class of unnecessary letters. An entreaty from an anxious mother to find clean and comfortable lodgings for herself and an unlimited number of children, with an incredible amount of luggage, is promptly attended to. Innumerable stairs are climbed, innumerable landladies interviewed and worn out and tired, a history, after great effort, of probable success at No. 2, Sea View Terrace, is reported, covering several sheets of note-paper. Alas! long before the letter reaches its destination another is written beseeching that no trouble may be taken about lodgings, as it is discovered that there has been a case of scarlet-fever at Sandsea, and Clevedon was considered more healthy.

I once heard a lecturer on "The Days of Swift" say that if "those times had their drawbacks, at least they were free from the horrible infliction of post-cards, coming in a vicious shower to irritate and annoy," Post-cards are useful enough, but alas! a great many little fidgets are thought worth the outlay of a half-penny which are not considered quite worth the expenditure of a penny! This humility is amusing, and there is some-

thing *piquant* in the habit of some people who make post-card correspondence a speedy, if telegraphic, style, with a French word introduced here and there, for the purpose of puzzling a too curious footman. Surely thousands of post-cards may be despatched to the heap of clearly unnecessary correspondence.

The third heap may be, and we hope is, infinitely smaller. In this, of course, lie anonymous letters, which are, we trust, rare as they are intolerable. Such offences against good taste are seldom perpetrated. There are letters written in angry haste, or letters full of passionate reproach; there are letters which distil poison, and, read between the lines, are as sad as they are sinful; there are cruel shafts tipped with venom, which strike deep and wound some faithful heart with a wound no human power can cure. These letters may go to the heap of those which ought never to have been written, and let us hope their number is lessening year by year.

And as we think of letters and of posts, most of us can recal a heap untouched by the Fairy's wand, which we keep in a quiet treasure-house, all our own. Old letters which we prize, and to which we turn, when the present is hard and barren, for refreshing, as from perennial streams;—letters which, as we read them, recal the day when we read them first—a day when youth was in its prime and our hearts were set to the song of joy and gladness.

Letters from those who have crossed the stream and entered through the gates into the City. As we read their words, the cold silence which lies between us and our dead seems broken, and once more they speak and we hear. Letters, too, from those who loved us once, but who, in the press and hurry of life, have drifted far from us. But though they love us no longer, they loved us once. And however weak, nay, foolish, it may be, we like to read these letters—a living witness that the hand which wrote, and the heart that dictated them, was ours once, and that the past was not wholly a dream.

Letters in clear round text-hand—the first from a child we love; letters in feeble irregular characters—the last we ever received from a dear friend. Letters which bring back the music of boyish laughter which is silent now—of girlish happiness which is lost in the deafening strife of the noisy world. Letters which tell of that sweet interchange of thought and interest, which is the charm of correspondence, and without that charm the very word has no meaning. We may have many to whom we write a letter, but there can be only an inner circle of correspondents. The former may be, as we have seen, reduced to our own and our friend's absolute gain—the latter, we may hope, to continue while life lasts, and earthly love flows in a fuller, deeper stream, as it draws near, to lose itself in the great ocean of eternal love.

The old Roman posting-station struck the key-note of these thoughts about letters. Let me sound it once more, before it sinks into silence. From the whispering beech woods I seem to hear a voice from a letter written long, long ago—a letter which was older than the time when the Roman chariot swept along the Via Viridariensis, and the queenlike dark-haired women, who were exiles from the sunny land of Italy, thought tenderly of those they left there, and wondered if the post, signalled from the hill crest, would bring them tidings of their friends, from the city of the Seven Hills. I hear that voice sounding along the stream of time, "*Ye are our epistles known and read of all men.*" Yes, if we are living epistles of love, and purity, and truth, we may be very sure that our letters in pen-and-ink shall be such as may be safely added to the many which are written in the present, and have been written in the past, of which it may be said, that they are as streams from a pure fountain, for refreshment and healing to those who read, from those who write them.

EMMA MARSHALL.