

Original Documents.

AMONG indirect evidences of the state of English society in the middle ages, few are more valuable than those manuscript treatises prescribing forms for the preparation of deeds and the composition of letters, which are preserved in our public libraries. They cast the same light upon the nature of epistolary intercourse at various periods that the *Registrum Brevium* sheds upon the formulæ of legal processes during early times; and, happily, many private letters, written between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, which have descended to us, prove that these forms, however strange some may appear, were, generally, well adapted to the social exigencies of the periods at which they were compiled.

These treatises on dictation are frequently confined to an enumeration of the ceremonial phrases for commencing and ending letters to persons of various ranks; but in numerous cases the authors have gone more deeply into the subject, and supplied entire epistles, which, *mutatis mutandis*, might be at once adopted and copied by the scribe of an earl or an esquire. As may be readily imagined such compositions refer chiefly to those petty cares and vexations of human existence which are not peculiar to any age; they include solicitations for preferment, for protection, for loans of money; these are their chief features; but as they were prepared for unlettered times, when the most ordinary principles of composition were unknown to any but the clergy, the authors occasionally descended to the humblest affairs of life, and prescribed the terms in which a farmer should ask the loan of his neighbour's plough or cart. It may be observed, however, that there are no forms of amatory declaration provided, although an Iago of the thirteenth or fourteenth century is taught how to intimate to her injured lord the supposed perjury of any contemporary Desdemona.

I select from a manuscript which has recently fallen under my notice, three forms presenting very characteristic features. The first is an application by an imaginary earl of Gloucester

to his vintner, for wine on credit. The noble wisely reminds the tradesman that he had been often indebted to him, and had always fully paid him at the appointed time; therefore he the more confidently relies on him in his present urgent necessity, and earnestly begs he will let him have five tuns of wine, viz., two of Gascony, and three of Anjou, each at the price of twenty shillings, until Palm Sunday, assuring him that the money will be duly paid at the day named, and begging that he will so conduct himself in this matter that he may be entitled to the earl's thanks.

Comes mandat creditori suo ut mittat sibi vinum.

A. comes Glovernie dilecto sibi A. vinetario de C. salutem et dilectionem. Quum quicquid vobis de vino creditorio multociens debuimus, ad diem vestrum semper plenarie persolvimus, et nichil est in reragio, audacius in hoc stanti negotio confugimus attentius rogantes quatinus v. dolea vini, s. duo Gasconiensis et tria Andegavense, quodlibet ad pretium xx. s. usque ad Pasca floridum nobis acomodetis. Scituri quod denarios vestros ad diem nominatum omni occasione et dilacione remota persolvemus: tantum ergo faciatis ut vobis ad gratiarum teneamur acciones. Valet.

The form prescribed for the vintner's answer to this communication, reciting the earl's request, and the fact that he had always paid his bills, concludes, "at present I consent to your entreaty, and accommodate you with five tuns, trusting that at the day named you will pay me my debt, according to your custom." But if the customer, on the other hand, was a bad paymaster, the tradesman is advised, the recital being preserved, to make this significant variation in the concluding terms of his epistle; "I trust you with the five tuns demanded, particularly requesting that you will pay me the old debt which is in arrear, together with this new debt, at the said day."

In the next example the same imaginary earl writes to his woollen-draper in London: premising that he scarcely deserves credit, he begs that he may be trusted with twenty ells of scarlet, as many of *pers*, or blue cloth, and an equal quantity of another, at as low a price as possible, until Easter-close, "without a pledge, if you please;" but, as he seems to have entertained a suspicion that the tradesman would like secu-

rity, he prudently sends by the bearer ten gold rings and ten silver cups, substantial gages of his intention to pay. The conclusion of the epistle is curious; the earl begs his woollen-draper "so to do that he may return unto him, as his friend and creditor, thanks and honour with his money." It was a very common practice in the times in which this formula was prepared, the reign of Henry the Third, to obtain goods on deposits of jewellery or plate; and when we recollect that the king himself was more than once reduced to the same strait, there is no room to suppose that the author of this "complete letter writer" of the thirteenth century has in the least degree attributed to his imaginary earl a procedure derogatory to his position, or opposed to the manners of his age.

"B. Comes Glovernie dilecto sibi A. Pannario Lond. salutem et dilectionis affectum. Quamvis merita nostra non exigant (vel non processerunt) tamen de liberalitate vestra confidimus (ad vos in hoc instanti negotio confugimus) rogans attentius quatinus xx. ulnas de scarleta rubea et totidem de perso et totidem de minueto ad rationabile forum vel precium prout sustinere poteritis usque ad Clausum Pasca, absque pignore si vobis placuerit, mihi acomodetis, vel super x. anulos aureos et x. ciphos argenteos quos vobis transmittimus. Sciat enim pro vero quod ad diem prefixum omni occasione remota vobis bene persolvemus. Tantum ergo faciatis ut vobis tanquam familiari et creditori nostro grates et honores cum denariis vestris referamus. Valet."

The following evasive letter suggests a very simple condition of society; for excepting in times when news travelled slowly the excuse proposed would scarcely have been generally apt. A fur-dealer is advised to reply to a friend who had asked him to purchase furs that a sudden fire had destroyed all his means, and that he could find no one to trust him since.

"Dilecto amico &c. literas vestras nuper accepi in quibus me petistis ut ego vos penulas et fururas perquirerem, quod libenter fecissem, sed ignis nuper superveniens totam pecuniam meam redegit in cinerem. Unde vobis mittere non potui quod non habui; nec creditores inveni qui aliquid mihi crederent post incendium: dubitaverunt enim perdere totum quod mihi acomodarent. Precor igitur ne moleste feratis quod petita vobis non misi, cum sciatis causam impedimenti. Valet."

T. H. T.