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**SALES AND ROUTINE LETTERS
FOR THE RETAIL TRADER**

SALES AND ROUTINE LETTERS FOR THE RETAIL TRADER

BY

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AUTHOR OF "DIRECT MAIL ADVERTISING FOR THE RETAIL
TRADER"



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FOREWORD

AT some point in the growth of a business it occurs to the principal to look into the question of the routine correspondence and sales letters that are in use

As a rule this inquiry is prompted by a particularly serious complaint from a valued customer. The result of the inquiry is not infrequently a rather serious shock to the investigator. "What! we've been sending out letters like *THAT!*"

No retailer would think of placing an untrained man or woman in charge of one of his selling departments—someone who knows the "trade" is clearly needed—but it is no exaggeration to say that the routine correspondence of many businesses is entrusted to employees who have neither the native gift nor the acquired ability to express themselves in clear, forceful, idiomatic English.

There is no lack indeed, of textbooks on Commercial Correspondence, in fact, they abound, but none that I have examined is suited to the peculiar needs of the retail trader. Some of them are scholarly—far too scholarly in fact, their subtleties of syntax and tedium of tenses would baffle the matter-of-fact trader, who is more concerned with split gloves than split infinitives. Others are specialized, but for the shipper rather than for the shopkeeper, for the broker rather than the boot-seller.

The purpose of this book is twofold. In the first place it is designed to help those retailers who handle their own correspondence and write their own sales letters, but who acknowledge, as many have done to me personally, that their store of letter-lore is in inverse proportion to their command of trade technique. Secondly, it will supply the trader in a larger way of business with a ready means of training his clerical staff in the admittedly difficult art of writing letters with a breath of human nature in them. All may

not agree with every suggestion made in this book, but few will disagree with Pope in—

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance

By way of demonstrating the importance of this subject of letter-writing, and the lack of attention that is given to it, I would ask the shopkeeper whose window displays are constantly praised, whose values are a by-word in his town, whose staff are renowned for their service and courtesy—when did he last hear it said that his routine correspondence and sales letters were of outstanding merit?

A word of explanation may not be amiss on the title of the book.

In the strict sense of the word, a sales letter is one that the trader sends out on his own initiative, and not in reply to any move on the part of the customer. But there are routine letters that have selling work to do, those for instance sent in response to an inquiry for goods.

It is this second variety of sales letters, which is so closely bound up with the subject of routine correspondence, that is in question here.

A few paragraphs of this book have been re-written from articles that have appeared in *Men's Wear* under my initials, and acknowledgments are due to the Editor for his courteous permission to use them.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend. Two sub-editorial knives have been plied with welcome freedom upon both the draft and revision of this book. To Captain J W W. Cassels, of Messrs Moss Bros, and also to a personal friend, a teacher, who wielded them so deftly to cut out the dead-wood, I return thanks.

H. D.

November, 1932.

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SALES AND ROUTINE LETTERS FOR THE RETAIL TRADER

CHAPTER I

THE QUALITY OF THE MODERN BUSINESS LETTER

WHY is the correspondence section the Cinderella of the retailing business? Most retailers appear to class it among the necessary evils attendant upon shopkeeping, to be disposed of with the least possible cost and trouble. Thus they walk in the steps of their fathers before them.

It is curious that, although there have ever been pioneers in retail trading, daring spirits who have forged ahead by sheer force of initiative, it has seldom or never been in the field of letter-writing that they have led the way. Firms, great and nationally known to-day, have emerged from pokey single-shopdom by the amazing value they have been able to give, or by the brilliance of their window displays, but apparently never by the outstanding merit of the written contacts with their public. Customers who have been gained by the excellence of their goods have been lost by the crudeness, or even rudeness, of their routine letters.

The recollections of the letter-writing routine of my apprentice days are quite clear. The firm was a general drapers, employing some hundred or more people, and comprising a dozen to fifteen departments. It was considered one of the most up to date of the medium class shops of the day. The organization of the correspondence "department" was of the simplest. When occasion arose which demanded a letter to a customer, the assistant who served

the line scrawled the details on a piece of paper, and sent it up to the "typist-in-ordinary," who translated the message into the stiff and starchy diction of the day.

A somewhat later experience—this time it is true in a wholesale house—was still more amazing. Each department in the house was furnished with a duplicate letter book, in which the salesman scribbled a semi-legible note, the top copy of which was posted to the customer, accompanied by a printed slip which bore the legend: "Herewith we have pleasure in enclosing our departmental reply."

THEN AND NOW

The critical and thoroughly up-to-date reader of these lines may be tempted to remark with some intolerance at this point: "Well, such might have been the case in the dim and distant days of your youth, Mr. Writer, but we have changed all that sort of thing in retailing to-day" Have we indeed?

I assert that, in spite of the amazing advance of almost every other department of British retailing—shop-fitting, merchandise, and staff training—the way of handling routine correspondence has changed but little in the last two decades.

Lest I should be charged with taking cover behind the shield of authorship, and making general statements which cannot be substantiated, I will give the results of an actual test that was carried out during the latter part of last year with the object of determining the standard of current English business correspondence.

BY WAY OF PROOF

The idea of making such a test came about in this manner. Some advertising heretic in America had dared to doubt that all was well with certain of the much vaunted business methods of his country. He wrote, therefore, to a large number of well-known firms, and asked them to send him a catalogue or particulars of their wares. The replies he received were very fully analysed, and the daring investigator came out later in a leading American magazine on

Direct Mail Advertising, boldly exposing the futility and weakness of much of the matter sent to him.

It would appear that the American business colossus had but feet of clay after all. Its letter-writing, upon which progress so much depends, limped very badly. In the language of the American investigator himself, many of the replies he received were "dumb." I was very interested to hear of this test, as I had suspected for a long time that the general complacency in this country on the subject of routine letters only covered up a general state of inefficiency. So to make sure it was decided to make a similar test in England. The object in view was not merely to see whether or not we in this country were as other men, even as these Americans, in the world of business letters, but rather to discover in what sort of order our British house of letters might be found.

The initial step was the same as that of the American investigator. Every firm that could be found inviting inquiries for catalogues, booklets, samples, information, etc., was written to. The initial means to obtain such inquiries were, of course, newspaper and magazine advertisements, which are quite out of the scope of this book, but compliance with the requests when they come is surely one of the simplest and most elementary type of routine correspondence with which the retailer is called on to deal. At the same time a *sale* was at stake in every case.

WHAT WAS DISCOVERED

Before stating *how* the firms who were approached dealt with the inquiry for their booklet, etc., it is worth mentioning *when* their replies were received. But for the coldly accurate typewritten analysis before me, it would be incredible that at least three well-known firms—large advertisers in the national Press—should give so little heed to the organization of their general correspondence as to allow NINE clear days to pass before replying to an inquiry sent to them through the post. Two other equally famous firms replied in only one day less, and this at a time when

business was confessedly very hard to get, and competition increasingly fierce. Only 10·3 per cent of a total of 262 firms written to replied by return of post.

Such dilatoriness of dispatch might prepare the reader for mediocrity of method, and indeed such expectations are more than justified. Twenty per cent of the firms merely shot out their catalogue or booklet without even the courtesy of a covering letter to say "Thank you"; 48 per cent used an obviously facsimile letter, and only 24 per cent went to the well-worth-while trouble of typing an individual letter. One firm offered the supreme insult of a jelligraphed letter. Then at least a dozen firms thought so little of the personal appearance of the communications they sent out, that they spoiled an otherwise fair job by subscribing their name in the form of an evil blob from a rubber stamp in lieu of a genuine signature.

You will say, perhaps, at this point: "You were being hypercritical, you were looking for faults—any one can do that." Certainly we were examining the replies in a thoroughly systematic way, and subjecting them to a very careful scrutiny, but our approach was with a quite open mind, and we gladly recognized some examples of considerable merit. On the other hand, it must definitely be said that the *mass* of routine letters sent out by these hopeful traders to a patient and long-suffering public was decidedly poor in quality, shoddy in appearance, and mediocre in content.

And by way of justifying this sweeping statement, I mention that the test included firms in various parts of the country, in twenty or thirty different trades, and ranging from the small private business to the mammoth store with thousands of employees.

THE LETTERS THEMSELVES

Perhaps the mildest criticism that can be levelled against the replies received—yet one none the less pointed—is that they were *conventional*. If it were possible to make a *com-pote* of the phraseology employed by the writers in their

replies to our request for a catalogue—big firms, little firms, prosperous firms, penurious firms—it would read something like this—

Dear Sir,

In reply to your esteemed enquiry of the 11th inst., we have much pleasure in enclosing our illustrated catalogue for your perusal.

We trust that you will find it of value, and we beg to assure you that any orders you may favour us with will at all times receive our careful and prompt attention.

We are, dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,

It is more than remarkable that business men who will writhe and fume as an after-dinner speaker trails his despairing audience through a wilderness of words in order to say just nothing at all, will themselves give their signature and benediction to equally meaningless ramblings in letter form.

There were exceptions to the general rule of such "Business English" letters among the replies received, but unfortunately in some of them the "cure" was almost as bad as the disease. Here is an example. For the peace of mind of the perpetrator, we mercifully suppress the name of the firm—

Dear Madam,

A further advance in the art and craft of permanent waving—Messrs. Blank to the fore!

Ever progressive, Messrs. Blank have invented a new way of . . . This improvement was the outcome of the peculiar facilities that Blank's enjoy. . .

and so on to the bitter end of this outstanding example of the art and craft of self-advertisement. Letters like this are much more likely to produce a permanent wave of disgust in the reader than one of prosperity in the firm that sent them out.

Another firm, in complying with "our favour," proffers the following tit-bit of information—

It may interest you to know that we not only carry out the whole of the optical and mechanical work of these binoculars ourselves, but we are also the actual makers of the optical glass

On the contrary, it does not interest us in the least!

The mere conviction that the general run of letters are bad will not produce good ones. To escape from the conventional, something more than a change at any cost is needed, for that will result in a mere straining after effect. This is seen in the following example, which was sent out by a firm selling high-class china—

the morning and coffee sets do at least show how the bright spirit of the day has been caught, while the dignified loveliness of the designs on pages 6 and 7, inspired by more traditional spirit, will take the fancy of many hostesses

. . . provided, of course, they have patience to read thus far. This particular letter is worthy of special mention, for it accompanied one of the most charming booklets I have ever seen. The sheet of letter heading, too, on which it was written was designed in excellent style, but sadly marred by the fatuous nonsense quoted above, and a really horrible rubber-stamp blob at the foot in lieu of a signature.

THE BRIGHTER SIDE

The very poverty of the bulk of the letters that were examined make the few that were really excellent shine out with greater brilliance. If one of these better-phrased and better-dressed letters arrived on the breakfast table amid half a dozen rag-tag and bobtail competitors, there is not much doubt in which direction the order would go.

Here is one of the "better letters" that were received. Not ideal perhaps, but so different from the general run. It was sent out not by a retailer in the ordinary sense of the word, but by a firm who sell books direct to the public—

Thank you for giving us the opportunity of sending our Free Home Hints Book. We hope that at least one of the hints will prove of immediate service to you

Can you imagine a collection of nearly ten thousand hints, covering every possible requirement of the householder? That is the briefest possible description of *The Handyman in the Home*

Strictly, this is a routine letter, but it is one with real selling value.

THE SERIOUS SIDE OF LETTER-WRITING

Quite apart from the definite harm that is done to trade by the brusque and off-hand routine letters that go out, the thing for the alert retailer to consider is the opportunities in a positive way that are lost every day. Every routine letter is an opportunity to build up goodwill; to cement friendship between customer and firm, to be helpful and informative about details of the business that might interest the customer. Take, for instance, one of the very commonest routine letters that has to be sent out -- one that tells the customer that the goods she ordered are now ready. Here is the form most generally adopted--

Dear Madam,

We beg to advise you that the curtains to your esteemed order are now ready.

We await your kind instructions in the matter, and assure you of our best attention at all times.

Yours faithfully,

What a splendid opportunity has been lost to show the customer that the firm are interested in her and her

purchases. And there is always the possibility of a further sale to be considered. Anyway, this is a more friendly way of saying it—

Dear Madam,

You will be glad to hear that the curtains you ordered recently are now ready. They look very nice indeed, and we feel sure that you will be pleased with them.

Shall we send them on, or would you prefer to call in first?

If you do come in, and can spare a moment, our new ranges of Dress Foulards are well worth looking over.

Yours faithfully,

THE ATTITUDE IS ALL-IMPORTANT

Quite apart from the actual phrasing of the letter, there is the even more important question of the *attitude* adopted by the writer in dealing with the point at issue. So vital is this matter, and so little is its effect upon subsequent business realized, that we shall illustrate it at some length. Commence with a typical case in which the attitude to be adopted must be definitely decided upon before a letter is dictated. A small boy comes into a draper's shop bearing a frayed packet, the string obviously tied by amateur fingers. He deposits the parcel on the counter with: "Mother says these gloves are no good, and if you don't send her another pair, she'll close her account." Having thus thrown down the gauntlet—one pair, in fact—the small ambassador departs.

An examination of the untidy packet reveals a pair of driving gloves, which have split their sides, not indeed under the stress of merriment, but obviously owing to the determined entrance of a hand sizes too large for them. "Here, Miss Brown," the shopkeeper calls to his assistant, "why

did you sell those gloves so tight to Mrs. Robinson?" "But I didn't," replies the assistant indignantly; "she *will* have them like that; it's a fad of hers."

So there it is—one of those injustices that retailers have to put up with. If the customer is to be "salved" it means a new pair of gloves "no charge." Although this particular lady may not spend a great deal of money in the shop, in the majority of cases it will be deemed advisable to make the allowance, for if the claim is refused, the whole story, considerably exaggerated, will undoubtedly go the round of her friends to the certain damage of the trader's reputation.

Very well, but the essential point to decide is: How shall the allowance be made? There are two ways, dependent upon the *attitude* adopted in writing to the aggrieved customer. The following examples will illustrate the point—

Dear Madam,

Your messenger brought in the pair of gloves of which you complain. We have carefully examined them, and it is obvious to us that the damage is due to their being too tight for you.

Our assistant who served you tells us that you insisted on having this size, so it is difficult to see in what way we are to blame.

However, we are anxious to retain you as a customer, and so we are replacing the gloves with a pair of a larger size, which we hope will be found satisfactory.

Yours faithfully,

The word "however," as it is used in the last paragraph, betrays the real feelings of the writer of the letter. What he really means is: "You are really something between a rogue and a fool to insist on buying gloves tight, and then to complain that they split, but we suppose we had better

satisfy you somehow—so here's another pair, and see that you treat them more carefully."

The letter is perfectly straightforward: it tells the truth, though with a bludgeon. But the obvious answer on the part of a customer with the slightest sense of independence is to take the gloves back to the shop and her future custom across the road.

At this point some reader may exclaim impatiently: "This is all nonsense; no one writes letters like that nowadays." Let me assure you that they *do*, and even worse than that. And some of the nationally known firms are among the chief offenders.

But suppose something more like this had been sent—

Dear Madam,

We have had a good look at the pair of gloves you sent in to us, and are very sorry to hear of the trouble you have had with them. Another pair are being sent to you at once.

Gloves are very difficult things to deal with. To look smart they should be worn tight, but if they fit too well, they are inclined to split very quickly. So the only thing to do is to compromise and have them a little on the easy side.

You will notice that the pair we are sending you are a trifle larger, and we feel sure that they will wear exceedingly well.

Yours faithfully,

The second letter costs no more to write than the first, except perhaps to the pride of the writer, but it makes a friend instead of an enemy of the customer. And as likely as not she will drop in and want to pay for the second pair of gloves and own quite frankly that she was just a bit unreasonable. Yes, it *has* happened scores of times when a customer's claim has been dealt with in a conciliatory manner.

This question of attitude in business letter-writing is so important that it merits a further example.

A customer has ordered a set of loose covers for her drawing-room suite, and although the usual note has been sent advising her that the goods are ready, the lady has not called about them or sent the cash. The shopkeeper could, of course, send the parcel on and chance when he got his money, but as likely as not, if he did this, the covers would come back with some imaginary fault.

Any one of the following may be the reason why the customer has not called—

1. She did not receive, or has mislaid, the advice telling her that they are ready.
2. She has not yet had time to call.
3. She is short of cash at the moment.
4. She has changed her mind, and does not intend to take delivery.

The last is a thoroughly low-down trick to play upon a shopkeeper, and if it is certain that this is the true reason, he *might* be justified in sending the first of the two following letters. It may make the customer take the covers, but it will certainly antagonize her as a future customer. It may be argued that if she would do a trick like that it does not matter much, but it has already been pointed out that the letter will also be shown round to her circle of friends, some of whom may be good customers of the shop.

Dear Madam,

May we again draw your attention to the fact that we are still holding the set of loose covers you ordered specially over a month ago.

As these have been made to the size of your suite, they are useless to our stock, and we shall be glad if you will call in and pay for them at your early convenience.

Yours faithfully,

But if it is not absolutely certain that the fourth possible reason is the correct one, then something like the following should be sent—

Dear Madam,

As you have not called in, we should like to remind you that the loose covers you asked us to have made up are ready.

They look very nice indeed, and we feel sure that you will like them on your suite. When you call, please ask for Mr. Smith; he knows all about them.

Yours faithfully,

CAN ANYONE WRITE A LETTER?

The root of the trouble with retail correspondence and the explanation of the poverty of most business letters lies in the mistaken notion that anyone or everyone is capable of doing the job.

It is curious that the heads of the large departmental stores appear to share this illusion with the private trader who has but one or two shops.

In the big business, the buyer of each department is carefully selected for his expert knowledge of the merchandise he is to control; the finance of the firm is under the charge of a qualified accountant. In like manner, Staff, Dispatch, Display, and the various other facets of Big Business are under the hand of specialists. This is so of necessity, for if these officials were forcibly moved from their own departments into others with which they were unfamiliar, then chaos would result.

But who usually deals with the correspondence in a large store? Sometimes it is the departmental buyers, who, though deeply versed in the technicalities of their particular wares, are seldom masters of lucid English. Where there is a Post Order Department, its already overworked head is often burdened with the extra weight of departmental

correspondence. This official most likely just "grew" into his position from behind the counter; he has had of necessity to learn to write letters that are just passable, but there is no guarantee that he has real aptitude for the difficult task of handling customers through the post and settling delicate claims.

In response to the test inquiry already described, one of the best known London stores sent a clumsily-worded form letter, *badly* duplicated on a stencil machine, the date filled in on a typewriter with no pretence at matching the body of the letter, and for its crowning shame the name and address of the inquirer scribbled in with *pen and ink*. No specialist in correspondence work would ever send out such an atrocity, but evidently this large London store reserve their specialists for other work than letter-writing.

HOW DO THE "MULTIPLES" FARE?

The multiple or chain stores are even worse culprits in this respect. Their organization being decentralized, almost all their correspondence must be handled by the already overburdened branch manager. Two constantly flowing streams from a distant headquarters with which he has to contend leave him but little time to devote to careful letter-writing. The greater stream consists of many literally wooden packing cases, often containing metaphorically wooden goods. The lesser stream, but the more perplexing, for it is ever in spate even when trade is quiet, comes every morning *via* the bulky envelope from headquarters which is crammed with notices, requests for reports, instructions about staff, window trims, and a hundred other things. So it is easy to see why the standard of routine letter-writing should be low in those organizations. So serious has this become, even in the eyes of those who are accustomed to the stereotyped "Business English" type of communication, that the executives of one of the largest chain stores in the men's trade have forcibly deprived their London shops of typewriters and, in spite of the delay entailed, have centralized the correspondence at their head office.

The private trader is just as badly off as regards correspondence facilities, for does he not already need to combine in his own person something of the qualities of half a dozen of the officials of the big store. buying knowledge, salesmanship, financial ability, and so on? It is in between all these duties that he must find time for writing conciliatory letters to aggrieved customers.

WHAT IS THE REMEDY?

How can this state of affairs be remedied? Very naturally the solution must vary with the type of organization, and we can therefore only make general suggestions.

The large store already has a superintendent of merchandise, a superintendent of staff, and a superintendent of something else, what it needs is a superintendent of correspondence, a man who has some native gift to which has been added definite training in the art of business letter-writing. Such a man could easily save his firm the amount of his salary many times over by reducing the number of customers lost through mishandling or even positive rudeness through the post.

For the decentralized chain store, a correspondence manager is scarcely practicable: it would only be possible for him to train and supervise in a general way. For a business of this type the paragraph system of dealing with routine letters, which is fully explained in the later chapters of this book, undoubtedly provides the best solution.

What, then, of the private trader, the sole owner and guide of the one- or two-shop business? The answer in his case is drastically simple. By what means was one man able to found a business which forged ahead of its competitors, becoming in the course of a few years the dominant shop of the town or district? Only by the founder realizing the varied qualifications necessary for his task, and deliberately applying himself to those in which he may have felt relatively lacking. The majority of men who have built up large businesses from small beginnings are at heart salesmen: their financial aptitude, their ability to handle a staff or to

organize the other departments of a business are qualities that have been painfully acquired. The measure of their success has been, in fact, the diligence with which they have applied themselves to those necessary studies. But the curious thing is that not one retailer in a hundred has thought it necessary to include letter-writing among the things that merit his special consideration.

Surely, then, the only way for the private trader to put his correspondence on a par with the other sections of his business is to give it the same personal attention and care.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE ROUTINE LETTER

There are two kinds of letters that go out from a business house: sales letters that are sent uninvited, and must of necessity carry their credentials with them, and correspondence letters relative to some transaction or inquiry in hand. The second named have one outstanding advantage over the first in that they are expected by the addressee. The sales letter is generally greeted with a stony stare or the muttered remark: "More circulars, I suppose"; but the routine letter is welcomed with a "Ah, here's the letter from Blank's: I wonder how they are getting on with my order?" Interest is already there, and what more can be asked of a letter than that it shall be read through with some measure at least of attention? What a marvellous opportunity there is then in every routine letter, even though it concerns a most trivial matter in connection with some transaction in hand, to carry with it a breath of human nature and friendliness. And might it not take full advantage of its assured *entrée* and include a short *sales* message as well? This point is dealt with more fully in Chapter IV, page 67.

GETTING THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE

The secret of successful business letter-writing (though it should be no mystery) is to deal with the matter in hand from the *customer's* point of view. We are all familiar with the curious effect of looking through a telescope at the wrong

end—everything appears pigmy size and very distant, the very converse of the right use of the instrument whereby the object is magnified and apparently brought nearer. Most business correspondents, similarly, treat their job from the wrong end and write as if their readers were of altogether microscopic importance. Few indeed get the right viewpoint and write in a friendly, courteous way.

An examination of the average retailer's stiff and starchy communication will reveal that the balance of imagined importance is decidedly on the writer's side. He has a pompous, often bombastic, way of "imparting" certain information with which he considers his customers should be acquainted.

The hollow insincerity of the whole epistle is magnified by the "respectful" salutation often found at the end, after the manner of that much hated person who signs himself "Your obedient servant," and higher up "Begs to advise you" that unless your telephone, rates, income tax, and a few other things are paid up, he will "have no option but" to summons you

It might be well here to assure the reader that in suggesting that the manner and method of British retail letter-writing need urgent reformation, I in no wise recommend the adoption of the American style and practice, or their interpretation of "friendliness" in business correspondence. If British housewives (or their husbands either, for that matter) were addressed in the familiar "How-are-you-old-friend?" manner that is current in the States, there would very quickly be an outburst of popular indignation against the culprits.

The ideal type of letter that we have in mind is one that is written in a friendly manner, but which does not offend our deeply-rooted British insularity—a national trait that is at once the despair and envy of other nations; a letter which deals with the matter in hand in a sympathetic way, yet without that sticky insincerity that mars the productions of so many of the "up-to-date-at-all-costs" letter-writers.

A TWO-WAY TEST

To those who may yet doubt the need for such drastic reforms as have been already advocated, I suggest a double line of investigation.

Let the retailing sceptic first turn out his own correspondence files for the past year or so, and pick out thirty or forty specimens here and there from the longer letters that he has written to customers. Then in the quiet of his own house these old letters should be read over. The particular event that called forth their composition will have been long forgotten—together with any warmth of feeling (good or ill) that prompted the particular phrasing employed. At this distant date it will be possible for the owner of the business to criticize dispassionately his own productions. All he need ask while in this calm and judicial frame of mind is: "Should I like to receive letters like these from the wholesalers who serve me? Should I feel that they were from a real live person who has *my* interests at heart, or is the writer merely making excuses, and pushing all the blame on to me?"

Then, as a final proof, the reader who is still unconvinced, and who thinks I am just a little impertinent in making such sweeping statements, might do well to make a small-scale test on the lines indicated higher up. We are all so built that we can be maliciously honest in our criticisms of the efforts of others, and the investigator can rest assured that he will find ample scope if he will but enter into correspondence with a dozen or so retail firms—large and small—over an order that is in the least out of the ordinary.

CHAPTER II

IMPROVING THE BUSINESS LETTER

This chapter is about English, Business English, and English for Business. Some readers may be tempted to skip this part of the book. To such we say "Don't." But if you must, then come back and read it later.

IF, as we hope, we have successfully demonstrated in the previous chapter that the average routine or sales letter leaves much to be desired, then our task in this chapter of suggesting ways in which it may be improved will be comparatively easy.

Were we only treating the matter in a superficial manner, this chapter could be dismissed with a single sentence, for there is one golden rule which if carried out faithfully would solve every dictation difficulty, and revolutionize routine correspondence. It is—

WRITE AS YOU SHOULD SPEAK

In giving this rule I am not overlooking the fact that in ordinary conversation we habitually use expressions that would appear crude and ungainly in a letter—expressions that are often not even grammatical, but which pass muster, even among the educated, in the spoken language. It is because of this that the rule is given: "Write as you *should* speak" rather than "write as you *do* speak."

Herein lies the safeguard of the rule: we all know how we *should* speak even if we do not do so in practice, and the vocabulary and style of *correct* spoken language is the ideal for routine letters. But the trouble is that to obey this rule, in common with many others seemingly so simple, is easier said than done. Why this should be so is something of a mystery, but the fact remains that it is. Most business men of to-day can converse with a customer across the counter in an easy colloquial way, and when a situation that might otherwise necessitate a letter can be dealt with personally in the shop, the retailer feels no embarrassment

whatever—it is a part of his business. Even if a customer should ring him up on the 'phone (the instrument once a terror to the tongue-tied) he will speak almost as if the customer were in front of him in the shop. But substitute pen and paper, or worse still a shorthand-typist, for the transmitter of the telephone, and the erstwhile glib salesman at once becomes dumb. To make the point clear, consider the following letter—

Dear Madam,

**We are in receipt of your letter of
the 7th instant, for which we thank you.**

**We have pleasure in advising you that
the tablecloths to your esteemed order
have been dispatched today under separate
cover, and we trust that they will meet
with your kind approval.**

**Assuring you of our best attention to
your commands at all times, we are**

Yours faithfully,

This letter is reasonably plain in meaning, it is not rude, but it has a decidedly "stiff front," and by no stretch of imagination could it be called genial. The last paragraph means nothing at all, it is empty verbiage. A mere revision of terms will not put things right, nor will any amount of juggling with the phraseology turn this into a friendly, human letter. Judged as a letter to build goodwill, its whole outlook, diction, and make-up from start to finish is wrong.

HOW YOU WOULD SAY IT

Mrs. Customer. Is that Blanks, the drapers?

You. Yes, Madam, Mr. Blank speaking.

Mrs. C. Did you get the letter I posted yesterday about the tablecloths?

- You . Yes, it reached us this morning, and the tablecloths have already been posted. They should reach you by to-morrow morning at the latest.
- Mrs. C : Thank you very much, I was afraid that I should have to wait longer.
- You : Oh, no. You can almost always count on our being able to post anything you want the same day that we get your letter, so do not hesitate to write to us whenever you want anything in a hurry.
- Mrs. C. : Thank you very much Good-bye.

This is perhaps rather an ideal telephone conversation. In practice there would be a certain proportion of unnecessary and obscure explanation that would make a verbatim report appear somewhat muddled. But if either party on the telephone were to read such a transcript of their conversation they would instantly reduce it to the essentials given above.

A letter is essentially a one-sided conversation, and the nearer it can approach to the ideal style of speech the more lucid and pointed it will be. Let us then amend our specimen conversation as little as possible with regard to this fact, and draft it out in letter form.

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for your order for tablecloths which reached us this morning. They have already been posted, and should reach you by tomorrow morning at the latest.

You can almost always count on our being able to post anything you require the same day that we get your order, so please do not hesitate to write us whenever you want anything in a hurry.

Yours faithfully,

If the same thought and consideration were put into routine letters as would be given to a personal interview with a customer, there would be far less injury done to feelings, and far less loss of custom.

When penning or dictating a letter, so many traders appear to regard the reader as a very distant and almost mythical person who can be spoken to in a brusque, off-hand manner such as they would never think of adopting in their shop. It is easy to slash out by post, for the customer cannot answer back—until next day at least.

THIS BAD BUSINESS ENGLISH

There are two main causes for the stiffness of the average routine business letter—

1. The *attitude* adopted. The letter is written from the shopkeeper's point of view instead of the customer's.

2. The diction and phraseology employed. This is clumsy and antiquated.

This first question of attitude we have already mentioned, and we shall have need to stress it repeatedly throughout the book, but here we will consider the curious phraseology amounting almost to a distinct dialect of our language, in which so many business letters are written.

On page 19 we remarked that the fluent salesman, confronted by his shorthand-typist, at once becomes dumb. He seeks escape from this linguistic paralysis by resorting to the set phrases and clichés that come parrot-like to his mind in such an emergency. Expressions that he would never think of using across the counter are jerked out in a sharp staccato tone. He "begs to acknowledge," he "esteems the inquiry," he "has the pleasure."

Most of these phrases were formed when business as we know it was learning to walk. They were introduced to save lengthy paraphrases and to avoid verbal stumblings, just as leg-irons are used to steady the walk of the deformed. But the trouble with business to-day is that it still clings to the artificial supports for its correspondence that were invented during its infancy, although it has in other directions grown

into a vigorous and lusty giant. No wonder that its movements are clumsy and awkward

Possibly the idea our forefathers had in mind in inventing these set phrases was an economy of words, for "We regret our inability to" says in five words what "we regret that we are not able to" says in eight. When freshly coined such phrases were doubtless useful, but age has sadly withered and long custom staled their appeal to the modern reader. So soiled are they by a century's use that the periphrases they were originally designed to supplant are in every way preferable to-day.

THE HOLD OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

This peculiar style of speech has obtained such a hold that many men altogether fail to perceive its futility. In a series of class-books on English, both excellent and illuminating in other ways, the following note is found in the chapter on letter-writing: "Success in writing business letters largely depends upon a knowledge of the phrases ordinarily used in such letters." If the authors had added "in order to avoid them" all would have been well. The writers then go on to serve up as sticky a collection of worn-out phrases as one could regret to find. Here are some of them—

Your esteemed communication of the 30th ult duly reached us, and . . .

We have the honour to hand you herewith.

We regret that we cannot oblige you in this matter, and beg to remain . . .

Who can wonder if scholars who have been soaked in this sort of thing during their last years at school should grow up to write deadly dull letters when they get out to business. The old phrases jump to their minds directly they are confronted with a customer's letter to answer. They will dictate:

I am directed to thank you for your inquiry, and to send you a copy of our catalogue . . .

What the writer really says—and probably means—is that he is paid to do the job and therefore supposes that

there is no help for it, but actually the customer is rather a nuisance bothering about the wretched booklet. And in case you might think that I have faked this last example for the purpose of proving my point, I must tell you that it is an extract from a letter dated 5th October, 1931, and sent out by a large London store, which, by the way, is very much alive in other directions. Here is another genuine illustration—

In reply to your request we have much pleasure in sending under separate cover some of our sectional catalogues of general furnishings at moderate cost, of which we beg your acceptance trusting they may be of interest and service

But we hope that we have sufficiently pilloried this "Business English" to demonstrate its futility as a business getter. At the very best its effect upon the reader can be but neutral. Half of its hollow phrases mean nothing at all, and the remainder present the necessary facts in a drab and sunless manner.

THE DEGREES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

All the set phrases of this curious dialect are effete, but all are not objectionable to the same degree, so we will attempt some sort of classification—

I Complete outsiders that should be ruthlessly expelled from the letter-writer's store of phrases.

beg, esteemed, respectfully, happy to, the same, we venture, as per, please find, kind inquiry (or favour, or command, or anything similar), have the pleasure.

II Undesirables. Their repeated presence in business letters should warn the writer that his dictation is dull and insipid:

expedite, perusal, at all times, complaint, advise, to hand, duly, separate cover, permit us, take the liberty, inconvenience caused, in due course, prox, inst, ult

III. Then there are the following. They are just the usual forms, and that is perhaps their greatest condemnation:

We are in receipt of, the enclosed, we are proceeding

with, the following, we much regret, the above, at our earliest convenience.

This list does not purport to be exhaustive; it is rather given as a warning by the way.

THE TWO LANGUAGES

The difference between the spoken language such as the shopkeeper uses in talking to customers and the written language in its peculiar form of "Business English" is two-fold—

1. The vocabulary—or the actual words used
2. The style, or composition of the sentences.

Throughout this book I have maintained that the ideal vocabulary for the business letter is that which is used in speaking face to face with the customer. But so ingrained is the conventional "Business English" diction, that the retailer almost needs to learn his own language again in order to free himself from the traditional manner of dictation in which he has been brought up.

So we will deal fully with these two points in their order, and try, by contrast and example, to outline the fundamental principles of good English as applied to the needs of the retail letter-writer.

THE VOCABULARY OF ROUTINE LETTERS

The English language is peculiar, not merely because it is composite, but because the two main contributory streams have flowed along, side by side, for nearly a millennium. The result is that English is still to-day a double language. For almost everything and every idea we have two words—one from the Latin, and the other from the Saxon source. At home, on the bus, and in the shop, we speak Saxon. If we told our children to "Cease that occupation" instead of the obvious, "Stop doing that," they would rightly think that we had taken leave of our senses. But when we are called on to dictate a letter, we apparently think that the homely speech that we and our readers learned from our cradles is not good enough to put on paper, and so we resort to the

stilted Latinisms we picked up at school or from the newspapers.

But the fact remains that the old Saxon words and phrases, which are still the very fibre of our tongue, will, if rightly used, go to the heart of the readers as none else can

Here are a number of couplets to illustrate the point. If you prefer to be highly conventional, and therefore starchy, then you will choose the Latin column; but if you merely wish to say what you mean, and say it in as natural a manner as you can, the Saxon is the word to use—

Saxon-English

Latin-English

buy	purchase
hasten	expedite
room	accommodation
show	evince
drink	beverage
see	envisage
get	obtain
food-stuffs	edibles
enough	sufficient
happen	transpire
gum	mucilage
try	endeavour
ask	inquire
go	proceed
building	edifice

And so we might go on listing words on every subject, and words used in every trade. Everywhere there is the choice between the Latin and the Saxon, and, be it noted also, between the short and the long. And so the homely word is the better on two counts

Because it is so easy to drop into the "long word" habit, the letter-writer should make a point of checking over his efforts, watching specially for the "-tion" plague. Words that end thus are generally Latin, long and pompous.

To avoid confusion in the identification of the various patterns, the adoption of a system of enumeration as shown below has been arranged

Why not—

So that there shall be no mistake, we have numbered the patterns as shown below.

THE COMPOSITION OF BUSINESS LETTERS

Unless the words of a letter are rightly chosen, that elusive quality "good style" can never be attained, but right words may be clumsily used and the resulting letter may still be far from good

English composition is by far too vast a subject to outline here, but we can touch upon and illustrate a few outstanding points that have special bearing upon retail letter-writing.

Here is an extract from a letter actually sent out—

Also let us know the amount of duty paid when we will remit, together with the postage

This is at once ungrammatical, obscure, and affected. That such a sentence should have been sent out by a firm of repute is proof that there is urgent need of care and study in letter-writing. What the writer probably means is "And if you will let us know the amount of duty and postage you had to pay, we will refund it to you."

There is a threefold rule, which if diligently observed will result in better and brighter letters—

- 1 Be simple
- 2 Be clear.
- 3 Be brief

It is a little difficult to deal with these three essentials of good prose in their order, for they are interdependent in the fullest sense, so we will start with an extract which offends against them all—

We have a number of specimen furnished homes in various styles, and an immense department for good Second-hand furniture of all descriptions and of the finest value to be obtained, so as you are so near we should strongly advise you in your own interest to favor us with a visit as we have every confidence that if you do so you will be readily able to fill your requirements in the best and most economical manner

The writer of this sentence reminds one of the very early days of learning to ride a push-bike, when to start was

sublimely simple, but to stop was appallingly difficult. Such scribes suffer from a too freely flowing pen—of the baser sort—and a reluctance, with which their readers may well sympathize, to read over what they have written.

The sentence is very far from clear, not merely because it is too long—a sentence may fill a page and yet be perfectly lucid—but rather because its component parts are undisciplined and disorderly. The ideal sentence has one dominant clause or statement upon which all the rest depend, just as in a platoon of soldiers each man is under the direction of the officer in charge and is deployed to his allotted position at his superior's will. The specimen sentence is like a wandering rabble with no one in control. It is not clear because it is not simple, and complications are caused largely by its length. It would be difficult for the most inexpert scribe to get in such a muddle in a shorter sentence.

Quite apart from its transgression of our threefold rule, the sentence is incongruous in another respect. It is written in the formal and stiff Business English style, and the two Americanisms ("favor" for "favour" and "*Fill* your requirements") are, therefore, particularly out of place. The effect is rather like that of a billy-cock hat on an elderly stock-broker.

The real remedy for such a sentence is to scrap it altogether, and approach the inquirer from a totally different point of view, but to do this would spoil the example for the application of our triple rule of business letter-writing. So we will be content with reformation rather than regeneration—

We have a number of specimen homes furnished in various styles, and a large (we really cannot stomach "immense") department for good class Second-hand furniture.

As you live quite near, we should strongly advise you to call and make a personal inspection. We feel sure that we shall be able to meet your requirements economically.

This revision is far from our liking, for it is really a patching of the unpatchable—which shows how important the question of composition is in routine letter-writing.

BE SIMPLE

Now consider this—

Thank you for your note. We are glad to hear that the rugs you bought from us last year have worn so well, and as you wish we will send three more when we get them in next week

Would you like them all the same shade, or shall we send one each blue, red, and brown?

Please let us know as soon as you can so that we may send you just what you want

The new ones may be an inch more each way, and we hope that you will not mind this

Now before you go any farther, read through the above example again. Do you notice anything peculiar about it? It is not hard to understand, is it? It conforms with the first part of our rule, it is simple. But did you notice *how* simple it is, or that it contains none but one syllable words which could be understood by a child in the infants' school? It is not suggested for a moment that every business letter can be composed of words of one syllable, or that the example given is of the highest order of English composition. It is merely intended to prove that simplicity in both words and composition leads to clarity, and that it is possible to be simple without being silly.

BE CLEAR

The cause of all obscure writing is obscure thinking. The letter-writer will not take the trouble to think out the end of his sentence before he starts to gabble out the beginning. This results in odd phrases left dangling in the air with no grammatical means of support.

We are enclosing stamps to the value of 6d which you added to the amount of the collars as this was a quantity reduction

Here is a complete muddle, the more remarkable because it has been achieved in quite a short sentence. It is marvellous what the really careless writer can do. What the above sentence means is—but perhaps the reader would like to work it out for himself.

Reading over what has been written or dictated is a humiliating business, but it is the only safeguard against such verbal labyrinths as the specimen just given. After all, no one need see us doing it, but the customers who receive our letters will guess that we *have* read them over first and will thank us for our pains. And if we are really in earnest about writing better letters, we shall not only read, but read aloud every letter that is the least bit involved, for the ear is more sensitive than the eye, and what does not run easily when read by the author, who knows what he means, will certainly not be plain to the distant reader who can but guess. "Say one thing at a time" sounds a very elementary injunction, but an analysis of every involved letter will reveal that the writer had got two or three distinct ideas tangled up together.

BE BRIEF

Every one who has fretted under after-dinner speakers knows that some—yea, many—men are constitutionally long-winded. It is an unfortunate fact that this mental malady is as prone to break out in writing as in speech. Too many letter-writers have the notion that the central idea of their communication is of such exceeding value that it must be wrapped round and round with soft woolly phrases, very much after the manner of the silkworm which spins a marvellous cocoon to protect itself from the vulgar gaze and the rudeness of the elements. And if you have ever unwound a chrysalis you will know how long it takes to get to the core of many business letters. The first paragraph or two of the conventional type of letter contain no vital information at all. All they really say is "Good morning," and that to the accompaniment of much metaphorical hand-rubbing. Similarly the closing paragraph, instead of being used to wind up the message with a swing, is merely employed by the writer to "bow himself out."

Almost all business letters are too long, needlessly long. I say "almost" with intent, for in my collection I have one remarkable exception, a letter from a motor firm that runs

to five pages of close typewriting. This marvellous epistle contains almost two thousand words, with scarcely a dull sentence throughout. Its disregard of our third rule is more apparent than real, for it is a long letter that has a lot to say. The sentences are short and well built, and the phraseology is sensible and consistent. The letter purports to take the reader round the Motor Show, and succinctly describes each of the new season's models in turn. Brevity, however desirable, must never be at the expense of clarity, and for that reason we have put it last of the three rules. Generally that which is brief is also clear. But not always—

In our furniture department our beds have been reduced while our Hire Purchase terms have been extended

This is not a scholarly enunciation of the law of inverse proportion, but a piece of careless phrasing on the part of the writer.

Here are two more examples of the traps that lie in the way of the careless and unwary who will not see that our threefold rule is really one whole, that simplicity, clarity, and brevity cannot be divorced from one another.

In reference to your order for sheets, we are short of the quantity you require, and so are sending as many less as possible

We are not able to send your order as you wished

Query, the last example—did the goods go?

STYLE

That peculiar and much sought after quality in writing, both literary and otherwise, known as "good style" is really simpler than it sounds. Good style does not come by a multiplicity of witticisms, obscure allusions, foreign words, artful alliteration, or other such tawdry fineries—rather is it by having something to say, and saying it as clearly and lucidly as possible. There is a world of difference between style and "stylish" writing.

Literary frills and furbelows, and all the varied antics of the author and journalist, are utterly out of place in the

plain business letter, and one of the objects of this book is to demonstrate that there is a middle course between the deadly Business English phraseology in which the bulk of letters are written, and the "high-brow" nonsense that a few adopt by way of reaction. Neither of these extremes represent the speech of the "common people," who comprise the overwhelming majority of those who buy and sell across the counter of the retail shop. Good style for the purpose of our subject may be defined as an expression of the individuality of the writer by means of words and phrases that every reader can understand. The spontaneous comment on the part of the reader "That's a nice letter," is the highest praise a writer can desire. The remark "That's a *clever* letter" should be considered the greatest condemnation. The bane of most retail letters is that they have nothing whatever to distinguish them from millions of their dull brothers that millions of bored customers have to read because they want to know what is happening to their order.

Fortunately there is a royal rule to achieve some humble measure of style in the business letter. It is to vary the phrasing, the length of the sentences, and the point of emphasis as much as possible throughout the whole communication. Consider the following—

Dear Madam,

We thank you for your letter of the 24th of June

We have sent off your goods to-day as requested by parcel post

We hope that they will arrive safely and please you in every way

So general is this monotonous form of sentence construction that the letter-writing ability of a man may be largely judged by the number of sentences he starts with "We" Compare with this—

Dear Madam,

Thank you for your letter of June the 24th

The goods you order have been sent off to-day by parcel post

We hope that they will arrive safely and that you will be pleased with them in every way

But the opening of the sentence is not the only place in which a letter may be monotonous. The constant use of very short sentences produces a jerky machine-gun effect that is unpleasant in the extreme; and conversely a number of long sentences will send the reader to sleep, unable to cope with the cumbrous phraseology and winding arguments

FINALLY, IDIOM IS A MONARCH

The average business man, although he would not claim to be a pedant, dreads to be twitted about grammatical errors in his correspondence. For him, therefore, it is grammar, grammar, all the time. As long as his composition conforms with the vague rules and shibboleths that he remembers from his schooldays, little else matters. He forgets that, although it is true that the basic rules of the grammar change very slowly and reluctantly, the way in which particular words and expressions are used or avoided is as much subject to passing fashion as women's hats or schoolboys' games. This curious force that is at work in every living language at once confounds the pedant and the plain man of affairs. The difficult thing about idiom is this, it is the master of man who makes it, and not his servant. Some idiomatic phrases are a settled part of the language and live for generations, others are the product of a passing event and die with it.

Idiom may be defined as that which is peculiar to the language in its construction or phraseology. The school-boy who, translating from the French, produces "The pen of the aunt of my grandmother," and feels vaguely that his English, unlike the quality of mercy, is decidedly strained, has, in fact, but clapped an English overcoat on a French sentence. The words are English, but the *idiom*, as all the world may see, is blatantly French. And lest we should allow our heads to swell with racial superiority because the French say "*Un œuf à la coque*" ("An egg of the cock"), which is absurd, whereas we say the obviously correct "Boiled egg," it is well that we should recall that English abounds with expressions equally illogical that are at once the

wonderment and despair of the foreigner. So thinks the Frenchman who, leaning out of the railway carriage window, was urgently requested by his English companion to "Look out!" as the train approached a tunnel. He did, and lost his hat in consequence. To this day he cannot believe that his friend was not playing a trick upon him.

Now the curious thing about many business letter-writers is that, although they may be faultless in their grammar, their disregard of idiom is such that one might almost think that their letters were the work of educated foreigners and not of native-born Englishmen. Here are one or two examples—

1. This is to advise you as promised that we are able to procure the material you desire for the lounge suit

2 . . . one of the patterns is sold out, and we enclose a swatch of patterns, asking you to kindly make a substitute

3 I have to thank you for the favour of your inquiry, and have pleasure to enclose herewith copy of our illustrated brochure

"We are unable" is perfectly idiomatic: "We are able" is perfect grammar, but does it not sound just *slightly* awkward (which generally means unidiomatic)? "We can procure" is the idiomatic way of saying the same thing. Then, in the second example, you can "indicate a substitute pattern," but not "make a substitute."

The third sentence is so thoroughly contrary to the idiom of the spoken language that it has become almost an idiom of its own, the idiom of Business English, and it is for that reason the harder to break away from. "In enclosing" instead of "to enclose" would improve matters, but even that is not euphonious

IDIOM AND GRAMMAR

Generally that which is idiomatic is also grammatical, but the two do not always go together. So for the consideration of those who feel a little shaky on this point we will give some classified examples

1. Phrases that are both Ungrammatical and Unidiomatic

These are legion, but the careful writer will avoid most

by reason of his devotion to the cause of grammar. One noted trap, however, might be mentioned, for it has on occasions caught even writers of repute

Our new range of Axminster carpets and rugs in many colourings and patterns are shown on page 21 (A range is shown)

Mistakes of this sort are clear evidence that the letter has not been read over before being signed.

2. Phrases that are Grammatical, but are not Idiomatic

Here is the real difficulty for the plain man. His grammar will leave him in the air, and he must depend solely upon his sense of propriety, and unfortunately this is apt to let him down rather badly.

Various of our departments are showing lines at a surprising discount (Say "several" or "many" . .).

These aluminium saucepans will stand you in splendid stead ("Good stead" is the correct phrase)

Our Sale is anticipated to take place on . . (Expected to)

We have a competent supply for all customers. (Adequate or ample)

It is a pleasure to comply to your request (Comply *with*)

We have arranged this Special Sale in order that our customers will have the opportunity to . . (may have)

In all our departments we aim to prove the worth of (aim at proving)

Although there is no defect in the material, we are not oblivious to the trouble to which you have been put ("insensible to the trouble," or much better and simpler, "we realize the trouble . . ")

Under this heading comes the famous "shall" and "will" idiom. To those of us who are of the South Saxon or even Midland stock, there is no problem at all. By some special grace we are to the manner born. But the Northern Angles and the still more Northern Celts, as well as many Irish, find our niceties about these two words and their cousins "should" and "would" decidedly puzzling. Many simplify

the whole question by asserting that they have an idiom of their own and we Southerners must please ourselves. But the fact remains that if a customer in the South receives a letter with—

We *would* like to know if the goods are suitable
If you *shall* return the goods .

she will vaguely wonder what is the matter, and to that extent her attention is diverted from the subject-matter of the letter

And just to show that the matter is not so easy even for Southerners, here is a poser that the reader may care to consider. Is "should" correct in the following? —

These chairs are very much overdue from the works,
the makers, it *should* seem, have had difficulty in getting
the covering tapestry

3. Phrases that are Ungrammatical, but nevertheless quite Idiomatic

Here the grammatical guardian angel gives up the unequal contest, and utterly betrays his devotees. So powerful is idiom and so absolute its edicts, that almost every constructional change in the language may be traced to its victories over the strict letter of older grammatical law. For this we may be thankful. It was the dreadful hash the Normans made of the old Saxon inflections—which were like modern German, only more so—that gave us our modern simplified English with no genders and hardly any case-endings to learn. But the routine letter-writer needs to be very sure of his idiom before he thus flouts the rules and sins against the syntax of his tongue. Here are some examples—

"The record *plays* well." It is difficult to account for the use of the verb "plays," we mean it sounds well when played, and the idiom is quite correct.

"These blankets are offered at an extremely low price, in fact we should not be surprised if it is not the lowest figure they have been priced at since the War." (Strict grammar would forbid the second "not.")

"The colours in stock are as follows. Blue, Brown, Green"
" ("ColourS"—plural—strictly requires "follow")

4. Phrases that are both Grammatical and Idiomatic

Very fortunately these are in the decided majority, and although grammar will not indicate the correct idiom, it will very frequently warn against the incorrect

"Our hard won reputation " (Not *hardly* won)
 "We claim that this is the best material of its kind " "
 (Not "We claim this to be the best " ")
 "We agree *with* your opinion that the material is faulty,"
 but "we agree to your suggestion that we should replace it "
 "This Sale *bids fair* to surpass all previous ones "
 "We *take it* that you will agree to "

ON SAYING EXACTLY WHAT YOU MEAN

It has already been stated that the very essence of good style in writing is (a) to have something to say; (b) to say it as clearly as possible. And because our language contains more words of similar meaning (synonyms) than almost any other, it behoves the careful writer to be ever on the watch lest he should be snared into using the wrong one, for the particular context, of a pair of words that are very closely related

Here is a list of some words that are often easily confused, to the detriment of the letter in which they appear—

act	action	delusion	illusion
apprehend	comprehend	apt	liable
assume	presume	authentic	genuine
below	under	broad	wide
decided	decisive	defective	deficient
essential	necessary	fragile	frail
practical	practicable	reciprocal	mutual
resort	recourse	small	little
effect	affect	deprecate	depreciate
continuance	continuation	imminent	immanent
credible	creditable		

We are all vastly amused at the constant crop of "howlers" which result from the struggles of the schoolboy to master the intricacies of his mother-tongue; but the boy who writes that his father is an "optimist" because he makes glasses,

or that the best way to separate sand and sugar is to "fillet" them, is no more blameworthy than the business man who writes: "We must *depreciate* any suggestion that our assistant knowingly sold you a defective pair of gloves."

DECORATION

Some writers in their desire to escape from the banalities of Business English, merely succeed in being dull in other ways: others less conventional in mind produce high-powered letters that attract attention to themselves rather than the matter on hand

There are, indeed, many ways of relieving a letter from dullness, but all should be used sparingly. Nothing is more objectionable than a letter on quite an ordinary matter thickly sprinkled with foreign phrases—dressmaker's French, for instance, or even worse confectioner's French. The misguided patrons of these antics, not content with an honest English "cake," must needs refer to our "superb *gateaux*." One writer on English composition, referring to this alien plague, has dryly put it thus: "Foreign words and phrases should rarely be used, even by those who do *not* know what they mean."

Quotations from the poets are a snare to some soulful writers who wish at all costs to be out of the ordinary. "Imitation is the sincerest of flattery" announces one sales letter I read. The quotation is, in fact, perfectly correct, but ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have said "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," and so the quoter has gone out of his way to puzzle his readers, and so lessened the value of his letter.

Decoration that is deliberate is generally strained and obvious, only that which is spontaneous should be admitted into routine or any other letter-writing.

BY WAY OF EXAMPLE

So that our criticism of letter-writing in general should not be entirely destructive, we give a short list of the

worn-out phrases that make up so many business letters, and then suggest the colloquial equivalent

<i>Business English</i>	<i>Household English</i>
In the contemplated eventuality	If so.
We are endeavouring to procure	We are trying to get.
We have, therefore, substituted	So . . . has been sent instead
We have pleasure in submitting same for your approval	We are sending the . . . for you to see
Regretting our inability to comply with your request	We are sorry we cannot do as you wish
Despite the unfavourable climatic conditions.	Although the weather has been so bad
The . . . will be dispatched at our very earliest.	We will send the . . . as soon as possible

LETTERS MADE TO MEASURE

The great disadvantage under which the writer of a sales letter works is that he seldom knows anything about the people to whom his communication is addressed. The very best he can do is to gauge the general type of customer on the list he is dealing with, and adjust his appeal accordingly. Individual characteristics are unknown to him, and so he can only shape his letter to fit a mythical "average" customer.

Not so the writer of the routine letter, he has much more to go on. Very likely the customer has been in the shop, or at least there is a letter from her which will give some clue to her personality. How foolish then for the retail correspondent to be content with "reach-me-down" letters when he can so often fit his letter to the customer, and so demonstrate that he has some sort of knowledge of her ideas and preferences. Routine letters should always be "made-to-measure."

Then, the English are somewhat conservative, all of us equally and hopelessly so in American eyes, but actually the thickness of our insular armour varies according to the strata of society in which we are found. Those, too, who

live in the country are less approachable than the town-folk, and the tone of routine correspondence must be adapted accordingly. Although, as we hope to show in a later chapter, a human and even friendly attitude in a routine letter may be consistent with the strictest propriety between the shop-keeper and the customer, yet a wide margin of allowance must be made for varying classes of customers.

Then there is the deeper distinction of sex. Though it is true that women form the very great majority of the retailer's customers, in certain trades it is necessary to write to men from time to time. As a rule, men like the "John Blunt" type of letter, the kind that gets down to facts with the minimum of preamble. Facts are what they want, and even a few statistics may not come amiss if they relate to the favourite "gadget" of the day. Logical arguments, provided they are not wearisome, will hold the male reader.

But figures, reasoning, and precise statements to a woman are anathema. Give her something "newsy", tell her how she can *do* this, and that, and the other; appeal to her imagination.

WRITING DOWN

Above all, the trader should avoid a condescending attitude in his correspondence. The high-brows call it a "superiority complex," and it is as bad as it sounds. It is fatal for a shopkeeper to treat his postal customers as if they were illiterates. Some may be so it is true, but even with them there comes into operation a little-recognized principle of latent mental capacity, to the disadvantage of the letter-writer. A critic of music or art is able to detect blemishes in the works submitted to him, although he may be totally incapable himself of producing anything approaching their standard. In the same way, the student of French can read and understand far more of that language than he could write or speak. The young child is quick—too quick—to seize upon parental slips of grammar and pronunciation, although it is entirely ignorant of the principles underlying them. In the same way, a semi-illiterate customer can

sense whether or not her draper or grocer considers he is writing to one beneath him.

Just as the growing boy detests being called "darling" or "duckie," so any normal housewife will strongly resent being treated as if she were one of a lower order of society, or as one who is somewhat simple-minded.

THE TWO PARTS OF LETTER-WRITING

There is a superstition abroad that accounts for the success of many of the Schools of Journalism whose enticing advertisements appear in almost every newspaper and magazine. This superstition is that the acquisition of certain grammatical rules, plus some mysteriously efficient coaching on the part of the school, will transform plain Tom, Dick, or Harry into such a brilliant writer that even the "spare-time" dribblings from his pen will be avidly snapped up by Fleet Street editors.

It is unlikely that any readers of this book have ever seriously contemplated the possibility of gathering "easy-money" in this way, but quite a number of folk have entirely false ideas of the qualifications of a good letter-writer. Perhaps, more accurately, they are accustomed to think there is but one qualification, whereas there are two which are of prime importance.

The trouble is that too much stress is placed upon the actual writing, the mechanical arrangement of the words and phrases, and too little upon the *idea* that lies behind them. Poor bricklayers will never build a good house, but the best bricklayer in the world will be helpless if the architect has misdrawn the plans.

As in the realm of literature, so to no less degree in business letter-writing, the *first* requisite is clear *thinking*. If this prime qualification is possessed, the prospective letter-writer may then turn his attention to the "mechanics" of the craft, the rules that govern the use of the words and sentences whereby his thoughts are put on paper.

There are some men who rightly occupy high positions in the business world—they are keen buyers, or men of

uncanny financial judgment—yet if asked to dictate a business letter a little out of the ordinary, or to make an informal speech, they are covered with confusion. Their business aptitude depends on instinct rather than solid reasoning, and when confronted with a problem that requires considered forethought, they are undone.

If a retailer feels that he is so built, far from being ashamed of it he should be glad to realize the fact, and concentrate on the compensating abilities with which he is endowed. But he should get someone else to write his letters for him.

The more complicated and delicate the subject-matter, the greater the importance of this dual process of the mental and mechanical in letter-writing.

An adjustment letter will fail badly if the writer is unable to make up his mind beforehand what to say. Letters which start off clearly, but degenerate into a hotch-potch of words without connected meaning betray this lack of initial thought and consideration.

Perhaps it may be well here to insert a caution regarding the other extreme. Mere literary brilliance can never replace a technical knowledge of the goods about which the letter is to be written. So we might revise our previous statement and say that there are *three* parts of good letter-writing—

1. A sound knowledge of the “selling points” of the goods
2. The power to think clearly beforehand
3. A reasonable command of correct English

The mere scholar who is asked to write a letter on a trade subject must needs take refuge in frothy nothings to conceal his lack of technical information. His letter may be interesting to read, it may even be witty—but it will not tell the customer what she wants to know about the goods, and after all that is the reason why business letters are written at all.

BUILDING THE SKELETON FIRST

It is a good plan for the retailer who has occasion to write many letters to draw up a few outlines which can later be filled in as the need arises to dictate a particular type of

letter. This suggestion is quite distinct from the preparation of "paragraphs," which we advocate in the next chapter; here we are concerned with the basic framework of every business letter.

In order to emphasize the peculiar character of the routine letter, we will first glance at its cousin the sales letter, and note its fundamental outline

Here are the three parts which every right sales letter must contain—

1. The opening to get attention.
2. The centre to arouse and sustain interest.
3. The close to induce action.

Now the one outstanding advantage of the routine letter over the sales letter has already been stated; the customer is already interested to some degree in its contents, and not infrequently she is awaiting its arrival with impatience.

The briefest mention of the transaction to which the letter refers will, therefore, suffice for a routine letter, for the customer knows all about it already. The folly of most routine letter-writers is that they devote a whole woolly initial paragraph to the work of introducing themselves to the customer. Only if there happen to be two or more similar transactions in hand for the same customer at the same time are more than a dozen words necessary to secure the attention and intelligent interest of the reader of a routine letter. Consider this—

In reference to your esteemed order placed with us on the 17th ult. for a blue and brown patterned honeycomb quilt with bound edges, we now have much pleasure in advising you that the same is to hand to-day

Thirty-nine weary words are used to tell the customer, who has been wondering when on earth Binks & Co. were going to get her quilt, that it has at last arrived. Why not say it in eight—

The quilt you ordered recently has just arrived

The most usual purpose of a routine letter is to give or ask for information. This work very naturally occupies the

body of the letter. If the transaction in hand is a rather complicated one, the letter may have to be long, how long depends on the dexterity, or lack thereof, of the writer. Not one in a hundred need run over to the second page. If a letter is getting long it is a sure sign that its phrases need pruning—or more likely re-casting altogether.

Thus far the routine letter resembles its "sales" cousin: it has a head and a body. To make the comparison clearer, we will put the two side by side—

	<i>Sales Letter</i>	<i>Routine Letter</i>
Head	Getting attention	Very brief statement of the transaction to which the letter refers
Body	Arousing and holding interest	Giving or asking information

Now, in addition to this head and body, the sales letter has a *tail*, and furthermore, after the manner of the scorpion, this tail is a most important part of its make-up, for therein is the "sting" that paralyses the "sales-resistance" on the part of the customer and causes her to make the purchase. But with a routine letter it is different, a response to a request for a catalogue, or for information about goods is almost the only kind that needs any "sales urge" whatever at the end. The obvious conclusion is that most routine letters are of the Manx breed—they are normally tailless. Unfortunately, the majority of correspondents, not content to leave a thing as Nature made it, must needs burden their routine letters with a clumsy, artificial appendage, simply because it is the usual thing. This takes the form of the standardized Business English vapid assurances of "our best attention to your esteemed commands" or "awaiting the favour of your kind reply."

A long-suffering public has become so accustomed to these needless final phrases that it has learned to clap the letter back into its overcoat if the last paragraph should begin with one of those "Trusting that", "Assuring you", "Awaiting the", or other participial phrases which warns them that the letter has really finished, and what follows is only flips and flourishes. Therefore save

your time, your typist, and your reader when dictating routine correspondence. Do not overbalance your letter by weighting it down at the end.

HOW TO TEST A LETTER

Habit is hard to break away from. Our grandfathers shamelessly paraded the public ways wearing mutton-chop or dundreary whiskers, they wore suits that would cover us with confusion if compelled to appear in them. Their whiskers are gone, their suits are gone, but their letter-forms persist to this day, and—amazing thing—we are loth to part with them. How then can we decide if a routine letter is rightly written? How can we be sure that it is not foolishly old-fashioned, nor arrogantly modern?

Here is a fourfold test that can be applied. If a letter passes this, there is not much wrong with it—

1. Does it read *smoothly*?
2. Is the meaning clear to a *stranger* at the first reading?
3. Is it written from the reader's point of view?
4. Are the words and phrases in the letter used in the spoken language?

Every lord of literature will tell his disciples that to ensure a correct style, every draft must be read aloud. Very few take that sound advice, to the detriment of their productions. It may be that business men are less high-minded and will deign to apply the first part of the test in this amplified way by reading *aloud* what they have written, and so improve their correspondence. It is possible, however, that the letter-writer brought up in the Business English School will fail to detect the harshness of his own diction, the remedy is the criticism of a third party to whom the letter to be tested may be read *aloud*.

By the "stranger" in the second line of the test is meant someone who is not acquainted with the subject-matter of the letter—not the writer or the customer—and this is the most searching of all.

Nor is the last line to be neglected, for so used to the clumsy phraseology of Business English have many become

that they fail to detect its ponderosities. But every business man knows how he would and how he would not speak across the counter of his shop. If a phrase would sound absurd spoken to a customer, then it cannot but be dull in typewriting.

CHAPTER III

THE PARAGRAPH SYSTEM OF HANDLING ROUTINE CORRESPONDENCE

IN Chapter I some letters that had actually been sent out by retailers were criticized. We were scathing, it is possible that we were harsh. So here we will look at the other side of the question and consider the difficulties that beset the retail letter-writer.

If the business is a small one, it obviously will not be possible for one man to specialize in correspondence. Either the owner of the business or one of his senior assistants must handle the job. But the trouble is that both owner and assistant are by trade butchers, bakers, or candlestick makers—certainly not letter-writers, except by dire force of circumstances. Not infrequently the more expert they are at their own business, the less facile they are with the pen.

On the other hand, the progressive and successful trader of to-day, unlike his grandfather who founded the business, has had an all-round education and, if he took himself seriously to task, there is no doubt but that he could produce correctly phrased and polite business letters.

But the trouble is that, so far from having time to settle down to the job, for the best part of the year the shopkeeper has scant opportunity to think about letter-writing, apart from the few minutes snatched from other duties each day to deal with the correspondence that cannot possibly be left over until to-morrow. Nor, for the man with a medium-sized business, is this flurry confined to the "rush" season. Problems of staff, display, buying, premises, and advertising, crowd in upon him—things that simply must be attended to.

But there is more in it than this. Even the experienced letter-writer knows very well that the quality of his dictation depends to a great extent upon the mood he is in at the moment. Who can give down an easy conciliatory letter

to an aggrieved customer in the middle of an afternoon when everything has gone wrong? Even for the expert there are times when the phrases come easily and fit snugly; at others the dictation is all ends and hiatus. Some of the stores, whose correspondence is large enough to justify the expense, have sought a remedy by appointing a well-educated, or even a university man to take charge of their correspondence. What is the result? In nine cases out of ten the man produces letters in flawless English, but written without the slightest trade-sense of the multitudinous departments that he is called upon to represent—and very little of the traditions of the firm that employs him. He is imported, and his letters will show it.

FORM LETTERS

Another way out of the correspondence difficulty, one that has been tried by both large and small traders, is the form letter. This is a decided step in the right direction. It is obvious that in a business where perhaps twenty or thirty letters a day are written to customers, a certain proportion of them will be almost identical.

Advantage of this may be taken in two ways—

1. Letters may be drafted out to cover these commonly recurring situations, and a supply run off on the office duplicator. A copy is then filled in with the customer's name and address, and the burden of typing out the whole is avoided.

2. Each typist may be supplied with one specimen of every form letter, and instructed to type a copy to a customer as required. Here time is saved only for the dictator.

There is no doubt that in the medium to large business such form letters have a right and useful place, the serious temptation is to use too many of them. The retail business that can properly use more than a dozen is exceptional. "Why is that?" you ask, "surely there are more than a dozen commonly recurring situations that could be settled without a specially dictated letter?" There are. Probably there are a hundred and twelve for that matter, and there

is the very crux of the problem, for many of the replies to customers' letters must needs cover two or more points, and at once the possibility of using a form letter is gone

The perfectly straightforward situations that might well be dealt with by form letters in many retail businesses are—

1. Simple acknowledgments of a simple order.
2. Advice that the goods have been sent off.
3. A note to ask for the return of goods from appro.
4. Advice that goods ordered are ready.
5. A request for cash before delivery.
6. A covering note accompanying patterns of material
7. Letter to accompany a catalogue sent by request.

If the shop has a Post Order Department, there will possibly be scope for one or two extra letters bearing particularly on that type of transaction.

THE FAILINGS OF THE FORM LETTER

It is one of the ironies of life that a thing or a plan that is particularly simple and easy in operation is usually particularly objectionable for other reasons. Nothing could be easier in theory than the form letter way of handling correspondence, but unfortunately it is open to at least three serious difficulties in practice—

1. The stock of the actual letter, when a number are run off on the duplicator, gets dirty long before it is exhausted

2. There is the dreadful possibility that the typist may pick the wrong letter out of the rack, or type from the wrong original.

3. When a supply is run off, it is very difficult to get a satisfactory "match-in" between the address and the body of the letter.

It is usually the proprietor of the business himself who is the cause of the first of these three troubles. In his enthusiasm for the new idea, he will order several times the necessary quantity of the various letters that are needed.

For a typist to send the wrong letter to a customer is a major offence, to be dealt with accordingly, but there is more in the second difficulty than that. A customer may

send in an order that at first sight is perfectly straightforward; all that is needed is a simple acknowledgment letter, the ideal subject for a "form." But unless the trader has read through the letter very carefully before tossing it to the clerk with a "Send No. 1 letter," he may miss the line at the back in the crabbed handwriting asking for details of his new line of stair-carpet. If he does miss it, snared by the easiness of the form letter, the customer will get merely an acknowledgment of her order, and will wonder why it is that the shopkeeper has so little heart in his business that he does not care whether she buys stair-carpet or not.

There is another drawback which limits still further the use of form letters. It is their lack of flexibility. Each letter is drawn up to cover one particular point, and if the point to be dealt with fits the form all is well, there is a decided advantage in using the set wording on which considerable forethought has been expended, instead of concocting a ragged, dictated reply for every case. To this extent the owner of the business may count on the general tone of his correspondence being raised by the use of form letters.

But should the customer's communication, to which a reply is to be sent, fail to fit exactly any of the letters provided, then there is the immediate temptation to ignore the phrasing of the nearest form altogether and resort to a clumsy cold-shoulder, composed-on-the-spot communication.

The "matching-in" difficulty is also a very real one. It is hard to get the typewriter ribbon to just that degree of blackness of the duplicated letters—which themselves vary according to the age of the ribbon on the machine on which *they* were produced. Some firms get round the problem of matching-in by using the red half of the typewriter ribbon for adding the name and address of the customer to the form letters. I have one in front of me now done that way. To give the firm credit, the body of the letter is very nicely duplicated, just a trifle patchy perhaps, so betraying to the critical eye that it is a mass product. But the "fill-in!" Evidently the typist had just put a new ribbon on her

machine, for the name and address and date are inserted in a thoroughly Bolshevik red.

THE BETTER WAY

How is it possible to take advantage of the undeniable virtues of the form letter principle, and yet avoid the serious objections to this method of dealing with correspondence?

Fortunately the solution is ready at hand. It is simple, easy of operation, and has been thoroughly tested over a period of years. It is the paragraph system

In its fully developed form, this method of handling correspondence is surprisingly little known or understood, although in its elements almost every business letter-writer uses it

This is how it comes about. A busy shopkeeper is struggling with a batch of letters that must be answered that afternoon. After dealing with a dozen or so by means of the usual trite Business English phrases, he comes to one that cannot be so easily disposed of. The point it touches concerns his trading policy, from which he is determined not to depart. But between his determination and the explanation of the "reason why" for that particular policy in a courteous manner to the customer, there is a great gulf fixed, a gulf that must be bridged by acceptable words. How can this knotty point be thought out with all these other duties crowding upon him? He will doubtless make a hash of the reply, and by insisting upon "his policy," and writing from that angle, he will most likely permanently offend a customer who might have been won by a more tactful explanation.

The only hope is that the harassed trader may remember that an almost identical case occurred about a month ago. "Let me see, who was it? I know, it was that Mrs. Brown; get me the letter out of the file that I wrote her." So the old letter to Mrs. Brown, which was composed one morning when things were rather quiet, is found, and really it covers the point at issue remarkably well.

So the retailer thanks a kind providence for such an excellent ready-made reply to the present customer, and

instructs his typist to send the same letter as Mrs Brown's, with just a slight variation here and there And so the foundation of a paragraph system is laid—if only the founder has wit enough to recognize the fact

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE ONE BEST WAY

Do you laboriously cudgel your brains afresh each time a particular problem presents itself? The point in question may be crystal clear in your own mind, but can you express yourself succinctly about it on the spur of the moment? Even if you can, there is no doubt that on one occasion the exact phraseology you use will be more finished than at another So why not shape the reply to that particular point once for all, shape it, too, one day when there is plenty of time, shape it in the *one best way*

Here is the value of such a system If the correspondence of an average retailer were analysed it would almost certainly be found that quite a number of the letters cover almost identical points. Suppose he writes 200 letters in a week Probably there are not more than fifty distinct situations dealt with in the whole 200 Then, again, of those fifty varieties some occur many times, some only once or twice during the week, most likely a dozen of the more common ones will cover 150 out of the total of 200 letters that are written

Now if these dozen commonly recurring situations can be dealt with once and for all in the *one best way*, then 75 per cent of the retailer's business correspondence will be covered

The usefulness of the form letter for dealing with simple situations has already been noted, but that usefulness breaks down immediately the situations become complex A form letter can only cover one specific point; it is helpless if confronted with two or more independent or interrelated points Herein is the strength of the plan we are now advocating It consists of a series of carefully prepared paragraphs each dealing with *one point only*, but so constructed that it will link up easily and naturally with others of the series to form a complete and intelligible letter

HOW TO START A PARAGRAPH SYSTEM

The reorganization of most departments of a retail business involves an expensive preliminary investigation which merely yields a page or so of typewritten report from which the reorganizers can commence work in the direction indicated.

But in compiling a set of paragraphs for use in a retail business, the very material gathered in the course of finding out the present state of affairs is itself the base of the new system

If the shopkeeper has reason to suspect that his routine correspondence is not up to the standard of the other departments of his business, or if he finds that the dictation of the necessary letters is a serious drag upon his time, then let him give instructions that an *extra* carbon copy be taken of every letter sent out during the next six or seven weeks

I might even venture to suggest that some retailers who have no suspicion that their correspondence is other than quite satisfactory would also profit by such an investigation.

At the end of the agreed period, the whole pile of "carbons" is gathered together and carefully analysed

If the shopkeeper is the fortunate employer of a clerk or salesman who has sufficient gumption to divide the copy letters correctly into a rough preliminary classification according to their subject-matter, then he will be saved some hours of wearisome drudgery in the first stage of the analysis.

On the other hand, if the owner of the business can summon up sufficient time and moral courage to tackle the job himself, then he will be rewarded by a closer view of the inner workings of his business than he has ever had before.

That the work of analysis is arduous I fully admit; I have done it myself, and must confess to a sinking feeling when confronted by a pile, about three feet high, of "carbons" in the thinnest of duplicating paper. But the time so hardly invested is paying an excellent dividend to-day in the ease with which I am able to handle a large and intricate correspondence amid many other duties.

SORTING THE "CARBONS"

Some of the copies will be found to deal with one point only, and a note might be taken of these to provide some guide for the compilation of such form *letters* as may be ultimately considered necessary. Most, however, will be more complicated than that—many of them dealing with several points in reply to a customer's letter. So it will be necessary to use a pair of scissors and dissect them into their component parts, each covering one point only.

At this stage the carbons—whole or sectional—are simply sorted into half a dozen *general* classes according to the type of situation they cover.

Here are some suggested general divisions which will probably be found suitable for most types of retail businesses—

1. Acknowledgments of orders and inquiries
2. Advices of delivery or dispatch, etc
3. Communications concerning cash
4. Catalogues or information sent
5. Complaints of various kinds
6. Goods on approbation.
7. Credit accounts, etc.

This outline must be regarded as essentially provisional for the first rough classification may have to be amended as the work goes on, and the groups re-sorted into fresh and more accurate divisions. Above all, too many classifications should not be attempted, those suggested above plus one or two peculiar to the business concerned should be ample.

The next and most important part of the job is to take in turn each of these groups containing an assortment of embryo paragraphs and subdivide them into the various single correspondence situations that they contain.

Finally, a census of these subdivisions is taken and a decision made as to which of them merits a paragraph written to deal with the situation it represents. Whether or not a particular situation warrants a paragraph must be decided by popular vote of the carbon copies in the

subdivision The three following considerations should govern the selection—

1. If a certain situation arises almost every day, or at the least several times a week, then it will certainly justify the writing of a paragraph

2 Although a situation only arises occasionally—perhaps once a month—it concerns an intricate point that is difficult to explain on the spur of the moment. If the investigator judges that this matter crops up, say, a dozen times in the course of a year, it may be well worth while composing a paragraph to deal with it It will probably be found advisable to treat this class separately as the ordinary analysis of carbons will not apply here

3 There are situations that only arise at certain seasons of the year, but then very frequently The regular sale periods and the holiday business may bring their special correspondence problems. Some firms, for instance, decline to send sale goods on approval, and this needs explaining courteously but firmly dozens of times during the period. These situations certainly merit the construction of paragraphs

With regard to the last point, the investigator needs to cast his mind to and fro, for only one type of “seasonal” paragraph may appear in the six or seven week collection of “carbons” upon which he is basing his analysis of the needs of the business

Then in the course of his investigation, the owner of the business will come across a number of situations which he will at once recognize as being quite exceptional These should resolutely be refused a paragraph, otherwise the completed system will become clogged up with useless matter and freak cases. No system can hope to cover the whole of the correspondence of a business; but who will complain if he can deal with 80 per cent of his letters in this simple way?

WRITING THE PARAGRAPHS

Now we are ready to discuss the writing of the actual paragraphs, and it must be emphasized that this job is being done once for all. If properly worked out at this point, the

whole scheme of paragraphs will never need more than a periodical polish or slight revision to keep them abreast of changing conditions. In this final stage there will be plenty of material to work on. Unless each subdivision of carbons into which the main classifications have been sorted contain a considerable number of specimens of a single situation, then by the rules we have already laid down, no paragraph would need to be written. It is highly probable, therefore, that for every situation arising in routine correspondence which merits a paragraph, there will be 20, 30, 40, or even more carbons, each one representing an attempt to deal with that particular situation as it arose at the time.

A careful comparison will most likely reveal that quite a number of these specimens are almost identical in phrasing, thus showing that even without ordered plan the dictator unconsciously "paragraphs" his letters. It is very simple to "cancel out" these similarly worded examples, retaining one only of each as a sample, so leaving the investigator with perhaps half a dozen carbons, each dealing with the same situation from slightly different angles.

The production of the actual paragraph now proceeds in two distinct stages—

1. The approach or attitude to be adopted in dealing with the particular situation
2. The actual phrasing of the sentences forming the paragraph

It may be that one of the carbons actually deals with the situation in the best possible way as far as the approach is concerned, then all that remains to be done is to polish, revise, or recast the existing wording, so that it reads as easily and naturally as possible.

On the other hand, all the specimens available may leave very much to be desired, and it will be necessary for the investigator to decide for himself the best approach to adopt.

A SPECIMEN PARAGRAPH

By way of demonstrating these principles, we will take a very commonly recurring situation in shopkeeping: one that

calls for care and tact in handling through the post. A customer orders some pillow-cases to be obtained, and the trader promises them by a certain date. They do not arrive from the wholesale until nearly a week after the day they should have reached the customer, and then only three out of the four ordered turn up.

The shortest-sighted trader will acknowledge that some covering note is necessary with the belated goods, unless the customer is to be for ever alienated from the shop. This is a situation that might be dealt with in a great variety of ways. Our space will only allow us to consider two or three. Among the different approaches exemplified in the carbon copies to this somewhat awkward situation, there will probably be found something like this—

We beg to advise you that only three out of the four pillow-cases you ordered have been sent by the factory, so we are forwarding them to you to-day, and hope to let you have the remainder in the course of a few days.

Here is small comfort, or courtesy either, for the customer who has already waited a week for her order. Most likely she will write or telephone to the trader not to bother about the fourth pillow-case at all. And she will take good care not to bother about going to *that* shop again. Very clearly both the attitude adopted and the wording is wrong here.

Now compare this—

We beg to advise you that three out of the four pillow-cases you ordered have been sent by the factory, so we are forwarding them to you to-day.

We assure you that every effort will be made to effect delivery of the remaining one at the earliest possible moment.

Although the first part of this specimen differs from the previous one by one word only—the word “only” itself, in fact—yet there is a world of difference in the attitude implied. The first starts with bad news: “*only* three have come”—it makes the worst of the case; the second starts with what good news there is. “three *have* come anyway.” In spite of its cumbrous Business English wording, it goes

about the job from the right angle. It does at least take the edge off an annoying situation.

What the compiler of the system of paragraphs now needs to do is to still further improve the approach, and then phrase the result in the best possible way. Something like this might be the result—

You will be glad to hear that we have been able to send off three out of the four pillow-cases you ordered, and we sincerely hope that they will not be too late to be of use.

An urgent note has been sent off to the factory about the remaining one, and you may be sure that we shall not lose a moment this end in getting it off to you.

The word "pillow-cases" has been inserted throughout these examples to make a concrete case, but the outline would serve equally well for pants, pineapples, pictures, or pearl necklaces.

It must be stressed that the final stage of settling the wording of a paragraph should never be attempted until the right attitude has been found. First get the skeleton right, then see how decently and well it may be clothed.

SUMMARY

Here it might be well to summarize the steps in the construction of each one of the paragraphs that go to make up the whole scheme. If one of these stages is scamped, then the final result will certainly suffer—

1. Decision that a certain situation merits a paragraph.
2. Consideration of the carbon copies dealing with the point.
3. Elimination of similar examples, leaving only those which deal with the point in distinct ways.
4. Selection of the right attitude, and drafting out of the skeleton of the paragraph.
5. Filling out the skeleton; the wording of the paragraph.
6. Making sure that the finished paragraph fits easily in with others of the series.
7. Polishing—polishing—and again polishing the final paragraph until it cannot be polished any more.

The critical reader will at once say of stage No. 7 that a

paragraph that purports to deal with a situation in the "one best way" should have no need of polishing, and in theory he is quite correct. But in actual practice the one best way is the best that the paragrapher can produce at the time—until he polishes it into a better way, and then still better again.

Stage No. 6 is worthy of careful note, it suggests that there should be a final look through the collection of paragraphs to make sure that there are no loose ends that will not fit in the one with the other. The composer of the series should bear in mind all the time that his productions are to be interdependent in the fullest sense.

For this reason it is unwise to settle the framework of the whole scheme too rigidly at the outset. It is very likely that the first rough classification will need some slight amendment to hold better the growing number of completed paragraphs. Then conversely, it may be necessary to adjust a few of the paragraphs themselves to fit more accurately into the final framework decided upon. All this work, laborious in the performance, will result in a more perfect system of finished paragraphs.

The writing of these actual paragraphs may well take two or three months of every moment that the shopkeeper can spare from his other duties, but when it is accomplished, he will ever be grateful that he stole or snatched the time in which to do the job. To take so long over a hundred or so paragraphs may seem excessive, and there will be the constant tendency to scamp them—and so mar their permanent usefulness.

LAUNCHING A PARAGRAPH SYSTEM

The author of a system of paragraphs who has got to this point must firmly believe in the idea, or he would not have won through the difficult task of their composition, but now he must be prepared for the discovery that his staff in general, and the clerical section in particular, will consider them just the stupidest thing they have ever heard of.

The bigger the business, the more difficult it will be to

"sell" the idea of dealing with correspondence by means of a system of paragraphs. Numberless objections, such as indeed greet every innovation, will be raised, perhaps the most overwhelming being: "We've managed up to now without them, so why on earth . . . ?" In a really large organization it will be a severe test of moral courage to carry the scheme through, for there the objectors will not be merely the typists and "dud" letter-writers, but many of the minor (and even major) officials of the firm, who resent the old way of doing things being so rudely disturbed. Unless the executives of the firm are whole-heartedly behind the idea, and give their full support to the official delegated to see it through, there is little chance of its success.

A steady persistence on the part of the owner of the business, or the man in charge of the scheme, will be found the best way with staff objectors. But there are other difficulties than these, from within rather than from without, and I state them quite frankly, for there is nothing so calculated to dishearten a man and make him throw up the sponge as to enter on a job ignorant of the problems that confront him. The fact that from fifty to one hundred distinct paragraphs are needed for an average business will at the first prove somewhat embarrassing. The letter-writing enthusiast when he first uses the finished set will find that it takes him longer to single out the appropriate paragraphs than it would to dictate the letter on the old way. The typists, too, will have to fumble about here and there amid a jargon of paragraphic reference numbers. This must all be anticipated and allowed for on both sides--for the first month or so at least.

But as things settle down, and the rough corners begin to wear off, both dictator and typist will find that the contempt which is alleged to be the aftermath of familiarity has a forerunner known as facility. The dictator will get to know the key numbers of those paragraphs which are in the more regular use, and for her part the typist will be able to type them off from memory without needing to refer to the "book of words."

CHAPTER IV

SIMPLE SITUATIONS IN ROUTINE CORRESPONDENCE

IN the previous chapter the principles underlying the construction of a paragraph system in general were outlined now the present one will be given to a consideration of some particular classes and subdivisions of the scheme.

In order to make the specimens given real and convincing they have been framed, as occasion serves, to varying trades but a very simple process of transmutation will suit them to whatever other trade the reader may be interested in.

As is indicated by its title, the scope of this chapter is restricted to *routine* letters, letters of which the subject-matter is predetermined. This is in sharp contrast to *sales* letters in which the writer has a relatively free hand. It is on account of this conventional restriction of subject-matter that the average routine letter is such a poor dull thing generally confined to the barest statement of fact dressed up in the starchiest of phraseology.

One of the outstanding principles upon which I insist throughout is that it is possible to infuse the most ordinary matter-of-fact routine letter with a tinge of life and warmth.

Having dealt so fully with the principle and theory of paragraph construction, we will now turn to the practice.

THE REFERENCE NUMBERS

In arranging the general scheme of paragraphs, it will be necessary to devise a system of reference so that they may be found readily when dictating a letter. The plan adopted here is to give each main classification a key letter "A," "B," "C," and so on, and to number the paragraphs serially in each classification. The details of the enumeration can be adapted to the individual needs of each business, but for the sake of the references in the book we have devised one of our own.

At the end of the book there will be found a key to the whole scheme of paragraphs, grouped under the main classifications, and this outline is rigidly followed throughout the following chapters so that cross-reference is easy, and the reader can readily compose trial letters for himself at any stage.

In suggesting the actual form of some paragraphs for the first time, I would remind the reader that they are *only* paragraphs, and urge him not to be alarmed at their seemingly disjointed appearance

At the end of each chapter will be found two or three specimen letters, using the paragraphs that have been given up to that point.

Very naturally it is desirable to begin with the simplest forms, and from them work on to the more complex. This principle has governed the ordering of the next few chapters.

First of all, however, come those paragraphs which are used to acknowledge the receipt of an order or inquiry. They come first, not merely because they are of the simplest, but also because they are invariably used at the beginning of a letter. For that reason they should be brief and to the point. Much of the "woolliness" of the average routine letter is due to wasted words in the opening sentence. The addressee obviously knows the details of the order or inquiry she has sent, and it is worse than futile to devote the first paragraph to a formal recital of the articles ordered or information asked for. "We beg to acknowledge your order for blue bedspreads with beige borders."

ACKNOWLEDGMENT PARAGRAPHS

A—1. Thank you very much for your letter of —.

A—2. Your letter of — has just reached us. Thank you very much for the — (order or inquiry).

A—3. Your letter of — asking us to send you — has just reached us.

A—4. Your letter ordering — is very much appreciated.

A—5. Your letter inquiring about — is very much appreciated.

The purpose of the "A" paragraphs is to start a letter off with the very minimum of formality, and to prepare the

way for the actual and essential facts to follow. They presuppose a present or recent letter, or instructions from the customer.

ADVICE PARAGRAPHS

These are in a way the reverse of the preceding paragraphs, for they represent a move on the part of the shopkeeper, and not of the customer. They are used to refer back to an order or request already in hand

- B—1. As desired when you visited us the other day —.
- B—2. As requested in your letter of —, . . .
- B—3. With reference to your recent order for —, . . .
- B—4. The — that you asked us to get in have now arrived. Shall we send them round to you, or would you prefer to call in and see them first?

DISPATCH PARAGRAPHS

Here we are still on very elementary ground. The sending of goods is a fundamental act of retailing, and a very large proportion of routine correspondence will be found to deal with this question. Here we only show the simplest form of dispatch paragraphs, the more complicated ones, those dealing with delays in dispatch, etc., are reserved for a future section.

- C—1. The — have been sent off by — (post, carrier, etc.), and we hope that they (it) will reach you quite safely.
- C—2. The — you ask for have already been sent off by —, and should reach you by — at the latest.
- C—3. (a) You recently asked us to get you —. They have (It has) now come in, and we are sending them (it) to you by — to-day.
(b) Should the contents of the parcel not be in perfect condition when it reaches you, please let us know at once.
(Suitable for fragile articles)
- C—4. The — are (is) being looked out, and we hope to send them (it) off to you by — at the latest.
- C—5. Usually we ask for cash with order, but as we notice that you want the — by return, we have sent them (it) off at once.

Two brief remarks are necessary before going any farther. Paragraph C—3, it will be noticed, consists of two parts (a) and (b). The purpose of this is that the dictator in marking

or calling down the paragraphs to be used, can easily leave out the second portion of the paragraph if it does not apply. At this point the need may appear trifling, but as the book goes on and the paragraphs get more complicated, the value of this arrangement will be seen. Then it will be noticed that one or two paragraphs have an alternative word in brackets. Those referring to the possible means of delivery are obvious in their application, and in the case of many traders one word will almost invariably be used ("our van" or "post"). But the other variations are grammatical ones, chiefly concerning the pronouns, which need to be in the singular or plural to agree with the preceding noun. It should be possible to leave the choice of the correct word with the typist, for the clerk who cannot see that "the tins of salmon" requires "have been sent" and "the tin of salmon" requires "has been sent" is not worthy of her wage envelope.

CATALOGUE PARAGRAPHS

Now we are getting on to slightly more complicated ground, and so shall find greater scope for the usefulness of the system. It has already been asserted that the reply to a request for a catalogue is one of the most important types of retail business correspondence. Many pounds may have been spent in getting the request in the first instance, either by press or direct mail advertising, hence it behoves the shopkeeper to see that those who *do* reply to his invitation are treated in an altogether worthy manner.

This is how too many firms, whose advertising is beyond reproach, acknowledge these precious requests for catalogues that should lead to valuable sales. What they say is in effect: "Thank you for your letter; here is the catalogue, Yours faithfully." Surely the customer (and still more the prospective customer) who goes out of her way to *ask* for a copy of the shopkeeper's catalogue is in the most receptive frame of mind to read something about the goods apart from the stereotyped information in the catalogue itself. No retailer can afford to have a dozen editions of his catalogue printed to suit the particular needs of a

dozen different types of customers, but he certainly can and should send to every inquirer a covering letter that is fitted to the particular occasion.

The paragraphs we have outlined up to now have been quite general in character, and might well be adapted to almost any retail trade, but those of the present series are essentially individual. We can only give one or two concrete specimens, to suggest the manner of treatment, and leave it to the shopkeeper to devise his own.

- D—1. (a) A copy of our booklet "Brighter Homes" is enclosed, and we feel sure that you will find it interesting.
- (b) The collection of novel recipes on page 21 is well worth reading. A 'phone message will bring any of the ingredients along by our next delivery.
- (c) Then the "Home Decoration" section at the end should save you a lot of money. It tells you how to do the hundred and one cleaning and re-furbishing jobs in the home with the least possible trouble and expense. It will make yours a "Brighter Home."

Here again it will be noted that the paragraph, necessarily a long one, is split up into sections so that the user may include or exclude parts according to the type of customer being written to

- D—2. (a) Here is a copy of the little booklet that you asked for—"Pressing Problems." We called it that because the first department of our cleaning service was pressing men's suits, but we soon found that there were many other problems of dirt-removing confronting the housewife.
- (b) So we extended in one direction and then in another until we can now clean anything from doll's clothing and doilies to costumes and coverlets.
- D—3. (a) A copy of the small booklet which gives full details of — is enclosed, and we hope that you will find in it the exact information that you want.
- (b) If there is anything that is not quite clear, please write to us again.
- D—4. A copy of our new catalogue is enclosed and on page — you will find full particulars of —.

Routine letters containing paragraphs of this kind become semi-sales letters; they certainly have selling work to do even though they are sent out in response to a request

from the customer This, as pointed out in the Foreword, is in part the justification for the title of this book.

Here are a few paragraphs—quite simple in style—that can be used in response to an inquiry for patterns or samples :

- D—5. Some patterns of —— are enclosed, each marked with the price and width, and we hope that you will be able to make a selection from them.
- D—6. Just at the moment there is a very large demand for this type of material—it is selling very quickly—so it is possible that the exact shade or design you select may be out of stock by the time your order gets here. Would you, therefore, please make a second choice in case this should happen.
- D—7. If you do not find just what you want among these patterns, please let us know at once, and we will do everything possible to get you a further selection.
- D—8. We are very sorry that we cannot send you patterns of —— exactly the same as your ——, but some cuttings of the very nearest are enclosed, and we hope that they will be of some use to you.
- D—9. If you would like us to make the —— specially for you, please fill in the enclosed measurement form.
- D—10. The cost of making —— will be ——, and you can rely on getting them (it) within —— days from the time you send the order.
- D—11. When you write, please use the enclosed envelope—it is ready addressed.¹ This will make sure that your order is dealt with at once.

Apart from simple requests for catalogues or patterns, customers frequently write asking for information about specific articles or lines. Some paragraphs will be needed to deal with these In some businesses inquiries of this kind comprise the bulk of the correspondence, and a wide range of paragraphs will be needed They should be arranged, first under the heading of the articles or line in question, then subdivided into the various prices and qualities that are available. For example—

Pianos—

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1 Baby uprights | 3 Full-size uprights |
| 2. Baby grands | 4 Full-size grands |

¹ See note about the "Business Reply Envelope" in Chapter XI

Mattresses—

Flock—single-bed.	Hair—single-bed.
Flock—double-bed.	Hair—double-bed.
Wool—single-bed	Spring—single-bed.
Wool—double-bed.	Spring—double-bed.

Ladies' Frocks—

Afternoon dresses, velveteen—give prices.
 Afternoon dresses, marocain—give prices.
 Tweed dresses—give prices.
 Tailor-made costumes—give prices.

Here are one or two fuller examples. Like the catalogue paragraphs, these will need to be drafted out to suit the individual need of the shopkeeper.

- E—1. (a) A good selection of electric irons can be seen at our show room in High Street. If you would prefer to see two or three at your home, send us the enclosed card, mentioning the voltage. In case you are not sure what it is, you will find it marked on the lamps you are using
 (b) These electric irons are priced from 15s., and in every case they have a good length of cable attached, ready to plug into the light holder.
- E—2. (a) As you do not mention whether it is single- or double-bed mattresses that you want remade, we are quoting for both
- | | |
|-------------------------|--------|
| Wool filling, 3 ft. | . 8s. |
| " " 4 ft. 6 in. . | . 12s. |
| Hair " 3 ft. . | . 9s. |
| " " 4 ft. 6 in. . | . 13s. |
- (b) You can rely on the work being carried out with the greatest care, and if you want it done extra quickly, we have special facilities for delivery within two days.
- E—3. A good selection of cretonne patterns is enclosed suitable for making loose covers. Will you let us know on the enclosed stamped card (or 'phone us at Central 4678) what time you would like our man to call to take the necessary measures.
- E—4. (a) Yes, we keep the modern glass trinket sets—in both the cut glass and plain style.
 (b) The plain glass sets are priced from 7s. 6d. upwards, and the cut glass from 15s. 6d.
 (c) The entirely novel appearance of these sets makes them a decided acquisition to a well ordered bedroom, and we feel sure that you will enjoy having one.

THE LITTLE EXTRA IN THE ROUTINE LETTER

We have several times urged the importance of getting that "little extra" out of the routine letter. This can sometimes be done by incorporating a "sales" or "service" paragraph into some of the more formal communications that the retailer sends out. It would be very unwise to add such a paragraph to a complicated reply to a customer who had made a serious complaint—such a letter would be already "loaded" to capacity. But a simple note telling that some goods have been sent off might well be made to carry the extra weight of one of the following—

- F—1. If you do call, perhaps you could spare a moment to look in at our new Juvenile department. This section fills a hitherto serious gap in our service, and we are looking forward to the opportunity of serving you there.
- F—2. In case you are wanting to replace a rapidly diminishing tea service, we mention that a specially attractive design has just been delivered—only a few services—and we think that you might like to know about them. The price is 12s. 6d. for the 21 piece set.
- F—3. While writing we mention an addition to our delivery service which we think will interest you. An extra motor-van has made it possible for us to deliver in your district *every* day instead of every *other* day. An order 'phoned to us before eleven o'clock will reach you the *same* day.

Paragraphs of this kind are essentially temporary in character; they will need to be revised at very regular intervals or they will become stale and useless. There should be very little difficulty in that, for, although new motor vans or new departments are rare additions to a business, there are always fresh and interesting goods being delivered, some seasonable novelty, something of particularly good value that many customers would be glad to hear about. Here is the alert trader's opportunity to sow some goodwill and reap some extra sales at next to no cost. Full postage must needs be paid on the routine letter—let it carry a double message wherever possible.

In this series of "service" paragraphs we are departing somewhat from the principle of construction that we have laid down hitherto. Our previous paragraphs have owed

their existence to a proven need as revealed in the carbon copy analysis; they have been built to meet a demand. Here it is the retailer who takes the initiative, and the paragraphs represent that "something extra" that a number of routine letters may be made to carry.

APPROBATION PARAGRAPHS

This is the last type of straightforward paragraph that we propose considering in this chapter. Drapers with fashion departments are probably the most concerned with these requests to send selections of goods for customers to see at their homes.

There is unfortunately a type of customer who thoroughly enjoys this approbation business. She will ask for a large selection of goods to be sent to her house, and several calls and letters are necessary to get either the money or the goods returned. A refusal to send a selection will bring the business into bad odour—and who can afford to risk that in these or any other days?

The main cause of the approbation difficulties is lack of definite understanding between the shopkeeper and customer from the start. A request comes for a few pairs of shoes, or a couple of basket chairs, to be sent to madam at her house. The goods are sent, accompanied, it may be, by a printed note hoping that madam will find something suitable. After a week or ten days the shopkeeper begins to think it is high time something was done about it—his van has called twice, but got no answer, and he sees very little prospect of any net profit on the transaction. So he writes to madam and opens his mind on the subject of goods sent on approbation in general, and those not returned within reasonable time in particular. It cannot be wondered if his letter—dictated on the spur of the moment—has a slightly acid flavour. Madam reciprocates with increased acidity, tells the retailer he can call for his shoes (or his chairs)—and keep them for his impudence.

How can this be remedied? Only by the trader having a firm but courteous understanding with the customer *right*

from the first It is better to send a fairly long letter with the goods in the first place while the customer is in a receptive mood, than to write three or four terse ones later on when she has become piqued. Here is a suggestion that a trader may adapt to his own requirements—

- G—1. (a) Your letter of — asking us to send you a selection of table-cloths has just reached us.
 (b) If it had been possible, we should have preferred you to visit us personally, for then you could have made your choice from a far wider selection than we can send on our van.
 (c) As this is not possible, we are sending as many as we can spare from stock, and we would ask you to co-operate with us by allowing our vanman to collect those that are not required when he calls in three days' time.

If there is any likelihood of there being a difficulty of getting the money for the goods kept, it would be wise to add the following—

- G—2. Then, in order to avoid complicated book entries, would you please let our driver have the cash for any goods that you decide to keep.

Again we emphasize that it is easy to say this at the outset, but very difficult later on when the customer has had the goods a week or so

The possible developments of an approbation transaction are manifold. The customer may keep all, part, or none of the goods sent; she may or may not pay at the time for those kept; or again she may be an account customer from whom immediate payment is not demanded. The trader who finds that these transactions occur frequently would find it well worth his while to draft out a *complete* set of paragraphs, covering every possibility in this direction. About a dozen paragraphs will be found necessary

SOME PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The trader who has read this chapter with somewhat diminishing patience up to this point, may be tempted to wonder whether we are not making rather much ado about very little, for with the possible exception of the approbation transactions just dealt with, everything in the chapter

is elementary in the extreme. The man who would need the aid of set paragraphs for such easy routine letters must be a very poor correspondent indeed. Such a challenge is welcome, for it gives the opportunity of re-stating some of the fundamental advantages of the paragraph system as a whole.

1. Every complex situation in routine correspondence is made up of simpler ones, and a system of paragraphs that only dealt with complicated situations would be clumsy and very limited in use. By the way, the critical reader shall have his fill of more "advanced" paragraphs in the next two or three chapters.

2. There are several ways of stating even the simplest point in a letter, and even letter-writers of quite average experience sometimes fail to put these simple matters in the "one best way."

3. Then apart from the standard of attitude and diction that is set by the use of paragraphs, there is the question of time-saving to be considered—surely an important one for the busy trader. This saving of precious moments by means of the paragraph system we will now demonstrate by actual example

In the specimens that follow, we are deliberately limiting ourselves to the paragraphs already given, and for that reason the customers' letters have been composed to order, but at the same time they are of a type that is very common in the average trader's correspondence.

A typical letter from a lady customer is given on p. 71. There is nothing inherently complicated about it—merely a chain of simple requests.

The old way of dealing with a letter like this would be to laboriously dictate the reply, line by line, to a typist. The reply would be taken down in shorthand, and the typist would then trip off to her office and transcribe it—provided her curves and circles had not become "cold" in the meantime. This is not unusual with inexperienced typists. How frequently they will sidle up guiltily to their employer with a "Please, I can't make this word out; would you mind telling me what comes before 'fish-fryers'?"

Then, quite apart from any other considerations, the time that the typist spends away from her machine "taking down" is just so much time wasted out of her working day. So used to this have employers become that it is taken for granted, but there are at least two ways of overcoming this

	Therons Delaine & Sons	Blay Rows
	Drapers	Addleton Lane
		Little Bluffington
Pans	Dear Sirs	Jan 10 th 1932
A-1	Will you please send me one of those	
C-2	aluminium fish fryers. The kind I saw in your	
D-4	window the other day - the one round the corner	
	I mean I think you keep both bowls in the	
	turkey style with the stripes running all	
	the way through from end to end	
	Please let me know the prices & sizes. And I want	
D-5	to buy some of that new pattern cretine you	
D-7	advertized the other day but perhaps I had	
	better see the patterns first. Can you send me	
	some please? And will you let me have the	
D-11	fish fryer at once please as I have broken	
	mine, but you need not bother about the	
	cretine or the bowls so much.	
	Yours faithfully	
	(Mrs) E. Poffitt.	

wastage. One is by using a dictating machine—of this we shall have something to say in a later chapter—the other is by the consistent use of a well-planned paragraph system. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that a combination of the two form an almost perfect way of dealing with correspondence.

Here we are concerned only with the use of paragraphs, but consider the contrast with the old way of replying to a letter. At the side of the customer's letter on this page you

will notice a few pencilled references. These are the keys to the paragraphs needed to reply to the letter. The shop-keeper, or whoever he may appoint to reply to customers' letters, having obtained the necessary information to enable him to answer the letter, merely jots down in the margin the reference numbers of the appropriate paragraphs and hands it in to the typist. While the correspondent has been looking up the necessary paragraphs for the reply—that is, if he is new to the job and does not know them off by heart—the typist is still *busy at work* on other letters

In some of the more complicated letters with which we shall deal in later chapters, it may be necessary, here and there, to dictate a special paragraph to put among the ready-made ones, but not in a straightforward example such as the present one. Under its feminine fripperies of wording our specimen letter consists merely of three simple requests

Unwound from their wordy wadding, they are—

- 1 Send me by return an Aluminium Fish-fryer as recently shown in your window
- 2 I want to know prices of Turkish Bath Towels with stripes running from end to end
- 3 Send me patterns of the new pattern cretonne recently advertised

Here in thirty-nine words is the essential point of the customer's letter of 119 words. In our chapter on Post Order work, we shall stress the importance of this "undressing" process, or job of reducing a complicated letter to its lowest common denominator. Not, of course, by actually writing it out as we have done for the sake of demonstration, but in mentally reading over

Now we will reproduce the finished letter that the trader would find in his "out" tray awaiting signature later in the day, a letter which contains no dictation at all, but is the result of the half a dozen paragraph reference numbers pencilled in the margin of the customer's letter.

It is assumed here that the typist who is dealing with the job is familiar with the general details of the goods and can be trusted to fill in catalogue page numbers

11-15, High Street,
Great Chuffington.

Mrs. E.Proffitt,
"Chez Nous",
Addlestone Lane,
Little Chuffington.

Jan. 11th, 1932.

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for your letter of January 10th.

The Aluminium Fish-fryer you ask for has already been sent off by post, and it should reach you by tomorrow morning at the latest.

A copy of our new catalogue is enclosed, and on page 21 you will find full particulars of Turkish Towels with stripes running right through.

Some patterns of Cretonne are enclosed, each marked with the price and width, and we hope that you will be able to make a selection from them.

If you do not find just what you want among these patterns, please let us know at once, and we will do everything possible to get you a further selection. When you write, please use the enclosed envelope - it is ready addressed. This will make sure that your letter is dealt with at once.

Yours faithfully,
for Delaine & Sons.

J.Binks.

One other example will suffice to illustrate the application of paragraphs to the simpler variety of routine letters.

Mon Rive
Eglington Drive
Much Woodley
February 2nd 1932

Messrs Delancey & Son

Para
A-2 Dear Sirs
I want a pair of bedspreads for rather small
turn beds, of a silky material that will wash without
creasing too much. I should like them in either
C-4 pink or green. I don't want to pay more than 40/-
the pair. I shall be obliged if you will send me
some to see.
I also have a small scullery that is very cold
D3ab and I want some inexpensive sort of stove to
warm it. I have heard that there is one made
after the style of the Primus. Can you send me
particulars? Also can you send me patterns of
D-8 art serge to match the enclosed piece? Do you keep
trinket sets in glass? I am told that these are coming
E4ab/in? What are the prices? Please let me have a reply
as soon as you can.

Yours faithfully

(Mrs) N Arbottle

In grammatical terminology this example would be called "compound." It consists of several requests, each in themselves simple and straightforward. "Complex" examples, containing requests that are themselves complicated, will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Again, the references of the paragraphs needed to reply to the letter are pencilled in the margin, and here is the resulting letter that is sent to the customer.

11-15 High Street,
Great Chuffington.

Mrs.N.Arbbottle,
"Mon Reve"
Eglington Drive,
Much Woodley.

February 3rd 1932.

Dear Madam,

Your letter of February 2nd has just reached us. Thank you very much for the order.

The bedspreads of the quality required are being looked out, and we expect to send them off on Friday at the latest.

A copy of the small booklet which gives full details of economical oil heaters is enclosed, and we hope that you will find the exact information in it that you want.

If there is anything that is not quite clear, please write to us again.

We are very sorry that we cannot send you patterns of art serge exactly the same as your sample, but some cuttings of the very nearest are enclosed, and we hope that they will be of some use to you.

Yes, we keep the modern glass trinket sets - in both the cut glass and plain style. The plain glass sets are priced from 7/6 upwards, and the cut glass from 15/6.

Yours faithfully
for Delaine & Sons.

J.Binks.

It will be noted that the last part of paragraph "E—4" has been left out, as the letter is quite long enough already. In response to a simple inquiry for trinket sets, the full paragraph would undoubtedly be used.

If no booklet were available describing oil heaters, a paragraph giving prices would be necessary, failing that a specially dictated paragraph could be inserted here.

The critical reader may perhaps rejoin at this point: "Those specimens look very nice and simple, but they are fakes. What about actual letters from customers?"

The assertion is true—although on page 70 I pointed out the extenuating circumstances—only the paragraphs available up to this point have been used, and so the letters have had to fit the paragraphs. In practice the reverse happens. The carbon copy analysis, already described in detail, has for its object the compilation of a complete set of paragraphs to *fit the letters*. No paragraph system can answer every letter; a good paragraph system should be able to deal with at least 75 per cent of them without any dictation whatever, and another 15 per cent with a little dictation, leaving only 10 per cent of the mass of correspondence to be handled in the old way.

CHAPTER V

MORE DIFFICULT ROUTINE LETTERS

IN the previous chapter I had occasion to crave the reader's indulgence for the simplicity of the situations dealt with there, although maintaining that the system was well worth while even when handling the most elementary type of correspondence

Now we shall deal with situations that are confessedly difficult, situations that are constantly arising in every retail business, situations above all that if wrongly handled may easily cause the loss of a valued customer. This question of "Customer-leakage" is one that is increasingly engaging the attention of alert shopkeepers in these days of intensified competition, and is rightly an important part of Direct Mail Advertising of the defensive sort. But here we can go one step farther back and show how such losses may be avoided in the first place. This is how complaints arise and customers are lost. A lady orders some things from her draper or grocer or other trader. She wants them by a certain date. The goods required are not in stock, and for some unforeseen reason the trader is unable to get them from the wholesaler in time. Here is a first-class complaint in the making. What is to be done? In too many cases nothing is done at all, and the retailer waits until a stinging letter is received from the outraged customer, a letter which calls for altogether superior genius to straighten things out. In Chapter VIII we shall outline the mode of approach even in such extreme cases, but here it is our object to short-circuit the complaint altogether by means of a letter sent to the customer before she has reached the angry stage.

The situations in the previous chapter are perfectly straightforward, and only absolute neglect can cause trouble—here there is every possibility of the situation developing "complications," just as a mild attack of influenza will too

frequently turn to the dreaded pneumonia. Hence the series of paragraphs given here are designed to meet incipient dissatisfaction.

PARAGRAPHS CONCERNING DELAYS IN SENDING GOODS

Without question the failure on the part of the shopkeeper to deliver goods to time is one of the chief of domestic vexations to the busy housewife. She is quite unaware of *his* difficulties—he has not sent those rugs she wanted—and that is all there is about it. As a matter of fact, the retailer has had a lot of trouble in getting the exact size and shade the customer wants, and has gone out of his way to hurry forward the delivery. Then why not tell the customer all about it? The best of apologies are poor substitute for the rugs she wants, but a straightforward letter of explanation will at least show her that the shopkeeper is in earnest about the matter and that he really does value her custom.

The first paragraph is to use in a letter telling a customer that some goods that are overdue have now been sent—

- H—I. (a) We are glad to say that the —— you ordered recently have now arrived, and we are sending them off to you at once.
- (b) There has been considerable difficulty in getting the exact —— (shape or style, etc.) that you wanted, but we felt sure that you would not like us to send you a substitute.
- (c) If the —— should be too late to be of use, please do not feel bound to keep them (or it).

The (c) section needs to be used with discretion—that is why the paragraphs are subdivided in this way. Its inclusion would disarm the great majority of honest customers who may have thought of sending the goods back while still piqued at the delay. The paragraphs, in part or complete, should be sent by letter post, and would thus arrive an hour or so before the parcel containing the goods sent by parcel post or next day's delivery van.

Here is a shorter and simpler paragraph which can be used in less serious cases of delays, or to customers less likely to be offended

- H—2. **You will be glad to hear that the —— you ordered recently are being sent to-day, and they should reach you by —— at the latest.**

It sometimes happens that the letter from the customer inquiring about her order actually crosses the parcel itself in the post. Some shopkeepers think that in such circumstances no answer to the letter of inquiry is necessary, "She will get the parcel in the morning anyway," they argue. So she will, but she will also get a more pleasant impression of the retailer's business methods if a letter containing a paragraph something like this is sent to her—

- H—3. (a) **The —— to which you refer in your letter have (has) already been sent off, and should have reached you by now.**
(b) **If the parcel has not arrived by the time you get this letter, please let us know so that we can take the matter up with the Post Office (or Delivery Service).**

At other times it will happen that, despite the efforts of the shopkeeper, the goods have not arrived even by the time the customer's letter of inquiry or complaint reaches him. Then the following paragraphs may be useful, although, as we have pointed out higher up, the time to write apologetically is *the day on which the goods were promised*

- H—4. (a) **To our annoyance the —— that we promised to send you on —— have not arrived from the manufacturer (or warehouse).**
(b) **An urgent note (or wire) has been sent off to them saying that the goods must come at once.**
(c) **You may be sure that we shall lose no time this end in getting them off to you.**

If the retailer, realizing that he cannot possibly get the goods to the customer on the day promised, can gather his correspondence wits together, he may be able to anticipate the customer's letter with the same paragraph (H—4).

It may be argued that this is a poor substitute for goods that are expected and wanted, but I strongly contend that it is very much better indeed than a deadly silence on the part of the shopkeeper, a silence which the customer can only interpret as a contemptuous indifference to her wants and feelings.

PART GOODS ONLY SENT

Here is another situation closely allied to delays in the dispatch of goods. A lady has written or 'phoned for three boxes of Bindle's Fancy Biscuits—she has run low without knowing it, and is expecting visitors. The grocer who receives her order only has two boxes in stock. What is he to do? Actually there are four courses open to him—

1. He can send the two boxes—say nothing and do nothing
2. He can send the two boxes—say nothing, but order some more from the wholesaler in the hope that they will arrive in time
3. He can send the two boxes with a note apologizing for his low stock—but do nothing.
4. He can send the two boxes, wire for some more—and tell the customer what he is doing.

Can there be any question which course will prove most profitable in the light of future business? Here is a paragraph which might form the centre of the covering letter—

- H—5. (a) At the moment we have only —— in stock, so we are sending these at once, and have wired to our factory for the rest.
- (b) They should be here by —— and we hope that it will not be too late.

Then it sometimes happens that the shopkeeper cannot supply the goods at all from stock, and what is more, there is very little prospect of his being able to get exactly what is wanted. Here again there is a choice of courses before the retailer—

1. He may ignore the order—send nothing and do nothing
2. He may write and say that he has no stock—and cannot get anything.
3. He may send the nearest line he has—and say nothing
4. He may send the nearest line he has—and write a full letter of explanation to the customer.

Who can doubt which is the wisest course to take? Many may query why the first is inserted at all. The answer is that there are shopkeepers so indifferent that they will not bother about inquiries that they cannot execute. Quite

naturally the buying public soon learn not to bother about *them*.

Here is a paragraph that may be used when the nearest goods have been sent, and there is no chance of getting exactly what he wanted—

- H—6. (a) As the exact (size, style, design, etc.) of —— is not in stock, we have sent the very nearest rather than keep you waiting without anything at all.
- (b) If these are not suitable please let us know at once, as we are quite willing to take them back or change them as you wish.
- (c) We would gladly offer to get exactly what you require but unfortunately the supply is entirely exhausted.

If there is any prospect of procuring what is wanted, the following section of the paragraph may be substituted for (c) :

- (d) Meanwhile, we are trying to get the precise —— (articles, goods, etc.) you want, and we will let you know one way or another by ——.

GOODS RETURNED

The next paragraphs are designed to deal with a common retailing situation that is frequently mishandled, and in consequence an excellent opportunity of creating goodwill is lost.

A customer has some goods, either on approbation or by definite order, but later returns them as unsuitable. Now the shopkeeper of a generation ago would have flatly refused to take the goods back unless there had been a very definite approbation understanding—and even then he rather resented doing it. His son to-day has learned better than that—of course, he will take them back, but will he do it graciously? Will he still have patience to try, try again with that same customer?

It is granted that returns are a mildew and a blight on the net profit of a business; in the wholesale a term of still greater opprobrium is used—they are known as “cold pig.” But if the customer senses these views on the matter, she will have small confidence in asking *that* shop to send

her a selection next time. When goods are returned "unsuitable," this is the way to deal with the situation—

- J—1. (a) The parcel containing the — you returned reached us quite safely, and we are only too sorry to hear that they are not just what you want.
(b) May we try again? If you will let us have further details, we will spare no effort to get exactly what is wanted. Please do not be afraid of troubling us.

Then there is the customer who asks for patterns of materials, has a wide range sent her, and sends the whole lot back: "I cannot see just what I want among them." The reaction of many traders to this is: "Well, she had enough to choose from, anyway," and they leave it at that. But why admit defeat at the first round? Businesses are never built up that way. Even if no sale finally results from a "try again," an impression of alertness is made upon the customer, and she will remember it the next time she wants something

- J—2. (a) Your letter returning the patterns of — has just reached us. Thank you for sending them back—they are rather expensive. We are very sorry that you did not find any among them that you liked.
(b) A few more of a similar range are being sent, and we hope that you will be able to make a choice from them.
(c) But if you cannot, do not be afraid of asking us to try again. We want to get you exactly what is required.

This and the previous paragraphs presume that it is possible to send a further selection of goods or patterns. This cannot always be done. Then it is all the more important to tell the customer so—and the reason why

- J—3. (a) At the moment there is nothing we have in stock nearer to what you want.
(b) Cases like this where we are unable to serve a customer are fortunately rare, and we hope that you will give us the opportunity of proving this the next time you want something.

These last three paragraphs provide an excellent opportunity of demonstrating the flexibility of the system of dealing with correspondence that we are advocating. By using

the various *sections* of these three paragraphs, any of the following situations can be dealt with—

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| 1. Goods returned. | Sending more unasked | J 1a, J 2b-c |
| 2. Goods returned | Shall we send more? | J 1a-b |
| 3. Goods returned. | Cannot send more. | J 1a, J 3a-b |
| 4. Patterns returned. | Sending more unasked. | J 2a-c |
| 5. Patterns returned. | Shall we send more? | J 2a, J 1b |
| 6. Patterns returned. | Cannot send more. | J 2a, J 3a-b |

This principle applies throughout the whole system, and the retailer who will exploit it to the full has solved the problem of handling a large correspondence in a very little time.

The “goods returned” paragraphs we have just considered have some close relations in the “goods exchanged” paragraphs. In many retail trades the sale of merchandise is complicated by innumerable sizes and styles, and it often happens that the fitting first selected is not correct and an exchange is necessary. Exchanges done with a goodwill will breed goodwill in the customer. Here are some paragraphs that help the retailer to do this.

The first of these should be included in the letter sent with every article of which there is the slightest doubt as to its suitability to the customer's purpose. It is a preventive, and hence very much better than a cure.

- J—4. Should any of the goods we are sending you not be exactly what you want, please let us know at once. We will gladly exchange them for another — (size, fitting, shade, etc.)

When the goods come back with a note saying that they do not fit, or are not suitable in some other way, here is the paragraph to use—

- J—5. (a) Your parcel containing the — has just arrived, and we are sorry that you have been put to the trouble of returning them (it).
 (b) We have sent off — (e.g. three more in a larger size), and we hope that they (it) will be exactly right.
 (c) If they are not, please do not be afraid of asking us to try again. We want to get you exactly what is required.

“ SHALL WE MAKE ? ”

It sometimes happens that, although the goods required by the customer cannot be supplied from stock, it is very simple to get them made up quite quickly. The tone of the customer's letter is usually sufficient indication whether or not she will wait a day or so for the goods, but in any case it is essential to tell her clearly and plainly what is being done. These paragraphs border on those dealing with delay in dispatch, but they have this added point, they offer some definite remedy for the “out of stock” trouble—

- K—1. (a) The exact (shade, size, etc.) you want is unfortunately out of stock at the moment, but we are having it (or them) made up for you specially, and hope to let you have it (or them) by —— at the latest.
(b) Although we have done this, we do not want you to feel compelled to keep the goods unless they are exactly what you want.

When it is doubtful from the customer's letter whether she will be willing to wait for the goods to be made, the following paragraph may be sent—

- K—2. (a) The exact (shade, size, etc.) you want is unfortunately out of stock, but we could have one (them) made up for you in the course of —— days.
(b) Would you like us to do this?

Even when the shopkeeper cannot offer to make, it is a desirable gesture on his part at least to send samples of the nearest that can be supplied from stock—

- K—3. (a) The exact (shade, size, etc.) is unfortunately out of stock, and we are doubtful if it can be obtained, so patterns (or details or illustrations) of the very nearest we have in stock are enclosed for you to see.
(b) Would any of these be of use to you? We will gladly send them for you to see on hearing from you.

SORRY—WE CANNOT . . .

Reversing the usual order of things, we have kept the worst until the last in this chapter. It happens at times that the shopkeeper has to tell a customer that not only is he unable to supply the goods required, but he cannot even

offer to obtain them. Similar to this is the case of a trader who is asked to undertake work—repairs, etc.—that lie outside the scope of his trade.

Time and again we have stressed the importance of a right attitude in handling retail correspondence, but nowhere is it of more consequence than in letters which tell the customer she cannot have what she wants. She is bound to feel some slight measure of annoyance at the time wasted, and the need of writing to another firm, but it is up to the letter-writer to minimize that annoyance as far as is possible. It so happens that a genuine pair of examples are available in this class of letter, so we will consider them before coming to our usual paragraphs dealing with the situation. These two letters were written in response to identical requests for a furniture catalogue and prices for remaking mattresses, so both firms start from scratch, so to speak. One other fact it is necessary to mention so that the fullest comparison may be made between the two—both these firms, which we will label as A & B, Ltd, and C & D, Ltd, by way of identification, are subsidiary companies of another company, Messrs E., Ltd. Here is the reply from A. & B, Ltd.—

Madam,

We thank you for your inquiry, and are enclosing a copy of our autumn catalogue for your inspection.

We regret having to advise you that we do not stock furniture, and neither do we undertake remaking mattresses.

We are, Madam,

Yours faithfully,
for A & B, Ltd

Take courage, small shopkeeper. The superb “fashion shops” of London’s West End may be able to beat you at Press advertising, sensational window displays, and so on; but while they write letters like this one, you should have a good time gathering in their lost customers. And this letter, with its super-stilted style, its “choke-off” attitude, and its evident illiteracy *was* sent out by a leading London West End store. Do not blame the printer for the “mattresses”; he has simply copied the letter as it was received.

It is supremely easy to criticize the efforts of others, but the whole value of a paragraph system will depend upon the frankness with which the trader who is building it criticizes the carbon copies out of his own file. It may be that some will be found not immeasurably superior to the specimen above.

But now turn to the reply from Messrs. C. & D, Ltd., who, I must again remind you, are subsidiary to the same firm as A. & B., Ltd.—

Madam,

We beg to acknowledge receipt of your esteemed request for catalogue of House Furniture, and your inquiry regarding the remaking of full-sized mattresses, but regret to inform you that we do not supply furniture or undertake the work in connection with mattresses. We have, however, forwarded your inquiry to Messrs E, Ltd, who have a large furnishing section, and no doubt you will hear from them direct in due course

Assuring you always of our best service,

We are, Madam,
Yours obediently,
C & D, Ltd

In spite of his rather clumsy constructions, the writer of this second letter scores heavily over his *confrère*—he has got the right idea, although he has only caught it by one wing.

Surely the only right attitude to adopt in dealing with such a request is, in outline, as follows—

(a) We cannot do what you want.

(b) Messrs Blanks, Ltd, are the best firm we know who can do what you want.

(c) This is what we *can* do—when you want it

The letter from A & B., Ltd, proffers a stone when it is bread that is required—for what is the use of a *lingerie* catalogue when you want some mattresses remade? The writer has put the cart sadly before the horse in talking about *his* catalogue which the customer *does not* want, before mentioning mattress making which she *does* want.

Here is a suggested letter in reply to a request with which

a retailer cannot comply. We have not given it in paragraph form, but it will be very simple to break it up as occasion serves

Dear Madam,

Your letter of April the 7th has just arrived and as we have no furniture department nor are able to quote for re-making mattresses, we are replying at once as we know you will want to get in touch with another firm.

We ourselves have found that Messrs. Blanks are very satisfactory - their address is 21 High Street (phone 23).

Although furniture is rather outside our orbit, we can and do supply a lot for the home - our household linen department is one of which we are particularly proud. We hope that when you are wanting something in this direction you will call in and inspect our stock.

Yours faithfully,

Do you not agree that a letter on these lines would leave a friendly feeling in the mind of the inquirer? The two writers whose efforts we have examined, by reason of their connection with a parent firm, could pass the inquiry on without asking permission, but that would hardly be advisable on the part of an independent trader

Because this type of letter is so important, we will give another extended example

An ordinary tailor is asked to quote for hiring out an evening dress suit. How is he to reply? He may stand on his dignity and write something like this—

Sir,

Your letter to hand. We are sorry that we cannot help you in reference to your enquiry.

We do not hire out evening clothes at all, and we know of nobody to whom we could advise you to go.

If we can be of any further assistance whatever, kindly let us know.

Yours faithfully,

Who will not agree that the closing paragraph is adding salt to the wound? And the letter is substantially based upon one recently sent out by a large multiple firm.

Although this letter is grammatically correct, and reasonably free from Business English *clichés*, it can only be described as a "choke-off." Which again demonstrates the immense importance of the right attitude

In order to provide a better contrast with the foregoing, we will rough out an alternative reply in full. The details can be amended to suit local needs.

Dear Sir,

Your letter of January 16th has just arrived, and as we have no Hire Department we are replying at once so that you may have time to get into touch with another firm.

There is no local firm as far as we know, that undertake this type of business, and we are afraid it will mean a journey to Town. Messrs. Blank & Co. in Oxford Street occur to us as the most likely to have just what you want.

We appreciate that a single occasion does not warrant purchasing a dress suit, but when you are next thinking of buying a lounge suit or overcoat we hope that you will call in and look at our ranges of fine cloths.

Yours faithfully,

It is quite probable that the inquirer will go to Blank's, of Oxford Street, to hire his dress suit; it is just possible that he may give them his future custom as well—although it is not so likely that he would bother to go up to town for what he can quite well get locally. But the whole point is this: even if he does go to Blank's for the whole of his future sartorial needs, the local trader will lose no more than he would by sending the "choke-off" letter, which would effectually discourage future custom from the inquirer.

Here is a more general "cannot do" paragraph that may be useful—

L—1. Although we have tried every source of supply we know, we have not been able to get the — you asked us for.

This might well be followed by J—3*b*. (See page 82.)

Then it is not always possible to comply with a request for a catalogue. In certain trades at many times, and in most trades at certain times, stock or prices change so rapidly that a set price list is impracticable. When that happens, do not reply with a blunt "Sorry no catalogue kept, Yours faithfully." The shopkeeper should make every effort to help the customer to order what she wants without the help of a printed list. One or two paragraphs will be needed both to tell simply and clearly why a catalogue cannot be sent, and then to ask for such particulars as will enable the trader to send whatever goods are wanted.

L—2. We are very sorry that we cannot send you a descriptive catalogue at the moment, prices and styles have been varying so much lately that we have had to suspend publication for the time being.

L—3. We are very sorry that we cannot send you a descriptive catalogue; unfortunately our supply has run out, and although we have hurried the new edition forward from the printers, the copies have not yet arrived.

- L—4. But we have a good selection of —, and if you will let us have particulars of the quality and style you require, we will gladly send you a detailed description of the nearest that is available.

DEFINITE REFUSALS

Now we finally turn to even more difficult situations, those in which it is necessary for the trader to definitely refuse to do what the customer wants—to deliver a special order, for instance, in much less than the time normally required by the wholesale or factory, or workroom. Demands for the impossible in this direction arrive regularly during the rush period that precedes each holiday. These orders have to be turned down, for it is impossible to set aside work already in hand in favour of these later claimants, but there are two ways of doing it. The one is a blunt, simple statement that the work cannot be undertaken—and that is all about it; the other is a more reasoned reply, still declining to do the job, but adding a little of the oil of human understanding to the troubled situation—

- L—5. We are very sorry indeed that we cannot undertake to make the — before the holidays, (or by —) and are replying at once in order to give you the chance of trying elsewhere—although we are frankly doubtful if you will be successful.
- L—6. Although our workroom is working late every night, the total output by — naturally has a definite limit, and this output has already been pledged to customers who ordered before your letter reached us. We are answering in full so that you may be assured that it is through no lack of desire on our part that we cannot serve you this time.

Another tricky job for the retailer is to refuse a request for goods on approval. With delicate merchandise such as millinery, or white dress waistcoats, this is often necessary, but how to phrase the refusal without hurting the customer's feelings is the problem—

- L—7. We are very sorry indeed, but it is not possible to send — on approval—they so easily become damaged in transit, and can never be put right again for stock.
- L—8. Quite apart from this difficulty, it would be much more satisfactory if you could make your selection in our showrooms, as you would then be able to choose from a far wider range of goods than we could send you to see.

SPECIMEN LETTERS

At the end of this chapter we can give more and fuller examples of letters dealt with by the paragraph system than was possible in the previous one, as we now have a larger range of paragraphs upon which to draw. We will commence with letters which are replies to orders or inquiries just received from customers, and from them go on to others that refer back to a transaction in hand.

One very definite word of warning might well be given at this point. A shopkeeper who has read up to here, and has become infected with enthusiasm for the paragraph system, may possibly attempt to handle his morning's letters with the material provided up to now. He will most

"Le Rid"

Birdaley Avenue
Thelmetham.

Sparkes Bio's
Nether Street
Worcester

Oct 29th 1932.

Dear Sir

Paros

A-1

Will you please send me three
Lamp shades, the kind that you show on
the second page of the leaflet you gave me
when I was in your shop recently.
I want the blue shade - no other will do -
they are to match my drawing room.
I am not actually waiting for them but
would like them as soon as possible.

K/a

Yours Faithfully

(Miss) E. Chuffett.

certainly fail ignominiously. Any system of paragraphs, like a good suit, must be fashioned to fit. The paragraphs we have outlined are necessarily suggestions only, and although it is true that a number of them may well suit the needs of half a dozen trades in general, it is more than can be expected that our specimen scheme will be found fully adapted to the requirements of any one trade in particular. Every shop-keeper who would use this time-saving scheme must first settle down to the carbon-copy investigation of his own correspondence described in Chapter III.

With this warning, then, we turn to the examples.

Here again in the margin are scribbled the keys to the paragraphs necessary to reply to this order (see p. 91).

Nether Street,
Wroxholme.

October 31st 1932.

Miss C. Chuffett,
"Le Nid",
Birdsley Avenue,
Thelnetham.

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for your letter
of October 29th.

The exact colour lampshade you
want is unfortunately out of stock at
the moment, but we are having them made
up for you specially, and hope to let
you have them by Wednesday at the latest.

Yours faithfully,

Sparks Bros.

It will be noted that only the (a) section of paragraph "K-1" has been used, the (b) section not being applicable.

The Cedars
Elm Grove
Cedarley-cum-Furzeysen

June 17th 1932

Messrs Wood & Co.
11 Market Place
Halsbury Posen

Paras

Dear Sirs.

A-2

I want a nest of drawing-room

L-3

lamps and I shall be glad if you will

L-4

let me have your catalogue

F-3

Yours Faithfully

(Sd/-) Doreen P. Jones

In the previous chapter the examples we gave were "compound," that is, they consisted of two or more perfectly simple situations. Here our examples deal with but a single situation, but that situation a more difficult one. Two or more of these harder situations would constitute a "complex" letter, and there is no reason whatever why such should not be dealt with effectively by paragraphs.

11 Market Place,
Halsey Poges.

June 18th 1932.

Mrs. I. Pyne,
The Cedars,
Elm Grove,
Oakley-cum-Hazelgrove.

Dear Madam,

Your letter of June 17th has just reached us. Thank you very much for the enquiry.

We are very sorry that we cannot send you a descriptive catalogue; unfortunately our supply has run out, and although we have hurried the new edition forward from the printers, the copies have not yet arrived.

But we have a good selection of nests of drawing-room tables, and if you will let us have particulars of the quality and style you require, we will gladly send you detailed description of the nearest that is available.

While writing, we mention an addition to our delivery service which we think will interest you. An extra motor car has made it possible for us to deliver in your district every day instead of every other day. An order phoned to us before eleven o'clock will reach you the same day.

Yours faithfully,

Wood & Co.

The introduction of the last paragraph is evident wisdom. The customer's possible annoyance at not getting the catalogue she asked for may well be mitigated by the prospect of a speedy delivery of the goods when they are finally selected.

Parklands,
Stourmere

September 7th 1932

Messrs Glover & Tighe
Men's Gaiters,
Woolbottom

Dear Sirs.

Paris
A-2

Can you send me by return half a
dozen pairs of men's grey cashmere socks
about 1/11 the pair

H-5

They are to wear with an eight in shoe,
and my husband likes them with black
clocks at the sides I am

Yours Faithfully

(Mrs) F Woolley

13 Central Square,
Woolbottom.

Mrs. Woolley,
Parklands,
Stourmere.

September 8th 1932.

Dear Madam,

Your letter of September 7th has just
reached us. Thank you very much for the
order.

At the moment we have only three pairs
of grey cashmere socks with black clocks in
stock, so we are sending these at once, and
have wired our factory for the rest.

Yours faithfully,

Glover & Tighe Ltd.

Now come one or two letters which relate to a transaction already in hand, and for which, therefore, there is no need to reproduce the customer's original letter. These specimens are also composed entirely of the paragraphs given up to this point in the book.

Dear Madam,

With reference to your recent order for a mackintosh, although we have tried every source we know we have not been able to get the style you asked for.

If you would like us to make the garment specially for you, please fill in the enclosed measurement form.

The cost of making would be 25/6, and you can rely on getting it within 10 days from the time you send the order.

Yours faithfully,

(Made up of paragraphs B—3, L—1, D—9, D—10)

Dear Madam,

As desired when you visited us the other day some patterns of rayon are enclosed, each marked with the price and width, and we hope you will be able to make a selection from them.

Just at the moment there is a very large demand for this type of material - it is selling very quickly - so it is possible that the exact shade or design you select may be out of stock by the time your order gets here. Would you, therefore, please make a second choice in case this should happen.

To our annoyance the table covers we promised to send you today have not arrived from the warehouse. An urgent note has been sent off to them saying that the goods must come at once. You may be sure that we shall lose no time this end in getting them off to you.

Yours faithfully,

(Made up of paragraphs B—1, D—5, D—6, H—4, a-c)

In our examples we have kept rigidly to the original form of the paragraphs used, but a typist of even average ability may be trusted to make slight adaptations beyond the insertion of the "it" or "them" as the grammar needs. This will greatly increase the scope of the system and proportionately decrease the number of letters that have to be dictated in whole or in part.

It may well be asserted that the typist who *cannot* be trusted to fill in the "blanks" in the paragraphs as we have done, should surely be seeking fresh berths and bosses new.

CHAPTER VI

GETTING THE MONEY FIRST

A FORM of painless extraction where money is concerned has yet to be invented. Paying *does* hurt, and the bigger the bill the more it hurts. Mrs. Customer ever wants this, and that, and the other, and her wants are not always consistent with her means—or more accurately with the means of her husband.

Mrs. Customer is almost always honest, although just a trifle extravagant, and each demand for spot cash means that she will have to forgo something else until the end of the month when her husband's cheque arrives—or even until next month. So considerable tact is needed on the part of the shopkeeper who wants his money first.

The trader who strikes out boldly for a "cash" trade has an uphill path to tread. The artifices to which the public will resort to avoid pre-purchase payment are numberless. The ever-increasing vogue of credit systems—ranging from the itinerant "tally-man" to the fashionable idea of "subscribing" to a dressmaking or tailoring service—all teach Mrs. Customer that she may have what she wants when she wants it—and pay when she will.

The whole problem reduced to its simplest terms is to decide with which particular brand of sugar to coat the pill; what sound reason can be put forward that the customer should part with some of her scanty store of cash before receiving the goods upon which her heart is set.

Undoubtedly the basic argument for a "cash" principle is that credit of any sort must needs increase the price of the goods. Book-keepers have to be paid, ledgers and stationery have to be bought, stamps have to be used, all to run and control a credit department.

The added overhead cost may be unknown to the customer—it generally is—the trader may even deceive himself

into thinking that he can sell as cheaply by credit as by cash, but the fact remains, the customer is charged directly or indirectly for the privilege of having the goods before she pays for them.

Before turning to the really difficult part of the subject-matter of this chapter—getting payment first—we will give one or two paragraphs for use on those bright and happy occasions when the customer unasked sends the money with her order

M—1. Thank you very much for your letter of —— in which you send a —— (cheque or postal order) for ——.

M—2. Your letter of —— containing a (cheque or postal order) for —— has just arrived. Many thanks for the order.

M—3. A receipt for this amount is enclosed.

ASKING FOR THE CASH

Now we have to consider the various ways in which the “cash-with-order” principle can be put over to the customer. Discretion is needed in applying any of these methods—for every customer who sends her order without enclosing the money cannot be dealt with in the same way. The reason why no cash is sent may be any of the following—

1 The customer was not able to get a postal order at the moment of writing, but is perfectly willing to send the cash first if asked to do so by the trader

2 On a previous occasion the goods have been sent in advance of payment, and from that the customer deduces that she has an “account” with that shop, and can legitimately expect them to do the same any time

3 There are those—and it is good to think that they are in the decided minority—who refuse on principle to send their money until they have the goods, and sometimes for a moderate time afterwards

4 Then just now and again an order will be received from a member of the public (I will not say customer) who has no real intention of paying for the goods at all

Retailers who do a mail order business are particularly concerned with these problems, which will be touched on again in the chapter on Mail Order Correspondence.

Our object is to devise paragraphs that will deter class 4 from their evil quest, but will not give any offence to classes 1 and 2. As to class 3, each retailer must make up his mind whether or not he wants to serve that type of customer.

It must be clearly understood that the following suggested paragraphs must only be used at the discretion of the owner of the business, or a responsible clerk who has a good knowledge of the type of customer in question. Much damage to the goodwill of the business may be done by injudicious demands for the pre-payment of orders.

We will start with a simple request for the cash—politely put, but offering no extended reason, a type of paragraph suited to some of the class 1 customer—

M—4. The goods you order come to —, and if you will let us have a postal order for this amount, we will see that the — are sent off at once.

Where nothing whatever is known about the customer, a paragraph like that would be suitable. Here is another that rather leaves the door open. It puts the onus upon the customer to say how the parcel is to be sent—

M—5. How would you like us to send the —? A bill is enclosed in case you prefer to send the cash first, but we will gladly dispatch by cash on delivery if you wish.

M—6. We have looked carefully through our list of Ledger customers, but cannot find your name there. If you have an account with us it is possible that it may appear under another address. If this is so would you let us know, but if you would rather send the cash, the enclosed bill shows the cost of the goods ordered.

The last paragraph is well suited to customers in class 2. When the shopkeeper has previously been asked to get some goods in for a customer, but no arrangements have been made as to payment, a rather different type of paragraph will be needed—

M—7. A few days ago you asked us to get some — for you, and we are glad to say that they have now arrived. Shall we send them on or would you prefer to call and pay for them? In case you are not able to come in, a bill is enclosed showing the cost.

M—8. It is clearly understood that if any or all of the goods are not exactly what you want, you may send them back, and your money will be returned in full.

Very frequently the lack of full details in the customer's letter provides an excellent opening to write before dispatching the goods, and then is the time to ask for a deposit or the cash in full.

THE CASH ON DELIVERY SYSTEM

The last few years have seen a greater expansion of the Post Office service as it affects retailers than there has been for a whole generation before. The cash on delivery system of dispatching goods, the business reply envelope or card, and now the restoration of the inland sample post are a triple blessing for the shopkeeper.

It is often possible to send a parcel by cash on delivery without waiting to get the customer's permission to do so, but here again discretion is needed. Some customers strongly resent being asked for payment on the doorstep; but as time goes on, and the working of the system becomes more and more appreciated, there will be less likelihood of offence being caused.

Here is one paragraph in which the customer is asked if she wishes this method of dispatch to be used—

M—9. If you would like us to send the goods by the cash on delivery system, we will gladly do so.

Some reasons that may be given for sending a parcel by cash on delivery without the customer's instructions follow—

M—10. The parcel has been sent cash on delivery, and the amount to pay the postman is ——. We have done this to save delay in writing for the cash or the bother of making out a cheque later.

M—11. As we note that you want the —— quickly, we are sending them by cash on delivery, the amount to pay the postman being ——. This will save any delay in asking you for a cheque first.

M—12. To save complicated book entries, we are sending the parcel by cash on delivery. The enclosed bill shows the amount to pay the postman.

Among the minor annoyances of retailing, particularly when a post order business is done, is the customer who sends too much, or, worse still, too little money with her order. With the first there is the bother of writing a letter which would otherwise be unnecessary, returning the surplus, and with the second there is the probability that more will be spent in writing for the small amount outstanding than the amount itself

Every trader who encounters this problem will have to fix a definite point below which balances outstanding against customers are "written off" I have seen offices in which were hundreds of "temporary accounts," each one opened because a customer sent a few pence short of her bill, and there these debits hang about month after month with no likelihood of their ever being collected.

PARAGRAPHS FOR BALANCES, ETC.

This paragraph can be included in a letter to a customer who sends too much money—

M—13. The goods you have ordered do not come to quite as much as the cash you sent, so we are returning the balance to you in stamps (or P.O.).

And either of these when not enough money is sent—

M—14. The amount of cash you sent was not quite sufficient to meet the cost of the goods. Would you let us have the small balance shown on the enclosed bill so that we can close the transaction?

M—15. The bill enclosed shows a small balance due to us. Would you mind sending this so that we can close the transaction?

Approbation paragraphs have already been touched upon (page 69), but they frequently present a "cash" problem, as well as one of merchandise. Many shopkeepers want a deposit before sending a selection of goods to an unknown customer. Here is a paragraph that can be used for this purpose—

M—16. (a) When you send your detailed instructions as to ——— (size, style, etc.), please enclose a deposit of, say ———, as we do not find your name on our Ledger as having an account.

Traders are often bothered by customers asking for discounts—some even go so far as to take off 5 per cent or so without so much as by your leave. They evidently consider that the favour they are conferring upon the shopkeeper by patronizing him merits some special concession on his part. Fellow traders in other lines of business are particularly annoying in this way. In some small towns and villages there seem to be few indeed who pay full price at all. Every butcher and baker is complacently assured that it is his right divine to have candlesticks made at a reduced rate. The whole thing becomes a farce, because every trader concerned allows a margin in his prices for this sort of thing, and nobody benefits in reality—

- M—17. It has always been our policy to give the very best possible “plain-figure” value. We say “plain-figure” intentionally, for everyone must know that where discounts are given, someone has to make up for it—and that someone is not usually the trader. It is only a paper discount after all.
- M—18. We notice that you have deducted —— from our bill, but must point out that our terms are net.

The second of these paragraphs might be used—followed by the first—when a customer has helped herself or himself to discount, and the first paragraph alone when the shopkeeper is simply refusing a request for a reduced price.

SPECIMEN LETTERS INVOLVING CASH

Here are further examples of letters from customers dealt with by means of the paragraphs given up to this point. In the first two cases the customer has sent the money in the first instance, the other letters either ask for the money or advise that the goods are being sent by cash on delivery.

Because the question of getting the money is so vital, and because the utmost tact is required in dealing with customers on the question of cash, more specimens are given here than in the previous chapters

"Eb Kido,"
 Nightingale Vale
 Aves Hill.

July 1st 1932.

Messrs Delancey & Sons.

Drapers
 High Street
 Great Chuffinglon-

Para

M-6

Dear Sirs,

I want $3\frac{1}{2}$ yds of Crepe Marocain in
 the plume pattern at $\frac{2}{6}$ the yard, as
 the sample I have pinned down.

C-2

we can my
 mummy initial
 keep in brown
 at $\frac{5}{6}$ and
 hope that
 these will
 be suitable

Also please send me a box of half a-
 dozen initial handkerchiefs - letter
 S- at about $\frac{4}{6}$ the box.

Then I want just one pair of little
 stockings, for shoe size six in ten,
 medium price.

M-13

A postal order for $\frac{14}{6}$ is enclosed
 & I hope that this will be enough.

Yours faithfully,
 (M^{rs}) E. Birds.

High Street,
Gt. Chuffington.

Mrs. D. Bird,
"El Nido",
Nightingale Vale,
Avis Hill.

July 2nd 1932.

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for your letter of July 1st in which you send a postal order for 14/6.

The articles you ask for have already been sent off by post, and they should reach you by tomorrow morning at the latest. We can only supply initial handkerchiefs in boxes at 5/6, and hope that these will be suitable.

The goods you have ordered do not come to quite as much as the cash you sent, so we are returning the balance to you in stamps.

Yours faithfully,

Delaine & Sons.

It will be noted that a dictated sentence has been added to paragraph "C—2 "

Wilmington Road
 Frosthighten
 November 10th 1952

Bode & Son
 Ironmongers
 Snow Coulman

Dear Sirs

Paros

M-2

M-3

H 6ab

Please send me a cub such
 as your sale price 10/11 reduced from
 15/6 with the adjustable box ends
 I should like it with the blue leatherette
 on the ends, if there are any left in
 that shade, but I want the cub
 sent at once as it is for a present

Yours Faithfully
 (Mrs) J Smuggles

Fireside House.
Snow Common.

November 11th, 1932.

Mrs. Snuggles,
Winterton Road,
Frostbighton.

Dear Madam,

Your letter of November 10th containing a postal order and stamps for 10/11 has just arrived. Many thanks for the order. A receipt for this amount is enclosed.

As the exact colour ends are not in stock, we have sent the very nearest rather than keep you waiting without anything at all.

If these are not suitable, please let us know, as we are perfectly willing to take them back or change them as you wish.

Yours faithfully,

Cole & Son.

The Cafe
Cuddlesworth.

March 8th 1932

Chas & Kidd Std
High Street,
Westington

Dear Sirs

Paras

A-1

M-4

I saw some rather nice cot
blankets in Sarsce Blue advertised in
a circular you sent me a week or so
ago, about two foot by three foot size
I forget the price, but I want two of
them If you will let me know how much
I will send you the money

Yours faithfully
(W) W Darling

High Street,
Nestlington.

March 9th 1932.

Mrs. U. Darling,
The Cote,
Cuddlesworth.

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for your letter
of March 8th.

The goods you order come to 5/10, and
if you will let us have a postal order for
this amount, we will see that the cot
blankets are sent off at once.

Yours faithfully,

Childs & Kidd, Ltd.

"Alameda"
Sunderland Sq.
Dulington.

April 23rd 1932

Smart & Dash Ltd
Mansion Bldg.
Little London

Paris

A-2

The beige colour
is available
at the price you
mention

M-6

Sirs

Please send me twelve yards of
Chiffon Velour in beige colour, price
 $2/11\frac{3}{4}$ the yard. If you cannot do the
shade I want let me have patterns
of what you can do

Yours faithfully,
(Miss) J. G. Lipp

Maison Chic,
Little London,

Miss I. Flip,
"Alamode"
Snobworth Sq.,
Dullington.

April 24th 1932.

Dear Madam,

Your letter of April 23rd has just reached us. Thank you very much for the order. The beige colour satin is available at the price you mention.

We have looked carefully through our list of ledger customers, but cannot find your name there. If you have an account with us it is possible that it may appear under another address. If this is so would you let us know, but if you would rather send the cash, the enclosed bill shows the cost of the goods ordered.

Yours faithfully

Smart & Dash Ltd.

Many a trader has found that the more "chic" a customer may be, the less likely she is to pay up promptly—so here he will wisely decide to ask for the money first. The lady it may be noted, does not see fit to mention such a vulgar matter as cash in her somewhat peremptory note.

"Westward Ho"
Packington Road,
World's End

August 5th 1932

Messrs Carse & Bagge,
Hustling Square,
Seaview

Dear Sirs,

Paros

A-2

M-5

Will you please send me a good strong cabin trunk, the kind covered with brown water-proof canvas I think that the one I had before had wooden hoops round the middle and ends so that it does not get knocked about when travelling. The size I want is about 24 inches long and 16 inches high.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs De Part.

Hustling Square,
Seaview.

Mrs. De. Part,
"Westward Ho"
Packington Road,
World's End.

August 6th 1932.

Dear Madam,

Your letter of August 5th has just reached us. Thank you very much for the order.

How would you like us to send the trunk ?
A bill is enclosed in case you prefer to send the money first, but we will gladly dispatch by Rail Cash on Delivery if you wish.

Yours faithfully,

Caisse & Bagge Ltd.

The customer does not say she is wanting the trunk urgently, and in any case it is a bulky article to send by cash on delivery (rail system here, of course) until the customer's permission has been received. On the other hand, a cabin trunk is a moderately expensive thing to send in advance of payment, particularly to a customer who is obviously off for a voyage.

La Blute
 Brasleigh Road
 Brokenall

13th May 1932

Paras

Messrs Blay & Brooker
 Potter Street,
 Wedgwood

A-4

Dear Mrs,

We have just had a bad accident to our dinner service, will you please send me at once a 21-piece service, the gold and green design you had in your window last week I think the price was somewhere about 16/- If you cannot do the green and gold, send the blue and gold, but I must have a service at once

M-11

C-3 f

We are using our best service for the moment, so be sure and send at once as I am afraid it may get damaged
 Yours faithfully,

(Mrs) B Faul

Potter Street,
Wedgwood.

Mrs.B.Faul,
"La Chute",
Crashleigh Road,
Brokenall.

May 14th 1932

Dear Madam,

Your letter ordering a Dinner Service
is much appreciated.

As we note that you want it quickly,
we are sending it by Cash on Delivery, the
amount to pay our carman being 15/11. This
will save any delay in asking you for a
cheque first.

Should the contents of the parcel
not be in perfect condition when it reaches
you please let us know at once.

Yours faithfully,

Clay & Crocker Ltd.

Then here is just one specimen of a letter referring back to a previous transaction—

Dear Madam,

You recently asked us to get you three deck chairs with shades and arms. They have now come in, and we are sending them off by carrier today.

The amount of cash you sent was not quite enough to meet the cost of the goods. Would you let us have the small balance as shown on the enclosed bill so that we can close the transaction?

Yours faithfully,

(Made up of paragraphs C—3a; M—14)

CHAPTER VII

CORRESPONDENCE ABOUT CREDIT

HAPPY is the man who makes "cash" his trading policy, and puts not his trust in credit. A quick ready-money business enables the trader to have his money in the bank before the accounts for the goods from the wholesale become due. But how many are so fortunate?

Everywhere the demand is for credit, whether it is called "an account," "entering," or even "terms." And the curious thing about this so decided a trend is that it pervades almost every level of society. The very poor want credit because they cannot possibly put the money down for any sizable article, the well-to-do want credit either because they are living far above their incomes or are merely taking advantage of their position to maintain a balance at their bank.

There will always be grumbles from customers who have been asked for their money before the goods are delivered—and it will be found no easy matter to justify a strict "cash" policy when there are only too many competitors willing to give credit.

To those few firms who successfully hold to the strict "money with order" principle, we take off our hats—and wish we could do the same. But we shall not be far wrong in assuming that very few readers of this book are in such a position of trading impregnability. So for the majority's sake we will devote this chapter to credit problems.

The necessity of giving credit has long been a retailing experience, one regarded as an evil to be borne with what patience the trader may possess. A generation or so ago the tailor, for instance, was fully expected by his better-class customer to give a full year's credit. Quite frequently one suit was not paid for until another was ordered. Some customers even had the audacity to offer him a cheque "to go on with," an old-time parody of the modern

hire-purchase system on the part of folk who would to-day scorn to buy on "terms"

The whole fabric of credit as applied to the purchasing public in those days was irregular, chaotic, and illogical. Bad debts were frequent, collection methods inadequate and slow. The trader naturally felt piqued with the customer who kept him waiting so long for his money, and the customer felt equally piqued with the shopkeeper who "pestered him for that wretched bill."

To-day there is a sharp differentiation in the methods of granting credit. There are, on the one hand, firms who lay themselves out to offer one to four *years'* credit on "extended payment" terms—a perfectly logical arrangement, reasonably safe for the trader, straightforward for the customer, who pays a definite amount on his bill for the accommodation.

On the other hand, shopkeepers who run ordinary credit accounts have tightened up their methods. The old quarterly or even half-yearly accounts will not do now. Accounts to-day with progressive firms are strictly monthly, and clearly recognized as such. Firms that open accounts in an indefinite sort of way with Mesdames Thomas, Richard, and Henry, of whom they know little or nothing, are asking for all they get. Most likely, they will get nothing at all. Most credit situations are basically cut and dried, and are, therefore, quite amenable to paragraph treatment.

OPENING AN ACCOUNT

Almost all the stores and drapery houses ask for two trade references before opening an account, and in London particularly the larger houses are constantly in touch with one another exchanging credit information.

Our first paragraph is for use when a customer who may previously have bought for cash now wishes goods sent in advance of payment from time to time—

N—1. (a) If you will let us have the names of two tradesmen or business houses with whom you have done business and to whom we can refer, we will gladly place your name on our Ledger for a monthly account.

- (b) Goods can then be sent at any time for your convenience without the bother on your part of sending the cash each time.

This system of asking for references is so generally accepted nowadays, that the majority of customers, writing to a house with whom they have not done business before, mention the names of one or two firms to whom reference can be made.

When the references arrive and have proved satisfactory, many shopkeepers are content merely to make out a Ledger folio for the new customer—and leave it at that. But this is to miss an excellent opportunity of putting all future credit business on a right basis. The customer should be told, if only out of courtesy, that her name has been put on the Ledger, and then is the time to state clearly the terms on which the retailer is prepared to conduct that account—

- N--2. (a) The references you gave us have proved entirely satisfactory, and your name has been placed on our Ledger for a monthly account. We hope that you will find this a considerable convenience in your shopping arrangements.
- (b) Whatever you require, whether ordered personally or by telephone, will be sent immediately without the bother of sending or paying the cash at the moment.
- (c) Nothing is charged for this service, you pay the ordinary cash prices for the goods you order. Because of this we render our statement at the end of each month, and it is then due for payment. Our prices will not allow more extended credit.

Unless the circumstances are entirely exceptional, the woman who would object to an account on these terms is of little use to the trader who wishes to keep an even keel.

CASUAL CREDIT

As if the whole business of regular Ledger Accounts were not sufficiently involved, it is further complicated by the "casual" type of credit customer. This is the lady who usually pays cash, she does not want an "account," nor will she give references. What she *does* want is half a dozen bath towels at once. She says nothing at all about money, but her note heading is the kind that warns the retailer that C.O.D. will not do. You may call the transaction

"Appro," "Memo," or what you like, but it is really *credit*. The trader may get his money by return; he may have to wait longer for it than he does from regular Ledger customers; he may never get it at all. If he decides to let the goods go, a letter containing paragraphs C—5 (page 62) followed by this one asking for the cash by return should accompany them.

N—3. Will you reciprocate by sending us the amount shown on the enclosed bill in course of post.

If it is decided not to trust the customer, the way out is—

(a) to ask for the money or a deposit—see Cash Paragraphs, page 100,

(b) to ask for a reference—here is a paragraph.

N—4. When writing would you mind sending us the name of a tradesman to whom we could refer, as we have not been able to find your name on our list of Ledger customers.

Some shopkeepers are content with a bank reference only, but that is of little real value. It is only too simple for any funds that may be deposited to be withdrawn between the time the reference is queried and the cheque presented. This is dishonest, of course; but if all customers were honest there would be no need for credit precautions at all. The ingenious frauds that are engineered at the expense of the retailer very naturally tend to make him wary of giving credit, he becomes almost permanently distrustful, in fact.

All the paragraphs up to now have been on the side of the trader and designed for his protection—and very necessary they are. But there is another side of the question—the perfectly honest customer's side. Many firms spend big money trying to attract the right type of customer to their premises. They advertise in the Press, they send out direct mail pieces, and in every way beseech and urge Mrs. Affluent Patron to give them her custom.

And when at length she *does* condescend to transfer her allegiance to the new shop and open an account there, what does she find? She finds that there is an evil-minded person

in the employ of the firm known as the credit manager. He obviously appears to distrust Mrs. A. Patron; he fires out abrupt "collection letters" at her if she happens to be away on holiday when her statement comes in. Mr. Credit Manager is dictatorial in his manner—has he not been caught many times?—but Mrs. A. Patron strongly resents his manner; she was not pestered like this at the old shop, she thinks she will go back there again. And so much of the excellent sales-promotion work of the advertising departments of the business is undone by the zealous credit man, bent on seeing that his firm is not defrauded.

THE IDEAL COLLECTION LETTER

These problems bring us to the inevitable aftermath of credit-giving—getting the money in. That in itself is a perfectly simple matter—unless the debtor happens to be a domestic servant, or is engaged in one of a few other specified occupations. Almost any trader with a fair number of book debts—enough to keep him awake at night sometimes—could collect 80 per cent of them in a very short time if he so wished. But the very next thing he would need to do would be to collect the scattered remains of his clientele and start off in business again. The real problem before the credit letter-writer is to get the money and keep the customer, and the solution lies somewhere near the point where the parallel lines meet, nowhere in theory, but in between the two in practice. The perfect collection letter to the slow-paying but honest customer has yet to be written. The best can only be a compromise between one that merely amuses the debtor and one that annoys her. The collection letter is undoubtedly one of the hardest to write of any routine letter.

If the "better-letter" campaign, to which this book is a contribution, has had any effect at all, it is principally among the newer and more progressive firms, and even with them in the sales rather than the routine letter department. If the "starch and stolid pomposities" are giving ground in the advertising department, they are still deeply entrenched

in the counting-house, and the Business English die-hards find their last refuge for their clichés and platitudes in the credit department. Firms of national renown whose sales letters are friendly and pleasant still ask for an "early remittance"; they still "beg to point out," and "request the favour of." The root of the trouble often is that the credit department is under the hand of the secretary of the firm, whom no one dare criticize

THE WORKMAN AND HIS TOOLS

Lest anyone might think that adopting the paragraphic principles outlined in this book would lead to a mechanical way of doing business, let me say at once that in its final analysis the conduct of a successful credit business is a test, not of the superiority of a system, but of the moral courage of the man behind the system. I definitely assert that the great majority of traders would improve their collections by using carefully constructed paragraphs suited to their particular needs, but I quite frankly admit that good tools will only yield good results in the hand of a good workman. The reader who thinks that a super set of paragraphs will make up for a vacillating credit policy had better close the book at this point and resign himself to his present proportion of bad debts.

The hire-purchase people have a principle that they endeavour to maintain at all costs. It is: "Never let a customer get so far behind that one payment overlaps into the next." In hire purchase this may easily happen, for the payments become due regularly each calendar month, and if they get more than four weeks behind there looms before the customer the prospect of a double amount to pay. The longer the delay, the less prospect there is of his ever catching up. With the ordinary Ledger account the position is slightly different, there is not the periodic payment of the same amount, but there is the very strong temptation for the shopkeeper to let the customer have what she wants urgently—just to keep her in a good frame of mind until the bill is cleared up. Humouring the customer is

infinitely easier than getting the belated bill paid. The grocer in particular knows this to his cost; the family must have food, and if money is tight and the trader shuts down the account, the customer will certainly take what ready money she has and spend it with a rival grocer. And the creditor may whistle for his money.

FINDING OUT FIRST

When ordinary Ledger accounts get behind, it is vital that the shopkeeper should seek the reason why, for on this depends the right assessment of the various types of debtors.

This is what happens. A customer who has a monthly account fails to meet her statement as usual. A reminder is sent, but nothing results. Now the owner of the business (or credit manager, as the case may be) has to make up his mind on this vital question—

“Is the customer a ‘can’t’ or a ‘won’t’?” The importance of this assessment cannot be over-estimated. To treat a mere slow-but-honest payer as a rogue is fatal, the customer will certainly be lost, to treat a rogue with easy patience is equally fatal, the money will certainly be lost.

What rule is there, then, for discriminating between the two classes? Very much depends upon the intuitive sense and experience of the man in charge of the credit department, but there is one test that may well be applied. The

Dear Madam,

- P—1. You have had an account with us for nearly two years, and we have noted with pleasure how regularly you have met our statements hitherto.
- P—2. Now we are sorry to see that it has fallen behind somewhat, and although we have sent two reminders, we have not heard from you about it.
- P—3. From our past business relations we feel sure that there must be some very definite reason for this. Will you tell us quite frankly what it is so that we can see what arrangements can be made? It has always been our policy to treat every case of overdue accounts on its own merits.
- P—4. A stamped envelope is enclosed for your reply—but if you would prefer to call in and see me personally I will gladly talk the matter over with you in confidence.

Yours faithfully,

unpardonable sin in the eyes of the credit manager is for a debtor to totally ignore his repeated applications for payment. This is particularly true in the account departments of the hire-purchase traders, but the ordinary retailer may well learn from their fuller experience.

Here, then, is the test. After the usual monthly account, and one or two reminders have failed to draw a response, send a letter something like the one shown on p. 123.

At times the first paragraph of this letter will be unsuitable, for most customers who have been paying regularly for two years can be labelled with some degree of certainty as "can'ts" rather than "won'ts." Then the letter can begin with an amended second paragraph thus: "We are sorry to see that your account has fallen behind and . . ."

Then there will be just a few folk whose pride will prevent their answering the letter at all. They would rather be summoned than admit that they are hard up.

But, apart from these exceptions, a very fair inference as to the type of customer may be drawn from the response (or lack of it) to this letter. The customer who completely ignores it is generally worthy of but little consideration. The account should be handed over to the firm's collection agency or solicitor.

Because the situation is a delicate one, we will give an alternative letter which may suit certain types of businesses better. Or it may be necessary to deal with the same

Dear Madam,

- P—5. It is necessary for the protection of our business to press for the payment of overdue accounts, but we would like you to know that if you are in any difficulty we will gladly do anything we reasonably can to meet you in the matter.
- P—6. Our experience tells us that a sense of embarrassment will often prevent a customer frankly stating her difficulty in meeting an account, and in ignorance of the real state of affairs we have passed the account over to our solicitor for collection.
- P—7. If you find yourself in such a position, please do not hesitate to tell us the facts. Perhaps we can suggest some way of payment that will make it easier for you.
- P—8. Your letter, of course, will be treated quite confidentially.

Yours faithfully,

customer twice in this way—at considerable intervals no doubt—but it would be fatal to use the same letter a second time. The average customer has an uncanny memory for such letters.

Those who *do* reply to these letters will need to be sifted again. Some of the reasons given for non-payment will be merely evasive, others will open the way for negotiations, which if tactfully carried out will result in the lasting gratitude of the customer—and her lasting custom, too, when times for her are better.

One point should never be overlooked by the ardent collector. He must make reasonably sure that the customer does actually receive the accounts and reminders he is sending so determinedly. This difficulty arises more particularly in the men's trade, in which customers are sometimes away on business for weeks on end. It is more than disconcerting for the traveller to return and find a pile of "dunning" letters, among them a threat of legal action, on his desk or door-mat, all over a petty account he forgot in the hurry of departure.

HUMOUR IN COLLECTION LETTERS

We have already noted that in this country the credit department is the last reserve of the conventionalist in letter-writing, in America it is the happy hunting-ground of the stunter. Almost unbelievable tricks are employed to cajole, urge, push, hustle, or coerce the debtor into paying up. These devices range from the childishly crude to the definitely vulgar according to our English judgment. They may do their job in their own country, but here they would produce anything from weak contempt to intense annoyance—anything, in fact, but the money that is wanted.

The fact is that paying up is a serious business, very different from ordering goods. It takes a clever writer to infuse his sales letters successfully with humour, it needs a positive genius to do so with collection letters. And as few of us can lay claim to such flights of intellect, we do well to keep our credit letters serious.

SPECIMEN COLLECTION LETTERS

In this chapter we are departing slightly from our principle of first giving separate paragraphs, and then linking them up into complete letters. The reason for this is that, by themselves, collection paragraphs appear rather strange and abrupt, and some traders might be chary of using them, but, as component parts of an ordered series of complete letters, the purpose of each will be seen at once. In the specimen letters that follow, and the two that precede also, the paragraphs have been numbered and are in many cases interchangeable, so that each reader can adapt them to his particular needs, supplementing them if necessary from the few separate paragraphs given at the end of the chapter.

The first essential of a series of collection letters is that they should be accurately graded. By this I do not mean that they should be worded in an increasing scale of threatening as the account becomes more and more overdue, but rather that their very attitude should swing right from entire friendliness at the outset to the threat of legal action at the end.

The general plan with account customers is to send a detailed statement of goods supplied at the end of each month. If this is not met, a statement merely carrying the amount due and the words "Account Rendered" is sent one month later. Whether or not this second statement should be accompanied by the first "collection" letter is a matter for local decision. We will assume that it should, for by that time the account is one full month overdue. Here is a suggested "first" collection letter—

FIRST LETTER

30th June, 1932.

Dear Madam,

- P—9. Your account for goods supplied up to the end of May is slightly overdue. Please let us have a cheque as soon as possible.
- P—10. An addressed envelope is enclosed—it needs no stamp—for your use if you prefer to post the amount, but if you should call in to pay, we hope that you will spare a moment to glance at the new range of afternoon dresses that have just arrived.

Yours faithfully,

This letter is entirely "harmless" in the strict business sense of the word. The "won't pay" will treat it with contempt, the slow payer will not be stirred by it, but the regular and conscientious payer, who has genuinely overlooked the account, will in most cases respond. It must be emphasized that the collection letter yet remains to be written that will secure the cash and retain the goodwill of every type of debtor.

SECOND LETTER

30th July, 1932.

Dear Madam,

- P—11. When you purchased the goods shown on the enclosed statement, we gave you the benefit of our ordinary cash prices on the understanding that you would meet our statement at the end of the month.
- P—12. As it is now nearly two months overdue, please let us have a cheque in course of post.
- P—13. An addressed envelope, which needs no stamp, is enclosed for your use.

Yours faithfully,

This letter is decidedly more blunt than No 1—it is intended to be, but there is not the slightest suggestion of any threat. It will be noted that the last paragraph is an abridgment of the close of No 1, but there is no mention of new goods. By the time an account is getting into the third month the trader is more interested in his money for goods already supplied than in selling fresh goods for which he may never receive payment. The thoroughly honest slow

THIRD LETTER

31st August, 1932.

Dear Madam,

- P—14. Your account for goods supplied in May is now much overdue and although we have written to you twice about it, we have had no reply whatever.
- P—15. It is obvious that we must insist on our bills being paid, or we could not remain long in business, and unless the account is paid at once it will be handed over to our solicitor.
- P—16. We dislike taking this step because it will threaten the friendly business relations between us. Will you make it unnecessary by sending your cheque?
- P—13. An addressed envelope, which needs no stamp, is enclosed for your use.

Yours faithfully,

payer will in most cases be stimulated by this letter, unless for some reason she is a genuine "can't." In some businesses it may be well to make No 2 the *third* letter and interpose the "test" letter outlined on page 123—

No 3 is a decided change in tone. We have got past the stage of the "honests and cans" to the "habitually slows" and "won'ts."

FOURTH LETTER

Dear Madam,

30th September, 1932.

- P—17. Repeated applications have been made for the enclosed account for goods supplied over four months ago, but they have been completely ignored.
- P—18. The Account will be handed to our solicitor next Monday morning unless we receive a cheque in full payment in the meantime.

Yours faithfully,

The trader need not be so fussy about the wording of this letter, the plainer and blunter the better, for it will only go to the "won'ts" and the thoroughly "dishonests." The genuine "can'ts" will for the most part have written and explained their position to the shopkeeper by now.

One general observation on this suggested series may be made. We have kept it strictly clear of the "cant" phrases that so often clog collection letters, deceiving nobody and bringing the writer into ridicule. This is the sort of thing I mean—

Would you let us know if you received our detailed statement of account that we posted to you on ——. In case it failed to reach you, the amount due is ----

This is humbug. The trader does not wonder for a moment whether the customer received the statement, he rightly assumes that she has. Or this—

We feel sure that it is only necessary to point this out to you in order to receive a cheque by return.

As an illustration of "the wish is the father of the thought" this is excellent, but in actual fact it is entirely untrue. By this time the trader has the gravest doubts as to whether he will ever see his money.

In some parts of the country, and with certain types of

customers, the regularly monthly programme as suggested in this chapter may be thought too drastic, and will need to be watered down. This is quite simple. Send the letters out at two-monthly intervals instead of one. By the time the debtor gets the last letter, she will have owed the money seven or eight months—surely long enough to satisfy the scruples of the most nervous trader.

It has been mentioned that, although the four collection letters have been given in complete form, their component paragraphs have been numbered so that the changes may be rung on them at the discretion of the user. It is, indeed, necessary to vary the form of collection letters periodically, for if the slow payers get the same first or second letter, they will recognize it and reason thus “I haven’t had No 3 yet—May as well wait till then before I pay.”

So here are one or two separate paragraphs that can be worked in

- P—19. (a) As the end of the month, when we balance our books, is only a few days off, we are sending you a statement of your account.
- (b) If you would let us have a cheque for this amount before the 31st, we should greatly appreciate your kindness.
- P—20. (a) Our books show that you have not been using your account just lately, and also that our statement sent about a month ago has not yet been settled.
- (b) If you have not required anything and the account has just been overlooked, we quite understand. If this is so, please let us have a cheque as soon as possible.
- (c) But if the reason should be that you have had reason for dissatisfaction with either our goods or service, please let us know about it at once. We will do everything possible to put things right.
- P—21. If you are unable to pay the bill at the moment, it is only fair that you should let us know so that we can make some arrangement about it.

As to the customers who always pays regularly, often she is so taken for granted that the retailer does not think of dropping her a line of appreciation now and then for her long and faithful patronage of his shop. But it is worth thinking about. Why not try the effect? Not every month, or even quarter, or it would simply become a circular—but just once in a way.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN THE CUSTOMER IS CROSS

THE problems of business letter-writing that we have dealt with up to now represent the normal course of retailing; they cover situations that regularly occur in the daily round of most shopkeepers, including those minor difficulties such as delays and stock shortages, that will arise in the execution of customers' wishes.

These small disturbances of retail routine are worrying enough, but unfortunately there are rougher gales that beset the harassed trader. The old tag "accidents *will* happen" is painfully true even in the best organized business. Faulty merchandise *will* creep in, errors *will* occur in book-keeping, assistants *will* speak inadvisedly with their lips, customers *will* misunderstand even when there is nothing amiss. So the shopkeeper, already busy enough coping with the smaller swirls of trouble, is periodically subjected to positive gusts of wrath from the very customers he is most anxious to please. What retailer does not, on occasion, have to wrench himself away from other and pressing jobs in order to wrestle with a stinging letter from an old and valued customer, or almost as bad, an influential customer who has just commenced to buy from his shop? And because this question of dissatisfaction on the part of customers, be it with the goods or with the service, touches the very core of successful retailing, we shall devote a whole chapter to its diagnosis and treatment.

The unfortunate name commonly given to the action of a customer in asserting that her last purchase was unsatisfactory is the root of much of the trouble. It is called a "complaint."

"And why not?" you say, "the man who calls a spade a spade rather than an agricultural implement is rightly lauded as one who is straightforward and sincere—why

not call a complaint a complaint—it is a complaint anyway!”

The reason is that the term exudes annoyance, resentment, and argument, surely the very worst atmosphere in which to conciliate an aggrieved customer whose gloves have split the second time of wearing.

It should never have been called a “complaint” to begin with. It was the shopkeeper of a couple of generations ago, working in his ill-lit, ill-fitted, fusty little shop who invented the term when he was plagued by impudent customers who dared to call into question the quality of his wares. Had they not chosen the goods themselves, had they not paid the money? Then the transaction was closed as far as he was concerned. To seek to reopen it under some footling pretext of “fading” (of course, it would fade) was to his mind closely bordering on the criminal

A more enlightened age has other views; faulty goods must be acknowledged and, if necessary, replaced, but there still lingers the idea that these cases are a species of blight upon a business, and should only be tolerated when there is no escape from them. “The customer is king” is a fruity morsel for the complacent retailer to twist round his tongue, but in practice his complacency with himself and his service is often in inverse proportion to his complaisance towards his dissatisfied customers

WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE

To illustrate the point here are some phrases which are used every day and all over the country to customers who have expressed dissatisfaction with the goods they have purchased.

We have received the stockings of which you complain. . . .

We regret to have your complaint about

We must say that this is the first complaint we have received about this line .

What attitude on the part of the writer do such phrases suggest in the mind of the reader? Surely one of pique and resentment. In the last example there is a double sting.

Under its thin disguise of conventional phraseology, this is what it really means: "There is nothing whatever wrong with the goods, and you are the very first rogue-customer who has had the cheek to complain about them "

So will you not agree that the word "complaint" is psychologically unsound, and join in forswearing it whenever possible?

Claims against the retailer and occasional dissatisfaction with his service there are bound to be, and the day is yet distant when customers will cease to become annoyed over very little at all. But much of the shopkeeper's success depends on how these cases are dealt with.

Reasonable expressions of dissatisfaction with either goods or service on the part of a customer should be definitely *encouraged*. This exhortation will certainly startle some of my older readers, so it is worth pausing a moment on it. In any healthy business the proportion of complaining to satisfied customers is well under 1 per cent. Then of the actual number of claims that are received of faulty goods, or of indifferent service, at least one-half—or it may be four-fifths—are fully justified. From this it is easy to see that the proportion of customers who will make an unfair claim is very small indeed.

But this is not the whole story. The proportion of those who *do* assert that something is wrong with the goods or service of the trader is small indeed, but are all the silent among the customers fully satisfied? They are *not*. How do I know? Because in every business there are many customers who have stopped buying. They have not all moved away, all their husbands have not lost their jobs, they still need goods and have the money to pay for them, yet they do not come to the shop as before. What can be more conclusive? I have frequently written to such missing links in the clientele and urged them to give their reason for not coming to the shop. Thus encouraged their tongues or pens are loosed, and they pour out their tale of misfits, poor material, bad service, wrong goods, faulty workmanship, and so on. And in case you may think that they have merely

invented their grievances because they think that here is some "easy money," let me say that an analysis of their claims has shown almost the same proportion of justified to unjustified as is met with in spontaneous expressions of dissatisfaction.

It is well worth risking a few blatantly unfounded claims in order to get the opportunity of dealing with twenty times their number of genuine ones. The alert retailer will, in fact, go out of his way to provoke genuine claims by means of "Customer Leakage" or "Follow-up" letters. I have dealt with this vital aspect of retailing in *Direct Mail Advertising for the Retail Trader*¹ under the heading of "Defensive Direct Mail."

Here we are only concerned with the way in which to reply to the claims themselves.

An analysis of the reasons given by customers for their dissatisfaction affords the very best possible index of the worth of a trader's service and merchandise. To neglect to deal adequately with these claims and so fail to profit by them is a sure sign of business ossification. Too many customers will cut their losses, say nothing, and go elsewhere. Hence those who do make a claim must receive every consideration.

THE DELICATE ADJUSTMENTS LETTER

Attitude is important in any type of business correspondence, but nowhere is it more so than in replies to dissatisfied customers. Letters are curiously sensitive things. If they are born in an atmosphere of pique, then all the care lavished upon their composition will be wasted, for they will certainly carry with them a subtle sub-audition of their writer's secret feelings upon the claim that is being made. He will, despite his courteous conventionalities, betray that he considers the claim a piece of impudence on the part of the customer.

If the owner of the business is unable to give the time to deal with these adjustment letters himself, he should fully assure himself that they are correctly handled.

¹ (Pitman, 7s. 6d.)

A further study of the two letters given in Chapter I (page 9-12) will evidence the prime importance of attitude in this work.

Before turning to the various ways in which claims may be met, it will be well to consider the different causes from which they may arise. Here is a list of some—

FAULTY GOODS

1. Material damaged; china cracked; fabric discoloured.
2. Articles badly made or ill-fashioned.
3. Food products bad or stale.
4. Goods imitation when thought to be real.

GOODS UNSATISFACTORY IN USE

5. Material does not wear well.
6. Garment a bad fit.
7. Material fades or shrinks.
8. Furniture, etc., fragile or broken.
9. Machine does not function properly.

VALUE

10. Poor value given.
11. Quality not as advertised.

SERVICE AT THE TIME OF PURCHASE

12. Inattention on part of assistant
13. Incivility on part of assistant.
14. Poor selection of goods, or not what is wanted.
15. Credit refused.
16. Delivery refused.

SERVICE AFTER PURCHASE

17. Delays in delivery.
18. Errors in packing—wrong or incomplete goods sent.
19. Bad packing.
20. Correspondence annoyance—discourteous letters.
21. Unwise methods of account collection.
22. Indifferent roundsmen or cheeky errand boys.

When the list is drawn up in full, it does look rather staggering. What a lot of reasons there are that may cause a customer to become dissatisfied with her draper or grocer, butcher or baker. Quite apart from the immediate problem of satisfying the customer, which is our particular concern in this chapter, a study of these causes of difficulty with customers can be of the utmost value to the owner of the business. A careful record should be kept, analysed under its correct heading, of every expression of dissatisfaction. If an unusual number appear in one section, then it is certain that prompt personal attention from the owner of the business is necessary in that direction.

THREE TYPES OF CLAIMS

There are three, and only three, basic types of claims that the retailer may expect from his customers—

1. The goods or service of the retailer are definitely at fault.
2. The fault lies partly with the goods or service of the trader, but the customer is making the worst of a bad job, or has by her negligence aggravated a defect in the goods.
3. The claim is entirely unfounded

The first class is absurdly simple to deal with. The trader must make a full and frank apology, and wherever goods are in question he must make full restitution. If, in addition, he can offer a sensible and logical explanation of the cause of the trouble, so much the better, but there is all the world of difference between a sound reason and a canting excuse. There is a reason, indeed, for every instance of defective merchandise, but it is sometimes too technical to pass on to the customer. Then the retailer should simply replace without question, and be thankful that the customer did make the claim. At other times—as with the gloves in Chapter I—a fairly full explanation of the cause of the trouble may prevent a recurrence with that particular customer.

Still another point, however, remains to be dealt with before we pass on to one or two specimen cases. The general question of attitude has already been emphasized throughout the book generally, and in this chapter particularly,

but in letters dealing with claims there are two distinct ways of approaching the question, depending on the trader's assessment of the validity of the claim, and whether or not he intends replacing the article in question.

A letter admitting a claim and offering to replace the goods must be framed in a way quite different from one in which it is maintained that nothing is wrong. Not only should the wording be different, but the whole letter should be framed accordingly. The two types, in fact, must begin from opposite ends

If the shopkeeper decides that he will allow the claim—apart from any consideration here as to the degree of merit—let him say so at the outset. If in a later paragraph he cares to enter into the “whys” and “wherefores” of the trouble, well and good. The first thing the customer wants to know in reading the letter is, will she get a new pair of stockings or whatever it may be?

When a claim is to be refused, the letter must say somewhere in effect: “There is nothing doing,” but the blow should be given as gently as possible, and *preceded* by sound and convincing reasons why replacement cannot be considered. It is readily agreed that a proportion of customers will be unconvinced by reasons of any kind, particularly those who are likely to make unjust claims; but that is no reason why every effort should not be made to write a conciliatory letter.

EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTMENT LETTERS

One or two specimen claims from customers which can be dealt with in a variety of ways will afford the best means of studying this important matter of handling adjustments. Here is one—

Dear Sirs,

I am sorry to say that the socks I bought for my husband last week have proved very unsatisfactory. They have gone through at the heels in two days' wear. I think they must be made from shoddy wool.

This is the first time I have ever had to complain about anything bought from your shop.

Yours faithfully,

In replying to a letter like this, it is hard to keep clear of a defensive attitude; there is indeed much to provoke it. Note the subtle suggestion in the last paragraph of the customer's letter; it always calls forth a dismal sigh of recognition from the experienced adjustment correspondent. What it really means is: "Your stuff is usually pretty good, but these socks are real duds; there's no argument about it either."

At this point it is important for the retailer to remember that the socks *may* possibly be at fault, so his reply must be entirely non-committal. He must assume for the moment that the claim comes into the first of the three classes we outlined on page 135. Here is a good way to answer such a letter—

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for telling us about those socks you bought last week. An addressed label is enclosed, and if you will return them to us, you can rely on a full investigation being made.

We are very concerned that our customers should receive full satisfaction, and we are always ready to replace any article that is found defective.

Yours faithfully,

The last paragraph leaves the door open to replace in full if the claim proves to be justified, but nevertheless ready to slam should the claimant be a "wrong-un."

To begin with, we will assume that by one of those unfortunate oversights a few pairs of socks not properly finished off have got into the trader's stock, and that those returned are some of them.

Then there is only one way to reply—

Dear Madam,

Your parcel returning the socks reached us this morning, and we are sending two new pairs off at once to you.

It seems that one odd packet not properly finished off, has been delivered from our warehouse, and we are most grateful to you for telling us about them.

Yours faithfully,

Here we follow the rule given on page 136 of telling the good news first—the fact that the socks are being replaced.

The second type of claim is far more difficult to deal with. Even when the customer is largely to blame, the trader will often deem it politic to replace the articles in full. The whole secret of successful adjustment correspondence is to avoid treating this second-class customer as if she were the rogue of the third class. I would go so far as to say that in nine cases out of ten it is wise for the trader to ignore the measure in which the customer is to blame. For the moment we will continue with the sock claim which we have already replied to as being fully justified, but now we will suppose that, although the fashioning of the socks is not perfect, the holeing has been aggravated by the wearer having his shoes too loose and so rubbing the sock in walking.

It will be noted that the opening of the letter is identical with that of the first type of reply. This is important. If there is to be a replacement, the approach must be in this way.

The third class of claim may be very easy, or it may be very difficult to settle. The more flagrant the claim, the simpler it is to frame the reply. It is the careless or ignorant customer who presents the greatest problem to the adjustment correspondent. To start with, it is difficult to decide how far carelessness, ignorance, or even dishonesty are

blended in the claim. The replies will, therefore, require consummate tact on the part of the trader

Dear Madam,

Your parcel returning the socks reached us this morning, and we are sending two new pairs off at once to you.

We find on examining them that the fashioning is slightly rough, and probably this has contributed to the trouble experienced, but we are rather of the opinion that too loose a shoe has been worn, and the constant rubbing in walking has also affected the strength of the yarn.

A pair of rimlets in the shoes will, we think, make a lot of difference to the wear of the new pairs we have sent.

Yours faithfully,

Although the claim may be quite unjustified the customer making it may be a good one, and it will be deemed expedient to make an allowance or replacement. On the other hand, it is sometimes necessary to point out quite frankly that there is nothing whatever wrong with the goods

The essential point is that if the trader is going to give way, let him do it as gracefully as possible.

For a consideration of these problems, we will take a fresh example—

Dear Sirs,

I am returning one of the vests that I bought for my little boy from you last week, and you will see that it is utterly useless

After only one wash, and it was done at home, it has shrunk to such an extent that it cannot possibly be worn. Will you please replace it at once.

Yours faithfully,

The draper's expert glance at once discovers that the vest, which is woollen, has been washed in water far too hot—a not uncommon accompaniment of the home washing of which the customer is so proud. But we will suppose that this particular customer is a good one, and that, although the goods were not in any way defective, the retailer decides to replace them in order to retain the customer's goodwill. At the same time, when replying, he will naturally wish to guard against a repetition of the trouble. He would write something like this—

Dear Madam,

The parcel containing the vest to which you refer in your letter has just reached us, and we are very sorry to hear of the trouble you have had.

A new one is being sent off to you today, and we hope that you will find it quite satisfactory.

The garment you sent us has been very carefully examined, and it rather looks as if it has been put into water a little too hot. Although all our woollen underwear is marked "Unshrinkable", it is taken for granted that the garments will not be subjected to too great heat in washing.

We mention this in order to guard against any possible recurrence of this annoying trouble. The enclosed leaflet is supplied by the manufacturers, and if its directions are carefully followed, we can guarantee that you will have no difficulty whatever from shrinkage.

Yours faithfully,

Finally, we come to the class of claim which is not only entirely unjustified, but which the trader decides not to allow in any way. Here, again, courtesy costs nothing, and it is worth every effort to conciliate even a customer who makes an outrageous claim—and, what is more, to prevent, if possible, a recurrence of the trouble. We will use the last example again—the claim of the shrunken vest—

Dear Madam,

The parcel containing the vest to which you refer in your letter has just arrived, and we have lost no time in carefully examining the garment.

The trouble with which you met is one of the most difficult problems that we drapers have to contend with - the shrinkage of woollen goods. Water too hot, and insufficient rinsing, will make the best wool shrink. We are returning the garment to you so that you may note the soapy feel and the cockled appearance of the fabric.

In guaranteeing that these garments will not shrink, the manufacturers take it for granted that their washing instructions will be complied with. In each new garment there is a printed slip - of which a copy is enclosed - giving clear directions for washing, and you will realize that if these are not followed, the wool is bound to shrink.

In order to demonstrate that this range of underwear is made from thoroughly good yarn, we will gladly have the second vest laundered for you free of charge - if you will allow us.

Yours faithfully,

The subject of claims against the retailer does not provide such good material for paragraphic treatment as other aspects of routine correspondence, and for that reason we have given

complete letters up to now. The justification for any paragraphs in this subject is certainly not the frequency with which they will be needed—at least it is hoped not—but rather the intricacy of the situations that they represent. So we will give a few that can be worked in with the letters already suggested—

Q—1. It would rather appear as if the — has been given harder wear than should be expected from a fabric of this kind. These goods are definitely of a luxury nature, and will not give the wear that can be expected from —.

This paragraph will be useful when silk goods are returned as faulty without any justification. Many customers have the entirely false notion that a high price is a guarantee of long wear—quite frequently it is the reverse. No one would advocate the purchase of trashy merchandise, but beyond a certain price the value in many articles is represented in comfort and appearance rather than mere durability.

Q—2. (a) We are very careful in selecting our regular numbers of —, and once we find one that comes up to our standard of quality and appearance, we retain it year after year unless fashion decrees a change.

(b) The garment you return is such an instance of this, it is a number we have sold for years with invarying success, and it is with surprise that we hear that it has not proved satisfactory.

From the nature of the case these supplementary paragraphs are of the defensive kind, for when a claim is to be admitted the letter sent in reply is of the simplest

Q—3. (a) We are very sorry that you did not give us the opportunity of dealing with these — when the defect first appeared, as it would then have been very simple for us to have given you a full allowance.

(b) Not that it is too late for something to be done now, but you will appreciate that it must be on a different basis to that on which we could have adjusted the matter had you brought it to our attention earlier.

Very useful for sending to customers who have the nerve to return an article that has obviously been worn long and continually. Here is another—

Q—4. (a) The — you return have been carefully examined, and in our opinion their present condition cannot be traced to either defective workmanship or faulty material.

- (b) They appear to have given as much wear as can be expected from —— of this type, and it is, therefore, difficult for us to deal with this as a case of inferior merchandise.

Another paragraph may be useful when the claim is largely unjustified, but for the sake of future custom the trader decides to make an allowance. There must not be anything of condescension in the adjustment letter or it will undo all the value of the replacement—

- Q—5. Although we feel that the above explanation demonstrates that the —— are not at fault, you may feel that from your point of view it does not put things right. For this reason we have made the replacement indicated in our first paragraph.

Just now and again a garment or article will be received in such an advanced state of deterioration that any thought of allowance is out of the question. Then the following paragraph will form a useful “parry”—

- Q—6. On examining the —— which you sent us, we find that they appear to have received very considerable wear. This makes us wonder if they are the pair that you intended to return to us, and to which you refer in your letter.

Then, just to end the chapter with the brighter side of a sombre subject, here is a sample adjustments letter which seeks to make the very most of the opportunity to put things right—

Dear Madam,

You certainly had very good reason indeed to be dissatisfied with the mattress you bought last month. We have put another on rail to you today and it should reach you by Saturday at the latest.

Even with the most rigorous inspection, a defective article will get into stock just now and again, and we are very grateful indeed to you for telling us about it.

We are, of course, crediting your account with the carriage on the faulty one you returned.

Yours faithfully,

CHAPTER IX

MAIL ORDER WORK

THE retailer who is able to keep his figures up when those of almost everyone else are down is the man who explores every possible avenue of increasing his turnover, and of doing so profitably. Mere volume of business may be had at almost any time, but the increase of turnover is often at the expense of the vital net profit. Advertising costs can easily get out of hand and show a mounting percentage to sales returns.

When the sales across the counter are falling off, many retailers turn their eyes to post orders as a means of giving a fillip to the flagging figures. Orders from customers at a distance, outside the town or city in which the retailer is trading, may be regarded as so much extra business over and above that which can be expected from the local residents. Theoretically the post order market is unlimited, and many a shopkeeper's ambition has been kindled by reading of the giant Mail Order houses in America, which sell anything from pins to pianos by post. But the trader who attempts such a business in this country would quickly crash. The United States and Canada with their vast stretches of half-developed country, containing thousands of homesteads situated a hundred or more miles from reasonable shopping centres, form the ideal ground for post order operations. In this country conditions are very different. In but few places can one be more than a few miles from a medium-sized town, and then there is the ever-increasing network of buses to bring the folk from the more remote villages to the busy market places.

Almost every trader has a certain number of post customers, and very useful they are to swell the takings in an incidental way, but the trader who sets out to develop this side of his business on a large scale will quickly discover the essential limitations of mail order work in this country.

THE "CONS" OF MAIL ORDER WORK

These particularly concern the drapery and allied types of retail businesses. The ironmonger is not very hard put to it to execute an order for two or three saucepans "thus and thus," but in trades where there is a multiplicity of sizes and designs to be considered, delays and queries are bound to occur. Then in the higher-class trade the styles and models are constantly changing, and it is, therefore, very difficult to send patterns of materials with any guarantee that the goods desired will be in stock by the time post orders are received. With tailored goods, too, it is hard to ensure a correct fit by post.

Here is a typical example of a letter that will come from a customer—

Dear Sir,

My husband wants two shirts with double cuffs like those you were advertising last month. I think the price was 8s. 11d. He wants the collars with the long points—polo shape I think you call them.

Can you send them off at once as he is getting rather low in shirts and collars, and wants to send some others to you for recuffing.

And oblige,

Anxious though the trader is to oblige, the following queries immediately arise in his mind, and prevent the execution of the seemingly simple order—

1. Why in spite of the wordiness of her letter, does she not give the size neck-band that is required?

2. *Which* range does she mean? Two have been advertised lately, and both of them had *short* pointed collars, not polo at all. Will these do?

To settle these points means a typed letter, and even with the economies effected by using the paragraph system we have described, letters are a costly addition to the overhead charge of a business. A shop with a post order business of any size will need to keep a proficient typist busy with these unnecessary queries—unnecessary, that is, from the trader's point of view, but very frequent indeed in occurrence.

If the shopkeeper is lucky, the lady will reply to both queries, or she may still forget one point when writing again. Do not think this is exaggerated. I get so many orders with not the slightest indication of the size required, that I have a special paragraph to deal with them.

Some orders are even more complicated, and in the end do not result in a sale at all. It is easy to see how this sort of thing will eat up the narrow margin of net profit in a retail business. Very few traders know what a typed letter really costs them; they are too apt to think of a 1½d. stamp and a farthing envelope, and that is all. When everything is taken in, wages, office rental, space, lighting, heating, supervision, together with the recognized postal and stationery costs, it will be found that few firms can turn out a good typed letter under *ninepence or one shilling*.

Are we to assume, then, that post orders are more bother than they are worth, and that they should be discouraged in every possible way? By no means. Rather let us examine the question impartially, and see how to get the best out of an admittedly awkward way of doing business.

THE "PROS" OF THE POST

A mail order business may be valuable to a retailer for the following reasons—

1. Regular customers who are too busy to come to the shop will appreciate a well-conducted postal shopping service.

2. A mail order service maintains a link with customers who are away from home. When they come back again they will certainly continue with the trader who has looked after them in the meantime, and they will certainly recommend the shop to their friends in the town.

3. A postal connection is a useful outlet for lines of goods that are not selling freely across the counter to the town customers. By this we by no means suggest that faulty goods can or should be palmed off on the unsuspecting rural folk, but actually those who live in the villages and hamlets are usually less exacting with regard to patterns and designs than their urban cousins. A line that is sticking may often

be cleared by transferring it to the post order department at a slightly reduced price.

ORGANIZING A POST ORDER DEPARTMENT

In other chapters of this book we have only considered problems of retailing as they definitely give rise to routine letters, but the post order department from its very nature is so closely bound up with the question of correspondence, that we must deal rather more fully with the working of the department as a whole in order to understand the letter-writing problems it presents

It is said, probably with some degree of truth, that some of the very large stores suffer from over-organization, but it may be said of the smaller shops with equal truth that most of them are far too little organized. This is particularly true of their post order sections, for, as a general rule, they have never been organized at all—they have grown up of themselves. The clerk in charge too often has no specialized knowledge of the work, and this is certainly part cause of the innumerable queries that are the blight of postal trading. The human element necessarily comes into every department of retailing, but nowhere are its consequences more serious than in this department. An error on the vanman's delivery sheet is bad enough, but it can at least be adjusted within a day and an apology sent. But the customer who is at a distance, or has written from a holiday address, and gets the wrong size stockings, is likely to substitute terse invective for renewed custom the next time she is in the shop.

The very first essential in organizing a post order department is to find a salesman or clerk who has in some measure that elusive gift of "sensing" what the customer really wants, even, as is frequently the case, when she fails altogether to give any lucid instructions. Customers will fill up a couple of pages with a barely legible scrawl devoted to totally irrelevant details, and then forget to mention the model or shape of article required.

Some years ago I handled post orders for a large wholesale house, whose customers were themselves retailers. But

were their orders easy to read? They were not. So what can be expected from the proverbially unbusinesslike lady postal shopper?

This is the sort of letter that has to be interpreted into terms of the retailer's stock—

Dear Sirs,

Please send me three shirts by return certain size 4
I want them in a thin flannel—a fine sort of herringbone
check and stripes.

Yours faithfully

The puzzled clerk in charge of postal orders might well rack her brains to discover what a “stripe herringbone check” pattern might be, and who could blame her if she replies: “Sorry, cannot do ”

But if she has been trained to “sense” the meaning of customers' letters, she will reason something like this: “‘Check herringbone’ cannot mean the *pattern*—there's no such thing—‘check *and* stripes?’ Ah, she may mean an *overcheck* design, we have some flannel shirts in that design—what does she say? a ‘fine sort of herringbone,’ that must mean the weave—a *twill*, that's like the Ceylon we have.” And so the “Fine sort of herringbone check and stripes” is mentally translated into “Overcheck twill Ceylon”—the shirt the customer wants. It is indeed fortunate that all post orders are not so involved as this, but the question for the shopkeeper to face is: “Can the clerk in charge be counted on to deal with the tricky ones when they *do* turn up?”

If anything more than a couple of dozen orders are received per day, it may be necessary to appoint a junior to look the actual goods out of the fixtures. In that case the clerk in charge should scribble her instructions on the back of the customer's letter, giving the range to be sent, the size, shade, etc. This should never be left to the discretion of the junior.

KEEPING TRACK OF THE ORDERS

Every order that is received through the post should be entered in brief in a book specially kept for that purpose

This is the only satisfactory way in which to control the work. Unless some such serial entry is kept of letters received, the owner of the business will be helpless when a query subsequently arises about an order, and the customer's letter cannot be found—and even this does happen in the best regulated post order departments. Still better is it to have the entry book serially numbered on every line, and to have that number stamped on each letter corresponding with its place of entry. This control number will then appear on every chit, order, or bill in connection with the transaction from start to finish. This is very necessary in businesses where post orders can become very complicated.

The entry itself may be quite brief—the customer's name, and possibly the town, if she lives some distance away; the amount of cash sent, if any; and a very condensed *précis*, consisting of three or four words only, of the order itself

THE FILING SYSTEM

I have already explained the reason for dealing in this chapter with matters that only indirectly concern the composition of routine letters, and here we must touch on the question of filing of correspondence. The importance of this work in a busy post order section is paramount. Too many retailers make the serious mistake of running their offices at the very lowest possible wage cost, and nowhere is this more fatal than in the filing section. The trouble is that careless work here is not discovered at the time, nor indeed until one of those distracting moments when there is a furious customer on the 'phone complaining bitterly about her order—and the correspondence cannot by any means be found. Once a letter is put in a wrong section in the fairly large file, then all the clerks, assistants, and errand boys of the staff put together will not find it when it is wanted.

A thoroughly reliable and well-paid clerk should be put in charge of and held responsible for the filing of all routine correspondence—and no one else should be allowed to put a letter away. Taking out of the file does not matter so much, if a note is made on a slip indicating who has the folder.

POST ORDER ROUTINE

The vital need of all post order work is promptness. Many customers make a habit of writing to at least a couple of firms when they intend making a purchase of some amount. If one of the firms favoured with the preliminary inquiry leaves the reply until the next day, the chances are that the order will be lost. The customer is not to know that her letter came on a day when there was an extraordinary rush of orders. All she knows is that one firm replied promptly and the other did not. It is granted that in the busy season it is very difficult indeed to deal fully with every order and inquiry the day that it is received. By the time the post has been dealt with, the orders read over, and the goods looked out, the morning will have slipped by. Then there is always a proportion of orders that cannot be executed exactly—or possibly cannot be executed at all—from stock. This means telephone inquiries or orders made out to the wholesale. Then there will be some difficult queries to unravel, which all help to eat into the afternoon hours. The latter part of the day in too many retailers' offices is occupied by hurried dictation and furious typing on the part of the clerks who in the morning hardly had enough to keep them busy. At closing time the rush approaches its climax, and if any orders or inquiries trickle in by the afternoon post, they generally receive scant attention that day. What is the remedy for this rush and pother? To an extent it is inevitable, and that in proportion to the chief's determination that all orders shall be dealt with the day they are received.

One way in which the stress may be minimized is to divert some of the sales assistants into the post order section whenever the shop is quiet. The assistants will not like this arrangement at all, and in probability the departmental buyers will be equally opposed, but it is just one of those common-sense arrangements that only needs a strong man at the top, with a sense of the well-being of the business as a whole, to carry it out. It is sometimes quite impossible to get the goods off the same day, but an acknowledgment should always be sent to the customer so that she may know

her letter and cash has arrived safely. Something like this on a post card will prevent the customer from thinking that Messrs. Blanks do not bother much about her order—

Dear Madam,

Your letter of 1st July has just arrived, and the goods are being looked out. We hope to send them off to you to-morrow for certain.

Yours faithfully.

INQUIRIES ARE POTENTIAL ORDERS

There is a great temptation on the part of retailers to under-value an inquiry. It may perhaps be only scribbled on a post card and not too clearly at that; the phrasing may be somewhat involved, and the tendency is to say: "Oh, just send her the usual catalogue." Possibly "just the usual catalogue" is sent, and it fails to cover the precise point that the customer wants to know. So she writes to the other firm across the road, and they, sensing that there is something good in the wind, go to the trouble of a carefully compiled typewritten quotation—and collect a useful order for £20 as a result.

Not long ago I saw a letter to a large firm from a customer in retrospect definitely telling them that he had gone to a competitor for the sole reason that the other firm went out of their way to answer his original inquiry sympathetically—and he spent £150 with the competitor.

In some ways inquiries are even more important than orders. When a customer sends her money and asks for certain goods to be sent, it only requires some trade knowledge and care to completely satisfy her. But if she wants to know this, that, and the other about half a dozen different lines of merchandise; what shades, styles, qualities are in stock; which does the shopkeeper recommend for such and such an occasion; will they wear, wash, and look well; can she have some on approval, or must she come in—and by the way, have they got her last measurements—then there

is a pretty problem in patience combined with uncommon sense propounded to the correspondence clerk.

POST ORDERS AND THE PARAGRAPH SYSTEM

Quite a number of the paragraphs that have already been given in this book have particular application in dealing with postal inquiries. The post order department is, in fact, the prime beneficiary of the paragraph system, for there is found a constantly recurring set of situations, some of them of considerable complexity, that form ideal material around which to build up a set of replies in the "one best way." From this it must not be inferred that correspondence arising out of a customer's visit to the shop does not merit consideration when framing a system of paragraphs. It does, and even if a trader has no post order department at all, it would be well worth his while building up a paragraph system to deal with his correspondence. But the point about a mail order department is that it is *all* correspondence from beginning to end—hence the special value of this scientifically planned method of business letter-writing.

Almost every type of retailing situation is intensified in the post order section. In other transactions there is always the prospect (or retrospect) of dealing with the customer face to face, and a thirty-seconds' conversation will settle more queries than can be straightened out in a dozen letters.

Not only will almost all the paragraphs we have already given be found necessary in a busy postal department, but quite likely a number of special ones also. These extra paragraphs will not necessarily be outside the scope of the main divisions already outlined, but rather specialized varieties within these divisions.

It is impossible for us to suggest the actual form of these particular paragraphs for postal work, as they will vary according to the type of business in which they are to be used. All we can do is to make some general suggestions. The handling of cash will need special attention. The post customer, not knowing the exact price of the goods, will frequently send the wrong amount of money, and if an

order is not completed at once, queries can easily arise. A very tight system of accountancy is needed. Cases will sometimes occur where a customer has paid her money, but the goods could not be sent at the time. When they do arrive the fact that cash has been received is forgotten, and a fresh bill is sent, to the consternation of the customer.

Then the "cannot do," "nearest sent," and "shall we make?" family of difficulties loom large in postal work. The paragraphs dealing with these situations will probably need to be elaborated and augmented. Indeed, in the more exclusive drapery businesses, when trade is good and stocks are moving quickly, it will be found the exception rather than the rule to be able to execute a post order exactly in every respect. All this means costly correspondence, apologies, delays, and disappointments. A well-planned paragraph system will do much to lessen the labour in this direction, in fact, a post order section conducted on the old plan of full shorthand dictation is hopelessly and needlessly expensive.

Here are some general headings that will probably need paragraphic treatment in the post order section. It must ever be remembered that our cardinal rule of paragraph construction still holds good here: paragraphs are only to be built for those situations for which there is adequate evidence in the carbon copy analysis of current correspondence.

- 1 The customer gives insufficient details in her letter.

- 2 The customer writes from abroad. Customs and special postal charges will come in here. Most firms pay postage within the United Kingdom, but very few do so to addresses abroad.

- 3 Many goods cannot be satisfactorily described at all in a catalogue, or even in a letter. The only thing to do is to send some on approval.

- 4 Quite apart from goods supplied, there will be requests for estimates for work to be done. This, whether it is renovating furs or decorating a house, may be simplified by paragraphic treatment if the volume of business will warrant it.

5 There will sometimes be special lines of goods offered of which it is impossible to send patterns because they are selling so fast.

6. Then, again, certain lines are reserved for personal shoppers This may be stated in the Press advertisements, but in spite of this hundreds may write in for them A well-written paragraph is the best way of dealing with these cases.

7. Multiple shops have their own special correspondence situations—the closing time of the various branches, etc.

CHAPTER X

FOLLOW-UP SALES LETTERS

THE line between the routine and the sales letter is generally fairly well marked. The sales letter is to *sell*; the purely routine letter is to *tell*. Any sales urge in a letter dealing with delay in dispatch or replying to a claim would be utterly out of place.

But there is one direction in which these two main types of letters converge—it is in that section which deals with requests for catalogues or information about goods. Even there the routine letter-writer has a much easier time than his *confrère* who has to produce sales letters, for has not the customer already manifested some measure of interest in the wares by writing for a catalogue? She has, in fact, made the first move, but a sales letter represents a move on the part of the *trader*, and it goes to what is technically and aptly called a “cold prospect.”

But although there is some measure of initial interest shown by the customer in writing for information, the retailer will be very foolish indeed if he thinks that all there remains for him to do is to send off the catalogue or booklet with some sort of covering letter. Too many traders at this point consider that they have done their part of the job—and done it exceedingly well, and that it is now up to the customer. So they lie back and wait that happy moment when the order shall come in. If it fails to arrive they feel mildly aggrieved at the waste of a good stamp and booklet, but it seldom crosses their mind that the fault is their own.

Possibly this neglect to exploit the potential value of the inquiry is due to a very natural tendency to look after the pounds under the mistaken notion that the pence will look after themselves. Trading conditions, too, affect the shop-keeper's sense of relative values. If trade is brisk there is a tendency to despise those “footling inquiries” when there

are large cash orders to be had for the serving. This is radically wrong. It is not that the customer does not matter when business is good, but that he matters a great deal more when it is bad. In times of general depression the trader must shape his course accordingly. Let him go out for the big fish by all means, if there are any in his pool—but let him give yet more attention to the small ones.

Straightforward orders with the cash, they are the big fish, and very glad we are when we can get them. But there are nearly always little fish to be had—single collars, sample garments to try, and even inquiries for patterns, etc. The last do not always result in orders at all, and that is the very point in question. The other day a friend of mine went into a hosiers for a tie (such a little fish), but as a result of tactful salesmanship he bought a *suit*. How many shops would have let him go out with only a tie?

Perhaps it would be more correct to call the mere inquiries “nibbles” rather than catches, and the trouble is that so many shopkeepers are such clumsy anglers that they let the fish slip off their hook and end with nothing at all. The catalogue is sent, and then they wait, and then wait, and finally do nothing at all. The fish is lost. Probably the customer did not find exactly what she required in the catalogue, and hearing nothing further from the shop, she calls somewhere else and finds just what she wants.

THOSE EXPENSIVE INQUIRIES

An inquiry is an exceedingly valuable thing—how valuable depends on two things—

- (a) The amount of the sale it may bring in.
- (b) The time, money, and effort that has been expended in securing it.

This leads up to a consideration of the various ways by which inquiries may come

1. Automatically. The customer wants such and such an article, thinks of Binks & Co., and writes asking them for a booklet about it. The business that relies solely upon this type of inquiry is likely to have a very thin time.

2 The trader may put an advertisement in the Press describing certain goods and inviting inquiries for a booklet or catalogue. This is a sound plan, particularly for the larger shops.

3. The trader may launch a direct mail advertising campaign and enclose a reply card with his sales letters, so that those interested may write for the booklet that is offered.

When it is considered that the total cost per inquiry by either of the last two methods may well be anything from 1s to 10s each, the exceeding folly of wasting these "nibbles" is the more apparent.

Those who have had the most experience in direct mail advertising agree that a single shot is almost useless to arouse sufficient interest to effect a sale. On expensive lines it sometimes takes eight or nine letters to bring the customer to a decision. Although there is initial interest on the part of the customer who has voluntarily asked for a catalogue, the principle remains the same, the sale needs to be clinched.

That many retailers fail to see the force of this principle I am convinced from a study of the few follow-up letters I received during the test described in Chapter I. Here is a sample that demonstrates the totally wrong viewpoint of the writer. I had written for particulars of some "multiple" book-cases, and in reply I received a reasonably well-produced catalogue, unaccompanied, however, by any covering letter. Whether or not the firm's heart smote them for their negligence I do not know, but it was certainly their impression that I should order the book-case at once, and they were just the slightest bit piqued that I did not. Exactly one week after the receipt of the original catalogue, I got the following letter from the local branch of the firm—

Dear Sirs,

We are informed by our Head Office at ——— that you are interested in our sectional book-cases, and that a complete catalogue has already been sent you.

Up to the time of writing we do not appear to have received your order, and shall be glad to know if you have given the matter your further attention.

. . . and so on.

Yours faithfully,

The simpler, shorter, and precisely equivalent way to say it would be, "Now, you asked for the catalogue, what about the order."

The folly of a "follow-up" of this kind must not blind us to the real value of the try, try again catalogue letter. Retailers generally have much to learn in this direction, and the people to teach them are the book-selling companies and the business colleges. I have little knowledge of the internal finances of these concerns, but ignoring the sharks, I suppose their rate of net profit is not fantastically great. Yet for a course of tuition costing four to five guineas, one of them thought it worth their while to send me a series of *nineteen* letters urging, coaxing, beseeching my enrolment. The letters were very well written too, nothing sloppy or maudlin about them. To the experienced eye they are clearly form letters, the match-in of my name is not good, and the signature at the foot abominable. But it is obvious that in spite of their untidy dress they must *pay*. This particular series was sent out under a halfpenny stamp (printed paper rate), and being run off in quantity, each shot probably did not cost more than 3d. or 4d. in all.

Is it not clear from all this that the furniture dealer who has had an inquiry for a £20 suite is deliberately defrauding himself of some very easy business if he "lets go" until the sale has been completed or he knows for certain that the prospective customer has gone somewhere else?

The task of the follow-up letter-writer is to utilize to the full the initial gesture of interest on the part of the customer in asking for a catalogue or information, just as the engineer designs the compound engine to make the steam yield up the last ounce of its power by first leading it into the small high-pressure cylinders where it loses the greater part, and thence to the larger low-pressure cylinders which use the remainder.

PLANNING FOLLOW-UP LETTERS

As with every other kind of letter, follow-ups depend for their success upon certain well-defined principles,

1. Each successive communication must approach the question from a new point of view, or describe a fresh attraction in the goods.

2. Although the viewpoint is to be different, each letter must contain within itself sufficient information to enable the customer to make a decision. The idea is not "we have five letters, and so we will lead up to the climax in the last one and let that do the trick," but rather say of each one in the series, "This is the one to make the sale"

3. Above all, the follow-up letter should not nag the customer in any way—certainly not as does the example higher up. Reference may be made on occasion to the previous letter or letters sent to the customer, or even to the customer's own letter of inquiry, but the slightest hint of "why have we not heard from you?" must be avoided

A follow-up letter may conform with all the above rules and yet be worthless. In the first chapter of this book we mentioned the ultra-modern variety of letter-writer, who in his anxiety to avoid the hackneyed, resorts to affectation and insincerity. Here is an example among the follow-ups—

Dear Sir,

When we recently sent you our catalogue, we had in mind that you were probably our next customer

We have not since heard from you, and are, therefore, wondering if we were at fault in any way in our representation of our product

We . . . and so on.

Yours faithfully,

If the letter is true, then the sales of this firm must be particularly slow—but actually it is all nonsense. There was an inkling of this smug attitude in the letter sent with the catalogue in the first instance—

We thank you for your inquiry and enclose herewith a catalogue, a perusal of which will quickly convince you of the advantages to be gained in the use of . . .

Unfortunately it did not.

This example is certainly preferable to the one on page 157, but it is little likely to inspire the only mildly interested inquirer.

EXAMPLES OF FOLLOW-UP LETTERS

It might be thought from some of the criticisms already given that it is impossible for a follow-up letter to be really genuine and sincere, but this is not so. It is their obviously bullying and unreal attitude that lays the specimens considered open to ridicule. Then, on the other hand, it may be asserted that if the customer has found what she wants in the catalogue she will order the goods, but this is far from being true. Unless the goods are wanted urgently, most customers put off the day of decision in proportion to the capital expenditure involved, and their dilly-dallying is not at all because the goods are unsuitable, but simply that they cannot make up their minds to send the order in. The true function of the follow-up letter is to bring the customer to this vital point.

We will start with the simplest type of inquiry, "Please send me your catalogue"—no details, no specific goods mentioned, nothing definite to go on. If no response is received within, say, a week, something like this should be sent—

Dear Madam,

- R—1. Last week we sent you a copy of our general catalogue—did you find just the information you wanted in it?
- R—2. It is very difficult to include a full description of all our goods in a few pages, and it is quite possible that the exact articles required are only casually mentioned.
- R—3. If so, will you give us the opportunity of telling you more about them. A note on the back of this letter sent in the enclosed envelope, which needs no stamp, will bring full details to you by return of post.

Yours faithfully,

Before going any further I give one word of warning, a word properly belonging to the chapter on post order work, but bearing specially on these follow-up letters. Let the shopkeeper make doubly sure that the customer's order has *not* been received before he commences this postal bombardment. Nothing will make the trader look so utterly foolish as a follow-up letter sent to a customer who has not only ordered, but whose order has been acknowledged. And that sort of thing can happen only too easily in a large firm.

Then there is the customer who has a small selection of goods sent to her, not necessarily on approval, but "I will try one or two first " To let lines like this slip by is to give business away. The following should be sent well within a week—

- R—4. You will probably have had a chance by now of trying the huckaback towels we sent you last week. Are they just what you want?
- R—5. If you would like to see another make or quality before deciding on the rest we will gladly send some for you to see.
- R—6. A note on the back of this letter posted in the enclosed envelope, which needs no stamp, will receive immediate attention.

Then there is the pattern business, and quite a costly business it is with many firms. If the cuttings are silk or equally expensive material, it is well worth writing to the customer again even if only to get back the bunches (or swatches as they are termed). But if the order can be netted as well, then it is 3d. or so particularly well spent—

- R—7. If the patterns we sent you are not just what you want, would you mind returning them to us as they are rather expensive.
- R—8. At the same time please let us know in what way they are unsuitable, and we will do everything possible to send something nearer your requirements.
- R—6. A note . . . , etc.

Inquiries for particular goods need slightly different follow-up treatment. If the customer gave full details of what she required, then it is probably the trader's fault if no order is received. But very frequently the original letter is more wordy than informative, and the trader's reply must of necessity be largely a matter of hit or miss. The follow-up is a means of probing further—

- R—9. When we sent you details of folding wringers last week, we were not sure if we understood the exact type you wanted.
- R—10. Several other patterns can be supplied, and we will gladly send you a full description of any of them on hearing from you.

A SAMPLE SERIES

Finally, it may be well to give a specimen series of follow-up letters to illustrate the principles set out in this chapter.

We will suppose that a musical instrument dealer receives an inquiry for a really high-class make of gramophone, costing, say, £15 to £20. Surely a "nibble" worth angling for with much patience! In order to get a complete perspective of the series, we will start with the letter that accompanies the descriptive leaflet in the first instance—

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your postcard asking about the "Notable" gramophone. A folder which gives a full description of this fine instrument is enclosed.

You are wise when thinking of buying a gramophone to consider a make like this; the really splendid tone and reproduction are in themselves the fullest justification for such an investment.

But the construction is not to be overlooked, it is as mechanically perfect as the finest craftsmanship can make it. The hand motor has an exceptionally long run - or if you prefer we can supply the instrument with an electric motor, to plug into the wall.

You are welcome at any time to call in at our audition rooms and critically inspect any model of the "Notable".

Yours faithfully,

The purpose of this first letter is to back up the general descriptive leaflet. As it is a man who is making the inquiry, the mechanical point of view will weigh more than with a lady. To inquirers of the other sex, it would be well to send quite a different type of letter. I hope that no reader will think it too much trouble to adjust the appeal in this way—it is the secret of successful follow-up work.

If nothing happens within a week, or even less, then the dealer should get busy again. When a man thinks of spending nearly £20 on a luxury article, all sorts of things may

come in to hinder the speedy conclusion of the purchase; he will almost certainly explore the market somewhat and probably visit more than one dealer. So the follow-up must be there quickly to keep the interest warm, and if possible clinch the sale.

The next letter, according to our rule, must strike a fresh note of appeal. This is really a sales letter; it is, in fact, adapted from one of the specimen letters in *Direct Mail Advertising for the Retail Trader* (Pitman, 7s. 6d)—

Dear Sir,

The thrill of really good music in your home - your own choice - just when you fancy it.

Science, your servant, has banished the scrapings and scratchings of earlier days, and has produced the "Notable" in which the reproduction is so good that even the connoisseur forgets that it all comes from that dull black disc.

You slip on the record - a momentary "sizz" - then at your choice, the welling cadence of song, the full-throated chorus, the majesty and volume of the orchestra, the melancholy of the "strings", or the drama of the "wind".

If you would enjoy music so good and reproduction so perfect that you can forget you have a gramophone, then call in at our audition rooms and hear the "Notable" you enquired about. If you will telephone us beforehand, we will have your favourite prelude, song, or maybe duet ready for you to enjoy.

Yours faithfully,

The thought behind this letter is to rekindle the desire that prompted the original inquiry—the desire to enjoy good music in the home. The first letter did not stress this, for it was already there, but as the prospect has taken no further step, it may be assumed that this desire has slightly abated.

Perhaps ten days may be allowed to elapse before another move is made.

If the original inquiry was genuine, interest will have been renewed by the first follow-up, but possibly other considerations have prevented purchase. So still another point of attack must be sought. Fortunately this is not lacking.

It can be assumed with some degree of certainty that a prospective purchaser of a £20 gramophone is not one of those suburban scoundrels who plagues his neighbours with ragtime and jazz abominations through the open window; he is probably in some measure a connoisseur of good music. Furthermore, it is likely that his home will be in accord with his tastes. This can be stressed in the next letter.

Dear Sir,

The "Notable" gramophone in which you are interested is not only mechanically perfect within, but it is beautiful without. The cabinet in which it lives will fit in with the scheme of your drawing room and so delight your eye, as the tone and reproduction will match your changing mood and delight your ear.

The exterior has that touch of quiet dignity which, without being aggressive, makes visitors say, "I see you've got a 'Notable'. Have you that prelude of Bach's we heard the other night? I should like to hear it on this instrument."

Will you call in to see and hear the "Notable" one day this week?

Yours faithfully,

And so the series might go on, developing point after point, and always remembering that there is a £20 order in

the balance, an order which should come to the dealer if he is persistent and patient enough

The extended payment facilities the dealer can offer, his record-changing library, or the exchange value he can give for an older machine could each be the theme of successive letters. One other principle, vital in sales letters, and equally applicable to follow-ups, must be mentioned ere we leave the subject—say one thing at a time. Each letter should be devoted to setting out one selling point and one only. To say too much is to say nothing effectively

CHAPTER XI

THE MECHANICS OF THE BUSINESS LETTER

THE common adage, "The clothes make the man" is, like many other common adages, only partly true. The day labourer and the navvy share with the wealthy or surpassingly brilliant man one curious privilege—they can afford to wear shabby clothes.

To a somewhat less extent this is true of routine letters. The note from the cheap-jacks telling the wife of a fish-porter that her weekly payments are behind can be sloppily typed on the coarsest of paper and yet do its work. An adjustments letter drafted by a master of craft with consummate tact, but carelessly typed on poor paper, *may* be effective in its object of appeasing the influential customer—but it will certainly succeed in spite of its evil garb and not because of it.

The attitude and diction are undoubtedly the predominant factors in the success of a routine letter, but to say that nothing else matters is to argue like the runner who asserted that, as he usually won the race, heavy smoking made no difference to fast sprinting.

Competition is so keen to-day that the alert retailer cannot afford to neglect any point that may conduce to the greater effectiveness of his sales and routine letters. Anything that would in any way handicap them must be studiously eliminated.

So in this chapter we will consider those factors to the success and effectiveness of the business letter, which, although relatively minor, are nevertheless important.

TYPING AND THE TYPEWRITER

Of all the mechanical aids to office work, the typewriter is the oldest, the most generally used, and certainly the most abused. In smaller offices particularly, the machine is often

disgracefully neglected, and allowed to get filthily clogged and out of alignment. The result can only be work that is a reflection of the laxity and indifference of the owner of the business. Just as character can be determined by a man's handwriting, so can the business efficiency of the shopkeeper be gauged from the neatness and style of the letters typed in his office. The trader who sanctions with his signature smudgy, blobby letters, typed on a pre-war crock, is little likely to be the man to carry out an intricate order efficiently. As is a man's typing, so is he.

It is obviously outside the scope of this book to discriminate between competitive makes of typewriters, but some general suggestions can be made. All the standard makes of typewriters are good for the particular purpose for which they are built. Some are specially designed for heavy manifold work, others for stencil cutting. The ideal machine for general correspondence work is the one with the light touch—and this quality will be found to vary considerably in different makes.

The largest typewriter makers have a "trading-out" scheme by which every machine is exchanged for a new one at the end of three years' service. In their opinion that is the life of a machine for first-class work. Those traders who pride themselves on their fifteen-year-old typewriters should consider whether their treasure is not costing them dear—in the esteem of their customers. The owner of the business, or the clerk in charge of his office, should insist that all typewriters are cleaned regularly each week. Then if letters are noticed with poor alignment, the machine on which they were typed should be immediately examined and the mechanic called in.

AFTER THE TYPEWRITER, THE TYPIST

So much, then, for the machine itself, but there is also the worker to consider. A tip-top worker can produce on an indifferent machine work as good as that of an indifferent worker with a new machine. So the trader who has invested in a good typewriter should see that the best is being got from it.

Quite apart from actual spelling mistakes and untidy erasures, a poor typist can utterly spoil the appearance and mar the effectiveness of a really good letter. On the other hand, the punctuation, the spacing of the paragraphs, the adjustment of the margin can all be left with a good typist.

Here is an example of the mess a bad typist can make of a carefully-dictated letter. The original properly laid out appears on page 163. Although it is not generally the best policy to show how a thing ought NOT to be done, it is because I see so many letters almost as bad as this example, that I am tempted to suspect that many retailers really think that lay-out does not matter in typewriting—

Dear Sir,

The thrill of really good music
in your home -your own choice -just when
you want it.Science your servant has banished
the scrapings and scratchings of earlier days and
has produced the "Notable" in which the reproduction is
so good that eventhe connoisseur forgets
that it all comes from that dull black
disc.You slip on the record, amomentary
"sizz",then at your choice the welling cadence of
song the full-throated chorus the majesty
and volume of the orchestrathe melancholy
of the 'strings"or the drama of the 'wind'.

If you would enjoymusic so good
and reproduction so perfect that you can forget that you
have a gramophone; then call in at our
audition rooms and hear the "Notable" you
enquired about if you will telephone
us beforehand we will have your favourite prelude,
song or maybe duet ready for you toenjoy

yours faithful ly

The prentice hand can ever be traced on the out-stepping of the lines in the first paragraph; they get longer and longer, until even the dulled conscience of the careless typist realize that the margin will soon be reached unless something is done

THE RIBBON

Ribbon difficulties may be the typist's fault, or they may arise because the owner of the business has never given the question a moment's consideration. A few years ago the

purple-coloured ribbon was predominant; to-day it looks as out of place as dundrearies and bustles. Unless there is a particular purpose in matching a letter-heading, the effect of a purple ribbon is garish and loud. For general correspondence work a lightly inked black ribbon, or, better still, grey-black is the accepted rule to-day. Never should the customer's name and address be filled-in on a form letter with a red ribbon. This would be going out of the way to advertise that the job is a mass (or mess) production.

If many form letters are used, it is worth the trader's while to get specially inked typewriter ribbons to match the ribbon used on the duplicating machine on which the forms were run off.

THE TYPE

Before leaving the question of typewriting, the size of the type on the machine is worth mentioning. There are two in general use: "pica," the larger (or standard); and "elite," the smaller. At least four out of every five routine letters are typed in the ordinary size type, and so the trader who wishes to give his correspondence a slightly distinctive touch may do so by ordering his next typewriter to have "elite" type. The effect, provided the letter is not too wide and long, is decidedly neater than that of the larger type.

SIGNING THE LETTER

The signature at the foot of a routine letter should be that of the owner of the business, or of a responsible senior assistant who is delegated to look after correspondence. Pen and ink should *always* be used. We have already pilloried the blotchy and untidy effect of a rubber stamp in lieu of a proper signature. The full name, too, should always appear, for a little "twiddle" of initials means nothing at all, except to suggest that the writer could not be bothered to sign the letter properly.

DUPLICATING MACHINES

The larger trader, who has occasion to use a considerable number of form letters, will find it economical to install a

duplicating machine of his own. The charges for doing this work outside are usually high enough for a machine to pay for itself in quite a short time if it is regularly used.

There are two distinct types of office duplicators—

1. Those which operate through a *stencil* cut on an ordinary typewriter, and use a semi-liquid ink. The effect of work done on a machine of this kind is not exactly that of true typewriting, but if there is to be no pretence at an exact "match-in," the letters will be found quite economical

2. Machines which actually print through a ribbon—generally 6 or 7 in. wide—from movable type. A skilled operator can produce and fill-in letters by this means that will almost defy detection as forms.

Although much simpler than typewriters in construction, these machines require almost as much care in handling. Cleanliness is essential if neat, clear work is to be turned out. It is almost incredible the mess and damage that one girl with one tube of ink can do on a stencil duplicator. Novices almost invariably over-ink. An experienced operator will produce 1,000 *good* copies with the same amount of ink that an ill-trained girl will use for 200 very bad copies.

There is no loose ink used on the ribbon type of duplicator, but care is needed to produce copies clean on both back and front.

THE LETTER-HEADING

It is a great mistake to treat this as merely the raw material of routine correspondence. For the trader with a good-class business, the first type and paper that the local jobbing printer can lay his hands on is *not* good enough.

I have just been going through a collection of heading paper which includes specimens from some of the leading stores and multiple shops, and am surprised to note the extraordinary diversity of the designs and lay-out.

One men's wear house with several branches has elected to have their heading printed in *pale grey ink* on white paper, almost causing eye-strain to read the apparently faded typescript. Other firms go to the other extreme and

indulge in two- or three-colour work that borders on the extravagant.

The safe course for the small to medium-size trader is somewhere between the two extremes. There is little justification for more than one colour on a retailer's letter-heading, for an up-to-date printer can offer a wonderful range of effects with one printing only. I say "up to date" with intent, for printers in relation to their work are very much like dressmakers: they have their particular styles and limitations; one cannot obtain Bond Street models at one-tenth the price from suburban home workrooms. Style and quality have to be paid for.

The aim of a letter-heading should be to announce the three essentials concerning a business—

1. The full name or title.
2. The full postal address and the telephone number.
3. A very brief description of the character of the business.

If a sheet of business heading lacks any of these, it is not fulfilling its proper function. I know that some of the very large stores are so confident of their "institutional" status that they merely head their paper "BLANK & CO LONDON," but I have repeatedly encountered the less sophisticated country postal customer who is diffident about sending her cash to so vague an address

On the other hand, to fill up the business note-paper with twaddling details regarding the date the firm was founded—who ever wants to know that—or even with the crests of the notabilities that have "patronized" the place—detestable snobbery—is to lessen the value of each sheet as a message carrier. One large South London store goes out of its way to make its heading dull by printing a list of *fifty-six* departments in column form at the side. "Cabinets, Carpets, Costumes, Coats, Cottons, and Curtains" make an excellent alliterative study; but on a business heading it is only one degree less objectionable than the Victorian atrocity "163, 165, 167, 169, 171, 173, 175, 177, 179 High Street," that used to be the wonder of our youthful eyes on mother's drapery bills.

While on the subject of letter-heading, there is one legend that was once almost universal, but is now I am glad to say rapidly disappearing, which is so utterly opposed to the principle of friendliness and goodwill so strongly advocated throughout this book that I must solemnly warn every retailer against it Here it is—

All communications should be addressed to the Company, and not to individuals.

It is only too easy for a large shop to become soulless and mechanical—why advertise its shame in this way?

THE ENVELOPE

After the manner of the observer of the “primrose by the river’s brim,” the business man’s view of an envelope is very often, well, just an envelope to him—and it is nothing more. Actually it is a very important factor in routine correspondence. It is the overcoat of the letter, the outdoor garb in which it enters the house of the customer, a garb which it only sheds under the critical eye of the reader. The most stylish of men appearing on our doorstep in a dilapidated great-coat would receive scant courtesy—and the same is true of the routine letter.

The retailer’s envelope should match his letter-heading; it should bear little or no printing, and it should, if conveniently possible, be slightly out of the ordinary in size and shape. Above all, its quality should reflect the standing of the firm whose letter it carries.

One general note about retailer’s stationery may not be out of place. Paper economies, like the famous “paper profits” of the financiers, are very deceptive.

ENCLOSURES

Here we must be careful. We have advocated in an earlier chapter making the routine letter do double work by incorporating some extra selling message in a letter of a purely formal nature, such as the advice of dispatch of goods. But to err by going to the other extreme is particularly human.

This I discovered on opening one of the "test" letters some time ago. As the envelope was slit, no less than *twenty* odd pieces of paper of various sizes and colours fluttered out on to the table. The effect was rather amusing, but I am persuaded it was of little advertising value to the senders.

POSTAGE AND THE POST OFFICE

Only by utilizing the most formal of form letters—and printed ones at that—can the routine correspondent take advantage of the halfpenny post. Possibly some firms deem a request for a catalogue of so small potential business value that they cannot be bothered to send a proper covering letter.

The following analysis indicates the proportion of firms who employed the different rates of postage as revealed in the test that was made, and it further shows the number who have adopted what is called "metered mail"—

		%
Full letter rate with adhesive stamp	. 157	62 8
Full letter rate franked	. 34	13 6
Printed paper rate adhesive stamp	43	17 3
Printed paper rate franked	16	6 3
	250	100 0

From this it will be seen that the "frankers" are still in the decided minority as compared with the "stampers." Only the larger shops can use this substitute for the stuck-on stamp, as it entails securing a licence from the Post Office, the purchase of a fairly expensive machine, and the *pre*-payment of the full value of frankings to which the machine is set.

THE BUSINESS REPLY ENVELOPE

One of the most important innovations benefiting the retailer that has been introduced by the Post Office during recent years is the plan whereby a customer can post a letter to the trader without needing to prepay the postage.

As is well known, the standing rule has been that

unstamped matter was charged double, and even under that arrangement the practice of telling customers not to bother to stamp their letters to the shop was discouraged by the postal authorities.

The present plan is quite simple. The necessary licence costs nothing at all, and only involves a deposit of a minimum of 10s. against future charges. Then instead of levying double postage as in the past, a flat rate of one halfpenny extra on the normal postage is made on each letter or card delivered. A post card is charged at 1½d., and a sealed letter 2d.

The only other proviso is that the envelopes and card used shall conform to the official pattern, but they can be printed or produced by the trader himself—they need not be bought from the Post Office.

The exceeding value of this plan to the direct mail advertiser who wishes to get replies from his prospective customers is evident, but it also has a very definite application to the routine correspondence department. If through any fault or error of the trader a customer has to be asked for further information, it is only courtesy to send her a stamped envelope for her reply. There is little danger of the stamp being wasted, because the customer is already involved in the transaction and wants her goods.

But the more casual inquirer through the post presents a very different problem. A retailer will advertise a popular line in the Press, and as a result will receive scores of inquiries for catalogues or patterns. He would wish, of course, that all of these might result in sales, but unfortunately they do not. To enclose a stamped envelope with the catalogue or letter to each inquirer would, therefore, be a considerable waste of money. It might be argued, on the other hand, that if the customer is sufficiently interested in the goods she will not be deterred from ordering for the sake of a stamp, but this is not altogether true. For every customer who *does* order, there are two or three who *nearly* do, but some trivial matter will make them postpone writing for the moment—which generally means for good.

The new Business Reply envelope provides the ideal solution for this problem; a ready means of reply is at hand for every customer, but the trader is only required to pay the postage on those envelopes which are actually used. Those who do not reply merely waste a blank envelope which costs perhaps 6s. to 10s. per thousand. It is true that on each one that does reply the trader has to pay an extra fee of one halfpenny, but this is much more than discounted by the economy effected by not needing to stamp all the envelopes that are sent out.

THE IDEAL CORRESPONDENT

The paragraph system of dealing with correspondence has a very valuable mechanical ally, at which we have already hinted in an earlier chapter. It is the dictating machine. The costliness of the equipment prevents its being practicable in a small business, but where the volume of business will warrant its installation, it is an ideal way of dealing with complicated and lengthy letters.

The machine is really a high-class gramophone, but it uses a cylindrical record instead of the more familiar disc pattern. The dictator speaks into a flexible mouthpiece as quickly as he wishes, and his words are recorded on the composition of the cylinder. Twenty or more letters can be got on one cylinder. When full it is taken off the "dictating" machine and handed to the typist, who puts it in *her* machine (the transcriber) and hears back the dictation. An ingenious "head-phone" leaves both the typist's hands free, and a "foot-pedal" permits her to stop and start the transcriber, and so keep pace with her typing speed.

How valuable this dual aid to speed can be, only the harassed correspondent struggling with an appalling pile of intricate letters late in the afternoon can appreciate.

When used in conjunction with a paragraph system the dictator merely calls down the appropriate paragraphs on the machine—which is even quicker than writing them—and any specially dictated passages can easily be included as required.

OTHER MECHANICAL AIDS

The owner of quite a small business has, or ought to have, in his mind all the information about his stock that is necessary to answer a postal inquiry; but when the correspondence of a larger business is centralized and in the hands of a correspondence manager, it is not to be expected that he will know every price, range number, estimate, quantity detail, etc.

Rapidity and ease of reference are the factors that count and all this data will need to be classified in convenient form by his desk. If he has to fuddle through bound books to get the information he needs to deal with a letter, then his output will be seriously reduced. The best plan is to have all lists, tables, etc., that will be wanted, typed out on 6 in. by 4 in. cards and kept in a visible index file, such as is used for mailing lists. The contents of each card will be typed at the bottom, and on taking up a "slide" or tray of the index the eye can be run up the exposed titles and the necessary one instantly selected. A lift of the finger at the right "pocket" (as the holder in which the card is placed is called) and the desired information is seen at a glance.

Opposite is an illustration of such a "slide," part of which may be used for keeping information as detailed above, and the rest to house the paragraphs themselves, which are also typed or printed on 6 in. by 4 in. cards.

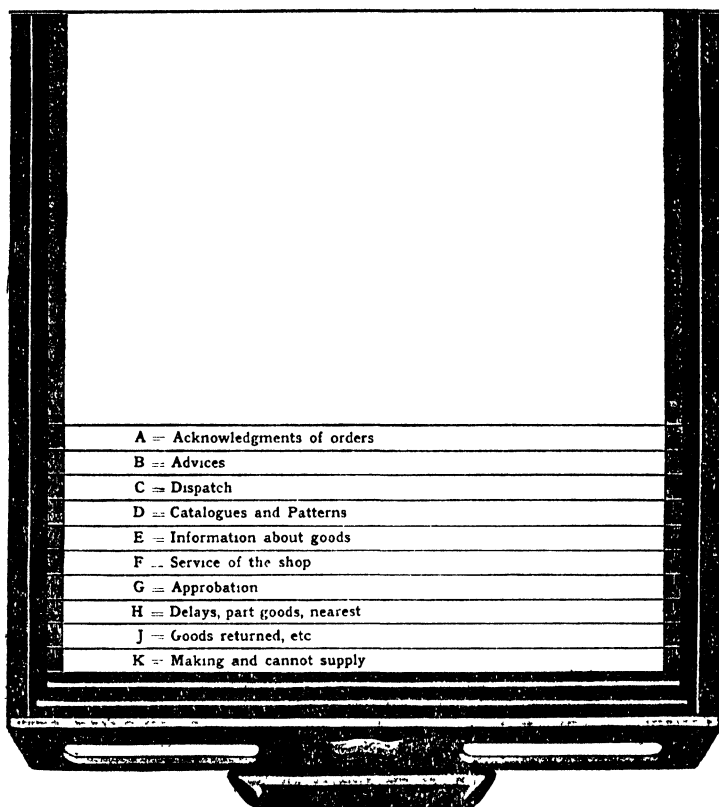
It will also be found helpful to give the typist a shorter "slide" in which to keep *her* copy of the paragraphs—it will be so much quicker for her to find them than if she has to refer to a list in a book or folder.

The flexibility of the visible index system is another great advantage. The needed store of information is constantly changing, and it is simplicity itself to insert a fresh "pocket" containing another card at any point in the slide.

The degree to which these various suggestions of mechanical aid can be utilized must of necessity depend on the size of the firm, but the following general suggestions may be made—

1. The single shop with only half a dozen letters a day to

deal with should certainly consider the advantages of a simple paragraph system.



2. The owner of a larger shop, or the head of the centralized correspondence section of a firm with three or four small shops, would be well advised to install a visible slide or small cabinet of slides for housing the paragraphs and necessary correspondence information. It is also highly probable that a duplicating machine could be justified

3. The store or larger multiple firm which can keep one man busy on correspondence will find a dictating machine the invaluable complement of the equipment given above.

CHAPTER XII

SOME SPECIMEN LETTERS

THE observant reader of this book will have noticed that in our treatment of the various sections of paragraphs some sort of order has been maintained. We started very naturally at the beginning with the "A" paragraphs, which are designed to open a letter, and from them progressed through the simple to the complicated in paragraphs for use in the body of the letter.

It is, therefore, quite appropriate that this last chapter should contain a few extra paragraphs designed to give what finish may be necessary to a routine letter. We have stressed that the cumbersome "Business English" ending is very undesirable, but at times there is the need of a final message in the letter.

So we give the "Z" or closing family of paragraphs—

- Z—1. An envelope, which needs no stamp, is enclosed for your reply.
- Z—2. Will you let us know if you would like us to do this.
- Z—3. Please let us know if the parcel does not arrive by this time.
- Z—4. We hope that this delay will not cause you any inconvenience.

PLAYING AT PARAGRAPHS

Before turning to our specimen letters, I would recommend the budding paragraph builder, having outlined his system, to spend a little time at a fascinating pastime not unlike the word-making and word-taking of our youth. This is how it is played.

Each paragraph of the series is typed on strips of thin card about 3 in. wide. These strips are then chopped up into pieces, each bearing one paragraph only, and the pieces laid out on the table in order of their reference numbers. Then the game is ready to begin. The idea is to build up one letter from three or four paragraphs, and then by adding, taking, or exchanging one paragraph at a time, to turn it into an entirely different letter.

This very innocent amusement has a triple value. It will severely test the "linking-up" qualities of the paragraphs, and at the same time demonstrate the remarkable flexibility of a well-thought-out system. And the beginner who plays the game will thereby become familiarized with the paragraphs themselves.

Here is a series of linked-up paragraphs, changed one at a time, that will afford some practice to work out—

M.1, C.1, M.14.

M.1, C.1, M.13.

M.1, H.6, M.13.

M.1, H.5, M.13.

M.1, H.5, Z.4.

M.1, K.1, Z.4.

A.1, K.1, Z.4.

A.1, K.3, Z.4.

A.1, E.1, M.16.

A.1, D.5, M.16.

A.1, D.5, D.6, M.16.

A.1, D.5, D.6, N.4.

A.1, D.5, D.7, N.4.

A.1, D.8, D.7, N.4.

A.1, D.8, D.7, D.11.

A.5, D.8, D.7, D.11.

Then as a demonstration of the pliability of the paragraphs given in this book, we will give one somewhat long letter made up from them. Four words only (shown in capitals) have been adapted to effect continuity. Here are the paragraphs used—

M.1, M.3, C.2, C.4, Z.4, H.6 ab., C.3, H.1 bc., D.8, D.9, D.11,
and overleaf is the letter made from them.

The very length of this specimen tends to make it jerky, but I invite comparison on this point with the average dictated letter of the same number of paragraphs.

Dear Madam,

Thank you very much for your letter of July 1st in which you send a cheque for £5.10.0. A receipt for this amount is enclosed.

The household linens you ask for are being sent off by post, and should reach you by to-morrow morning. The rest of the goods are being looked out, and we hope to send them off Wednesday at the latest. We hope that this delay will not cause you any inconvenience.

As the exact designs of the pillow-cases you order are not in stock, we have sent the very nearest rather than keep you waiting without anything at all. If these are not suitable please let us know at once, as we are quite willing to take them back or change them as you wish.

You recently asked us to get you some boys' shoes. They have now come in and we are sending them WITH THE OTHER GOODS. There has been considerable difficulty in getting the exact shape you wanted, but we felt sure that you would not like us to send you a substitute. If the shoes should be too late to be of use, please do not feel bound to keep them.

We are very sorry that we cannot send you patterns of casement exactly the same as your sample, but cuttings of the very nearest are enclosed, and we hope that they will be of some use to you. If you would like us to make the curtains specially for you, please fill in the enclosed measurement form. When you write, please use the enclosed envelope - it is ready addressed. This will make sure that your order is dealt with at once.

Yours faithfully,

SPECIMEN SALES AND ROUTINE LETTERS

The letters that follow are intentionally as varied as possible. Most of them are adapted from actual letters I have had occasion to write at various times. One or two have been written specially for this book in order to illustrate particular points. Their value to the trader who would improve his routine correspondence is not so much the exact phraseology used—although that is important—but rather the attitude that is adopted in dealing with the various situations—

REPLY TO AN INQUIRY FOR FOUNTAIN PENS

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your enquiry about the "Write" pen. The folder we are sending you illustrates the various models from which you can choose.

You will appreciate a pen which is above all dependable, which will not gush out an inky stream on someone else's carpet or on your own suit. It is a well brought up pen, too, and will not dribble on your letter, but will write to its last gasp of ink.

A small envelope is enclosed for you to send us a sample of the nib you use with an ordinary pen. This will help us to send you the "Write" pen that is exactly right.

Yours faithfully,

REPLY TO A CUSTOMER WHO SENDS IN A PATTERN GARMENT
THAT HAS OBVIOUSLY SHRUNK CONSIDERABLY WITH:

“PLEASE SEND ME A BOY’S VEST THE SAME SIZE
AS THE ONE ENCLOSED ”

Dear Madam,

Your parcel and letter have just arrived. Thank you very much for the order.

On examining the pattern vest, we find that it has shrunk somewhat, and if we sent you a new one exactly the same size, it would probably be too small after it had been washed a few times.

So to avoid this trouble we have picked out one a size larger, but we thought it best to tell you in case you might think we had ignored your instructions.

Yours faithfully,

REPLY TO "DON'T PESTER ME WITH ANY MORE OF
THESE FOLLOW-UP LETTERS"

Dear Madam,

Your letter of July 1st has just reached us, and we will certainly see that no more letters are sent to you about the costume you bought from us last year.

But we should like to put the matter to you for a moment from another point of view.

Ready-made costumes are a comparatively new department with us, and for that reason we are particularly anxious to know that every purchase in that section is entirely satisfactory, for we realise that if this should not be so we could not possibly expect a customer to come to us again.

Hence it was with much concern that we noticed that a few customers, yourself among them, have only tried this department once.

As our business has been built up so largely on the recommendation of satisfied customers, we felt it was only right to find out what was wrong. This is our only reason for sending out these letters.

We hope that this full explanation will make our policy clear, and remove from your mind the idea that we bother customers unnecessarily. We are as anxious to give the right service as you are to receive it.

Yours faithfully,

REPLY TO: "I PAID 5 GNS. FOR THIS CHAIR ON SATURDAY AND NOW ON MONDAY I FIND ONE EXACTLY LIKE IT MARKED IN YOUR WINDOW FOR £4"

Dear Madam,

Your letter about the chair you bought on Saturday has just reached us, and we can quite understand how you feel about it.

From our side sales of any sort are very difficult things for this very reason. We hold these price reduction periods from time to time when trade is slackest, not only to keep our workrooms going, but in order to attract customers to fresh departments when we can give them the fullest attention.

But it is obvious that these periods must have a definite beginning and ending, and if we were to make a concession to customers who bought at ordinary prices on the Saturday before, it would be easy to imagine what those who bought on Friday would think about it, and even those who bought on Thursday wouldn't like it - in fact business would quickly become impossible.

We can assure you that the chair you bought is thoroughly good value at 5gns, and you also had the advantage of choosing from a far wider range than you could today. But we will see that you are advised of every future price reduction period, in case you may wish to take advantage of it.

Yours faithfully,

LETTER TO A CUSTOMER WHO HAS BEEN AWAY FROM HOME SOME MONTHS, AND HAS HAD TWO OR THREE COLLECTION LETTERS FOLLOW HIM. HE RETURNS HOME TO FIND A FINAL NOTICE ON HIS WRITING TABLE. HE STRONGLY RESENTS THIS—AND SAYS SO

Dear Sir,

Your letter enclosing a cheque for 15/- in settlement of your account has just arrived, and owing to the seriousness of the matter I am replying personally.

I can well imagine your annoyance at being pestered for this comparatively small amount, and although our clerk acted in strict accord with the rules of the company, I frankly admit that little discretion has been used.

The fact of your being abroad complicates matters, and here I would like to put the case to you for a moment from the other point of view. It appears that the suitcase was supplied nearly eight months ago, and the usual account and reminder letters were sent each month, but as far as we are concerned, nothing whatever is heard.

Not knowing that these letters were accumulating or being sent on to you while abroad, our clerk, who is responsible to me for the state of the books, quite naturally - although perhaps unwisely in view of the small amount involved - followed the usual procedure in such cases.

On the other hand, the briefest note from you, saying that you were away, and that you would attend to the account on your return, would have obviated the whole difficulty.

I very much hope that you will, on the one hand, accept my apologies, and that on the other you will appreciate something of the other side of the question - and so allow us to serve you again as occasion arises.

Yours faithfully,

FOLLOW-UP LETTER TO A HOSIER'S CUSTOMER WHO HAS
ASKED FOR DETAILS AND PRICES OF A GOOD-CLASS
MAKE OF UNDERWEAR

Dear Sir,

If you can stand the British climate, there is not much in the world to worry about on that score. That is why Englishmen are to be found hale and hearty from the North-West Territory to the Victoria Nyanza.

We as a nation have found out how to keep warm without coddling in spite of the raw and damp of winter - and also how to keep cool in the sultry heat of summer without casting so many clouts that the evening chill finds us out.

The secret lies in the peculiar virtues of good British underwear, famous the world over as a complete protection against all kinds of weather. We say GOOD British underwear, for you can get cheap underwear that is made from rough harsh wool, made by the mile tube-fashion, and then sliced up and sewn up. No wonder it is baggy and irritating.

But the "Ambleside" underwear that you enquired about is made on an entirely different principle; it is actually woven to shape on the machine, and only the finest yarns - wool, silk or silk and wool are used for it.

If you will look in the next time you are passing, you can inspect a wide range of this fine underwear.

Yours faithfully,

A "SERVICE" LETTER FROM A DRAPER TO HIS REGULAR
CUSTOMERS, TELLING THEM HOW TO AVOID DAMAGE
TO THEIR WINTER CLOTHES THROUGH MOTH

Dear Madam,

Every Autumn we receive visits from customers telling us that the raiders have been in - hungry raiders they were too.

Last Spring our customers put away their furs and fineries, hung them safe, they thought. until Winter came. But what did they find? Expensive overcoats with those unmistakable little holes right in front where they show so much, beautiful furs with the fur coming out. The stealthy raiders have been at work, battalions of them, feeding to their hearts content - on valuable clothes.

Ordinary moth-balls don't seem to worry them, they simply go a little further along the cupboard. But we have found a way to stop them. We have produced a moth-proof bag made of stout impregnated cartridge paper - and you put the garment right inside the bag and seal it up.

We thought that you would like to know about these bags, for to each customer who buys her summer costume or gown in our showroom we are giving one in which to keep her winter coat or furs.

Call in and get your bag while the supply lasts.

Yours faithfully,

REPLY TO CUSTOMER WHO OBJECTS TO THE SMELL OF A HARRIS TWEED COSTUME. (THERE ARE OTHER TRADE SITUATIONS THAT MAY BE DEALT WITH SIMILARLY—E. G. THE THORN MARKS IN PECCARY HOG GLOVES)

Dear Madam,

Your note about the real Harris Tweed costume you bought has just reached us, and we hasten to explain.

In these days of factories and machinery there are too few of the old-fashioned industries left, but real Harris Tweed making is one of them.

India gauze and Madras muslin may be made in Lancashire, Holland is made in England and so are Jerseys, but Harris Tweed is still made in the Isle of Harris off the West coast of Scotland. The yarn is spun there, the dyes collected from the rough rocks of the island itself, and the cloth is woven on hand looms in the rude cottages. Finally it is dried over the fragrant peat fires on the spot where it is made, and it is this drying that gives the cloth that characteristic odour - an odour without which it would not be genuine.

We will gladly exchange your costume for one cut from a machine-woven tweed, but we can assure you that the one you have is the genuine product of an old island craft that we should be very sorry to see die out.

Yours faithfully,

LETTER TO A CUSTOMER WHOSE ORDER HAS, IN HER
OWN WORDS: "BEEN COMPLETELY MESSED UP"

Dear Madam,

Your letter in which you relate the unhappy sequence of mistakes that have been made with your order has just reached me.

To say that such cases are very rare would be to invite the retort: "They need well be!", but fortunately it is a fact. Were it otherwise we should have been out of business years ago and not enjoying an enviable reputation for value and service in this town.

Most of the bother has been caused through our assistants not sticking to our rules, but as I realise that mere paper apologies for the trouble and inconvenience to which you have been put are of little value, I am going to be paradoxical and break another rule myself.

Under no ordinary circumstances do we allow any discounts whatever, but as some little compensation for the annoyance we have caused you, I have instructed our office to deduct 25% from the bill for the goods you ordered.

Quite apart from this, I want you to feel that if we do make a mess of things at rare intervals, we are as much concerned about it as our customer.

Yours faithfully,

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