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Brief Epistles

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“Cæsar to Cicero:
Expect help.”

It was thrown over into the camp, affixed to a javelin: for the barbarians prevented all personal access. Hardly had it been received, when the hearts of the garrison were made to leap with a yet livelier joy by the sight of the smoke from Cæsar's camp-fires, surging above the woods. They were seen also by the savage besiegers; who left the siege to attack him, and were utterly routed, with great slaughter.

3. It is well known that an English dandy, who courted the familiarity of Lord Chesterfield, eloped to Gretna Green with an heiress, and after having the nuptial knot tied, wrote thus to his lordship:

“MY DEAR LORD—

I am the happiest dog alive.

Yours,

JACK * * * * *

To which the wit responded—

“DEAR JACK—

Every dog has his day.

Yours,

CHESTERFIELD.”

BRIEF EPISTLES.

1. The letter of Lentulus to Catiline, in Salust's account of the conspiracy of Catiline, certainly is a model of brevity; consisting, in Latin, of but 31 words, which in English it is difficult to avoid expanding into 38. In view of the bloody convulsions which that letter was designed to produce, it used to strike my boyish fancy as having a touch of the sublime in its awful and mysterious conciseness:

“You will learn who I am, from him I send to you. Reflect, in what peril you are, and remember that you are a man. Consider what your circumstances require—seek help from all, even from the lowest.”

2. But that letter was as a President's message to a speech of Queen Victoria, compared with a missive which Julius Cæsar wrote to his lieutenant, Quintus Cicero. The latter, with a small force, was beleaguered in an isolated camp, or fortress, by an immense host of Gauls, or Germans,—no matter which. They guarded all the approaches to him so closely, that with extreme difficulty and hazard, he conveyed news of his peril to Cæsar. The great leader instantly posted off, with 7,000 men, to relieve Cicero; but sent forward a nimble courier, with a note in two words, which must have been to the distressed lieutenant one of the most delicious of *billets-doux*. It was in Greek—that the enemy might not understand it, should it fall into their hands:

“Καίσαρ Κικέρωνι
Βοήθειαν προσδεχού.”

The two upper words were only the address, or direction of the letter. The whole, in English, was—

Our own times have afforded samples of epistolary brevity, that may compare not badly with Cæsar's. I do not allude to the breathless dispatches by the lightning-horse, lately harnessed and made to bear “winged-words” with a celerity that Iris or Mercury never dreamed of, however Jupiter might hurry them. The instances I am going to cite, were before the magnetic telegraph had been invented.

4. One was a New England mother's letter to her son, who had roved away to Louisiana. It was as follows:

“DEAR TOM—

Come home.

YOUR MOTHER,” &c.

Tom's answer, quite as laconic, ran thus:

“DEAR MOTHER—

I won't.

YOUR LOVING SON,” &c.

5. Virginia, some half a century since, furnished a correspondence briefest of all. It had but one word in each epistle. The eccentric Doctor Honeyman, of Hanover, had contracted to buy, from Captain Robert Dabney, of Louisa, some live pork, which the latter was to drive down and deliver. It did not come, however, so soon as it ought: and the doctor, in a fit of mingled impatience and waggery, folded a large sheet of foolscap into a very complicated letter-form, having written in its innermost recess the single word “HOGS!” This he dispatched by express to Captain Dabney—a humorist also, of the first grain. In half a day the messenger returned, bearing in reply a similarly folded sheet, in the very penetra-

lia whereof was written, only the word used by swine-drivers to urge along their grunting herd—"Houy!"—pronounced *hoo-y!*—By this, the doctor was given to understand that the pork was coming on, with all speed. And he had hardly done laughing at the retort of his joke, when the Louisa captain appeared, with his hogs and drivers.

Would that all tellers of stories (myself included), and all makers of speeches, writers of essays, and builders of books, would learn from the heroes and heroine of my narrative, one among the most important rules of man's brief and busy life—**BE SHORT.**

M.
