

**ON
LETTER WRITING**

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On Letter Writing by Anthony W. Thorold

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ANTHONY W. THOROLD

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ON LETTER WRITING

"THESE THINGS WRITE WE UNTO YOU, THAT
YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL."

MANY years ago Sir Francis Head wrote a sparkling account of a night's journey in a railway post-office, describing among other things the sorting of the letters, the ingenious arrangements for dropping and taking up the bags without stopping the train ; how in one place a black-edged packet, evidently announcing a death, jostled a silver-edged packet announcing a marriage ; and how he soon found himself musing on a good many things as the train rushed on in the dark. No wonder, for the coldest imagination might be stirred by such a scene. Those countless bundles of letters—tied up so

rapidly by the busy and indifferent officials, and at day-break to be dropped into thousands of letter-boxes in busy towns, or to be taken to country villages by the philosophical postmen that Cowper tells us of—mean promotion or disappointment, happiness or sorrow, it may be life or death, to multitudes of human hearts in quiet homes, little thinking what a change in their lives one sheet of paper is to bring. For, as a sober matter of fact, letters are the wheels on which the world moves.

In the same letter-bag there may be a letter with the offer of a seat in the Cabinet ; another, marked "with spede," from a servant to her parents, telling them she is sent home to die ; another with a proposal of marriage ; another a letter of comfort, to be read and re-read in sad and lonely hours, till constant handling has worn out the paper, and frequent tears have almost blotted out the words. Less than spoken words—for the gleam of the eye and the tone of the voice

are wanting—they are more than spoken words, for they remain to be kept and pondered, perhaps printed and circulated, long after the writer is in the dust; and the end of it all is, that letter writing in these modern times is so universal an instrument of government and society, of religion and of kindness, of business and recreation, of joy and of pain, that in plain truth it is one of the most important duties of life, and is, perhaps, capable of being used, much more than many of us have ever thought it could be, for the glory of God and the welfare of man.

—It is with this view of the importance of the subject that I ask leave to try to show, what letter writing is and implies, in the principles that should regulate it, in the materials that should constitute it, and in the motives that should suggest it. What a Hulsean lecturer once said of a truth intended for all mankind, is not quite inapplicable to a practice adopted by all mankind. “Every form of human experience, every feature of human nature,

will be found to throw some light upon it" (Venn's "Characteristics of Belief," p. 27).

The sentence of St. James about the tongue may most appropriately be transferred to what we have seen to be the necessary substitute for it. "If any man offend not—with his *pen*—the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle his whole body."

Duty is the word that imposes and justifies letter writing. To obey conscience, in other words, to please God, is in this, as in everything, the plain path for us all. Say, if you will, that it makes a needless worry about trifles to make the writing of a short note a question of right or wrong. Without doubt, some letters *are* less important than others. Still, the most momentous and notorious military dispatch ever written was a letter of three words; and if St. Paul really meant his exhortation to be taken literally, "Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. x. 31), not even the writing of an

invitation to dinner, or a civil inquiry about a neighbour's health, can be treated as something outside that great circle of duty in which every responsible being lives and moves before God.

We find ourselves placed in this world, with certain duties to perform, and relations to discharge, and callings to fulfil—the duties, and relations, and callings, all necessitating more or less of letter writing; and what with the penny postage, and the railway system, and popular education, and cheap writing paper, letter writing has become so enormously increased, that to write the letters *we ought* to write without grudging the time, without resenting the trouble, justly, accurately, cheerfully, kindly, saying the right thing in the right way, neither too much nor too little, with a handwriting that is readable, and a paper which is never crossed, is certainly not what most of us can take credit for.

It is, moreover, only too evident that a great many letters are written which ought not to be written; that the cause of