

# How to Fail in Literature; a lecture eBook

## How to Fail in Literature; a lecture by Andrew Lang

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# Contents

<a href="#">How to Fail in Literature; a lecture eBook.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Table of Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Page 1.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Page 2.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Page 3.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Page 4.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Page 5.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Page 6.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Page 7.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Page 8.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Page 9.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Page 10.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Page 11.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Page 12.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Page 13.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Page 14.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Page 15.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Page 16.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Page 17.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Page 18.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>

# Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
HOW TO FAIL IN LITERATURE		1
FOOTNOTES		18



# Page 1

## HOW TO FAIL IN LITERATURE

What should be a man's or a woman's reason for taking literature as a vocation, what sort of success ought they to desire, what sort of ambition should possess them? These are natural questions, now that so many readers exist in the world, all asking for something new, now that so many writers are making their pens "in running to devour the way" over so many acres of foolscap. The legitimate reasons for enlisting (too often without receiving the shilling) in this army of writers are not far to seek. A man may be convinced that he has useful, or beautiful, or entertaining ideas within him, he may hold that he can express them in fresh and charming language. He may, in short, have a "vocation," or feel conscious of a vocation, which is not exactly the same thing. There are "many thyrsus bearers, few mystics," many are called, few chosen. Still, to be sensible of a vocation is something, nay, is much, for most of us drift without any particular aim or predominant purpose. Nobody can justly censure people whose chief interest is in letters, whose chief pleasure is in study or composition, who rejoice in a fine sentence as others do in a well modelled limb, or a delicately touched landscape, nobody can censure them for trying their fortunes in literature. Most of them will fail, for, as the bookseller's young man told an author once, they have the poetic temperament, without the poetic power. Still among these whom *Pendennis* has tempted, in boyhood, to run away from school to literature as Marryat has tempted others to run away to sea, there must be some who will succeed. But an early and intense ambition is not everything, any more than a capacity for taking pains is everything in literature or in any art.

Some have the gift, the natural incommunicable power, without the ambition, others have the ambition but no other gift from any Muse. This class is the more numerous, but the smallest class of all has both the power and the will to excel in letters. The desire to write, the love of letters may shew itself in childhood, in boyhood, or youth, and mean nothing at all, a mere harvest of barren blossom without fragrance or fruit. Or, again, the concern about letters may come suddenly, when a youth that cared for none of those things is waning, it may come when a man suddenly finds that he has something which he really must tell. Then he probably fumbles about for a style, and his first fresh impulses are more or less marred by his inexperience of an art which beguiles and fascinates others even in their school-days.

It is impossible to prophesy the success of a man of letters from his early promise, his early tastes; as impossible as it is to predict, from her childish grace, the beauty of a woman.



## Page 2

But the following remarks on How to fail in Literature are certainly meant to discourage nobody who loves books, and has an impulse to tell a story, or to try a song or a sermon. Discouragements enough exist in the pursuit of this, as of all arts, crafts, and professions, without my adding to them. Famine and Fear crouch by the portals of literature as they crouch at the gates of the Virgilian Hades. There is no more frequent cause of failure than doubt and dread; a beginner can scarcely put his heart and strength into a work when he knows how long are the odds against his victory, how difficult it is for a new man to win a hearing, even though all editors and publishers are ever pining for a new man. The young fellow, unknown and unwelcomed, who can sit down and give all his best of knowledge, observation, humour, care, and fancy to a considerable work has got courage in no common portion; he deserves to triumph, and certainly should not be disheartened by our old experience. But there be few beginners of this mark, most begin so feebly because they begin so fearfully. They are already too discouraged, and can scarce do themselves justice. It is easier to write more or less well and agreeably when you are certain of being published and paid, at least, than to write well when a dozen rejected manuscripts are cowering (as Theocritus says) in your chest, bowing their pale faces over their chilly knees, outcast, hungry, repulsed from many a door. To write excellently, brightly, powerfully, with these poor unwelcomed wanderers, returned MSS., in your possession, is difficult indeed. It might be wiser to do as M. Guy de Maupassant is rumoured to have done, to write for seven years, and shew your essays to none but a mentor as friendly severe as M. Flaubert. But all men cannot have such mentors, nor can all afford so long an unremunerative apprenticeship. For some the better plan is *not* to linger on the bank, and take tea and good advice, as Keats said, but to plunge at once in mid-stream, and learn swimming of necessity.

One thing, perhaps, most people who succeed in letters so far as to keep themselves alive and clothed by their pens will admit, namely, that their early rejected MSS. *deserved to be rejected*. A few days ago there came to the writer an old forgotten beginner's attempt by himself. Whence it came, who sent it, he knows not; he had forgotten its very existence. He read it with curiosity; it was written in a very much better hand than his present scrawl, and was perfectly legible. But *readable* it was not. There was a great deal of work in it, on an out of the way topic, and the ideas were, perhaps, not quite without novelty at the time of its composition. But it was cramped and thin, and hesitating between several manners; above all it was uncommonly dull. If it ever was sent to an editor, as I presume it must have been, that editor was trebly justified in declining it. On the other hand, to be egotistic, I have known editors reject the attempts of those old days, and afterwards express lively delight in them when they struggled into print, somehow, somewhere. These worthy men did not even know that they had despised and refused what they came afterwards rather to enjoy.



## Page 3

Editors and publishers, these keepers of the gates of success, are not infallible, but their opinion of a beginner's work is far more correct than his own can ever be. They should not depress him quite, but if they are long unanimous in holding him cheap, he is warned, and had better withdraw from the struggle. He is either incompetent, or he has the makings of a Browning. He is a genius born too soon. He may readily calculate the chances in favour of either alternative.

So much by way of not damping all neophytes equally: so much we may say about success before talking of the easy ways that lead to failure. And by success here is meant no glorious triumph; the laurels are not in our thoughts, nor the enormous opulence (about a fourth of a fortunate barrister's gains) which falls in the lap of a Dickens or a Trollope. Faint and fleeting praise, a crown with as many prickles as roses, a modest hardly-gained competence, a good deal of envy, a great deal of gossip—these are the rewards of genius which constitute a modern literary success. Not to reach the moderate competence in literature is, for a professional man of letters of all work, something like failure. But in poetry to-day a man may succeed, as far as his art goes, and yet may be unread, and may publish at his own expense, or not publish at all. He pleases himself, and a very tiny audience: I do not call that failure. I regard failure as the goal of ignorance, incompetence, lack of common sense, conceited dulness, and certain practical blunders now to be explained and defined.

The most ambitious may accept, without distrust, the following advice as to How to fail in Literature. The advice is offered by a mere critic, and it is an axiom of the Arts that the critics "are the fellows who have failed," or have not succeeded. The persons who really can paint, or play, or compose seldom tell us how it is done, still less do they review the performances of their contemporaries. That invidious task they leave to the unsuccessful novelists. The instruction, the advice are offered by the persons who cannot achieve performance. It is thus that all things work together in favour of failure, which, indeed, may well appear so easy that special instruction, however competent, is a luxury rather than a necessary. But when we look round on the vast multitude of writers who, to all seeming, deliberately aim at failure, who take every precaution in favour of failure that untutored inexperience can suggest, it becomes plain that education in ill-success, is really a popular want. In the following remarks some broad general principles, making disaster almost inevitable, will first be offered, and then special methods of failing in all special departments of letters will be ungrudgingly communicated. It is not enough to attain failure, we should deserve it. The writer, by way of insuring complete confidence, would modestly mention that he has had ample opportunities



## Page 4

of study in this branch of knowledge. While sifting for five or six years the volunteered contributions to a popular periodical, he has received and considered some hundredweights of manuscript. In all these myriad contributions he has not found thirty pieces which rose even to the ordinary dead level of magazine work. He has thus enjoyed unrivalled chances of examining such modes of missing success as spontaneously occur to the human intellect, to the unaided ingenuity of men, women, and children. {1}

He who would fail in literature cannot begin too early to neglect his education, and to adopt every opportunity of not observing life and character. None of us is so young but that he may make himself perfect in writing an illegible hand. This method, I am bound to say, is too frequently overlooked. Most manuscripts by ardent literary volunteers are fairly legible. On the other hand there are novelists, especially ladies, who not only write a hand wholly declining to let itself be deciphered, but who fill up the margins with interpolations, who write between the lines, and who cover the page with scratches running this way and that, intended to direct the attention to after-thoughts inserted here and there in corners and on the backs of sheets. To pin in scraps of closely written paper and backs of envelopes adds to the security for failure, and produces a rich anger in the publisher's reader or the editor.

The cultivation of a bad handwriting is an elementary precaution, often overlooked. Few need to be warned against having their MSS. typewritten, this gives them a chance of being read with ease and interest, and this must be neglected by all who have really set their hearts on failure. In the higher matters of education it is well to be as ignorant as possible. No knowledge comes amiss to the true man of letters, so they who court disaster should know as little as may be.

Mr. Stevenson has told the attentive world how, in boyhood, he practised himself in studying and imitating the styles of famous authors of every age. He who aims at failure must never think of style, and should sedulously abstain from reading Shakespeare, Bacon, Hooker, Walton, Gibbon, and other English and foreign classics. He can hardly be too reckless of grammar, and should always place adverbs and other words between "to" and the infinitive, thus: "Hubert was determined to energetically and on all possible occasions, oppose any attempt to entangle him with such." Here, it will be noticed, "such" is used as a pronoun, a delightful flower of speech not to be disregarded by authors who would fail. But some one may reply that several of our most popular novelists revel in the kind of grammar which I am recommending. This is undeniable, but certain people manage to succeed in spite of their own earnest endeavours and startling demerits. There is no royal road to failure. There is no rule without its exception, and it may be urged that the works of the gentlemen and ladies who "break Priscian's head"—as they would say themselves—may be successful, but are not literature. Now it is about literature that we are speaking.



## Page 5

In the matter of style, there is another excellent way. You need not neglect it, but you may study it wrongly. You may be affectedly self-conscious, you may imitate the ingenious persons who carefully avoid the natural word, the spontaneous phrase, and employ some other set of terms which can hardly be construed. You may use, like a young essayist whom I have lovingly observed, a proportion of eighty adjectives to every sixty-five other words of all denominations. You may hunt for odd words, and thrust them into the wrong places, as where you say that a man's nose is "beetling," that the sun sank in "a cauldron of daffodil chaos," and the like. {2} You may use common words in an unwonted sense, keeping some private interpretation clearly before you. Thus you may speak, if you like to write partly in the tongue of Hellas, about "assimilating the *ethos*" of a work of art, and so write that people shall think of the processes of digestion. You may speak of "exhausting the beauty" of a landscape, and, somehow, convey the notion of sucking an orange dry. Or you may wildly mix your metaphors, as when a critic accuses Mr. Browning of "giving the iridescence of the poetic afflatus," as if the poetic afflatus were blown through a pipe, into soap, and produced soap bubbles. This is a more troublesome method than the mere picking up of every newspaper commonplace that floats into your mind, but it is equally certain to lead—where you want to go. By combining the two fashions a great deal may be done. Thus you want to describe a fire at sea, and you say, "the devouring element lapped the quivering spars, the mast, and the sea-shouldering keel of the doomed *Mary Jane* in one coruscating catastrophe. The sea deeps were incarnadined to an alarming extent by the flames, and to escape from such many plunged headlong in their watery bier."

As a rule, authors who would fail stick to one bad sort of writing; either to the newspaper commonplace, or to the out of the way and inappropriate epithets, or to the common word with a twist on it. But there are examples of the combined method, as when we call the trees round a man's house his "domestic boscage." This combination is difficult, but perfect for its purpose. You cannot write worse than "such." To attain perfection the young aspirant should confine his reading to the newspapers (carefully selecting his newspapers, for many of them will not help him to write ill) and to those modern authors who are most praised for their style by the people who know least about the matter. Words like "fictional" and "fictive" are distinctly to be recommended, and there are epithets such as "weird," "strange," "wild," "intimate," and the rest, which blend pleasantly with "all the time" for "always"; "back of" for "behind"; "belong with" for "belong to"; "live like I do" for "as I do." The authors who combine those charms are rare, but we can strive to be among them.



## Page 6

In short, he who would fail must avoid simplicity like a sunken reef, and must earnestly seek either the commonplace or the *bizarre*, the slipshod or the affected, the newfangled or the obsolete, the flippant or the sepulchral. I need not specially recommend you to write in “Wardour-street English,” the sham archaic, a lingo never spoken by mortal man, and composed of patches borrowed from authors between Piers Plowman and Gabriel Harvey. A few literal translations of Icelandic phrases may be thrown in; the result, as furniture-dealers say, is a “made-up article.”

On the subject of style another hint may be offered. Style may be good in itself, but inappropriate to the subject. For example, style which may be excellently adapted to a theological essay, may be but ill-suited for a dialogue in a novel. There are subjects of which the poet says

*Ornari res ipsa vetat, contenta doceri.*

The matter declines to be adorned, and is content with being clearly stated. I do not know what would occur if the writer of the Money Article in the *Times* treated his topic with reckless gaiety. Probably that number of the journal in which the essay appeared would have a large sale, but the author might achieve professional failure; in the office. On the whole it may not be the wiser plan to write about the Origins of Religion in the style which might suit a study of the life of ballet dancers; the two *mm*. Halevy, the learned and the popular, would make a blunder if they exchanged styles. Yet Gibbon never denies himself a jest, and Montesquieu’s *Esprit des Lois* was called *L’Esprit sur les Lois*. M. Renan’s *Histoire d’Israel* may almost be called skittish. The French are more tolerant of those excesses than the English. It is a digression, but he who would fail can reach his end by not taking himself seriously. If he gives himself no important airs, whether out of a freakish humour, or real humility, depend upon it the public and the critics will take him at something under his own estimate. On the other hand, by copying the gravity of demeanour admired by Mr. Shandy in a celebrated parochial animal, even a very dull person may succeed in winning no inconsiderable reputation.

To return to style, and its appropriateness: all depends on the work in hand, and the audience addressed. Thus, in his valuable Essay on Style, Mr. Pater says, with perfect truth: {3}

“The otiose, the facile, surplusage: why are these abhorrent to the true literary artist, except because, in literary as in all other arts, structure is all important, felt or painfully missed, everywhere?—that architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning, and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigour, unfold and justify the first—a condition of literary art, which, in contradistinction to another quality of the artist himself, to be spoken of later, I shall call the necessity of *mind* in style.”

## Page 7

These are words which the writer should have always present to his memory, if he has something serious that he wants to say, or if he wishes to express himself in the classic and perfect manner. But if it is his fate merely to be obliged to say something, in the course of his profession, or if he is bid to discourse for the pleasure of readers in the Underground Railway, I fear he will often have to forget Mr. Pater. It may not be literature, the writing of *causeries*, of Roundabout Papers, of rambling articles “on a broomstick,” and yet again, it *may* be literature! “Parallel, allusion, the allusive way generally, the flowers in the garden”—Mr. Pater charges heavily against these. The true artist “knows the narcotic force of these upon the negligent intelligence to which any *diversion*, literally, is welcome, any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject . . . In truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be lying somewhere, according to Michel Angelo’s fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone.”

Excellent, but does this apply to every kind of literary art? What would become of Montaigne if you blew away his allusions, and drove him out of “the allusive way,” where he gathers and binds so many flowers from all the gardens and all the rose-hung lanes of literature? Montaigne sets forth to write an Essay on Coaches. He begins with a few remarks on seasickness in the common pig; some notes on the Pont Neuf at Paris follow, and a theory of why tyrants are detested by men whom they have obliged; a glance at Coaches is then given, next a study of Montezuma’s gardens, presently a brief account of the Spanish cruelties in Mexico and Peru, last—*retombons a nos coches*—he tells a tale of the Inca, and the devotion of his Guard: *Another for Hector!*

The allusive style has its proper place, like another, if it is used by the right man, and the concentrated and structural style has also its higher province. It would not do to employ either style in the wrong place. In a rambling discursive essay, for example, a mere straying after the bird in the branches, or the thorn in the way, he might not take the safest road who imitated Mr. Pater’s style in what follows:

“In this way, according to the well-known saying, ‘The style is the man,’ complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world: all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things, the purity of this medium, its laws or tricks of refraction: nothing is to be left there which might give conveyance to any matter save that.” Clearly the author who has to write so that the man may read who runs will fail if he wrests this manner from its proper place, and uses it for casual articles: he will fail to hold the vagrom attention!



## Page 8

Thus a great deal may be done by studying inappropriateness of style, by adopting a style alien to our matter and to our audience. If we “haver” discursively about serious, and difficult, and intricate topics, we fail; and we fail if we write on happy, pleasant, and popular topics in an abstruse and intent, and analytic style. We fail, too, if in style we go outside our natural selves. “The style is the man,” and the man will be nothing, and nobody, if he tries for an incongruous manner, not naturally his own, for example if Miss Yonge were suddenly to emulate the manner of Lever, or if Mr. John Morley were to strive to shine in the fashion of *Uncle Remus*, or if Mr. Rider Haggard were to be allured into imitation by the example, so admirable in itself, of the Master of Balliol. It is ourselves we must try to improve, our attentiveness, our interest in life, our seriousness of purpose, and then the style will improve with the self. Or perhaps, to be perfectly frank, we shall thus convert ourselves into prigs, throw ourselves out of our stride, lapse into self-consciousness, lose all that is natural, *naïf*, and instinctive within us. Verily there are many dangers, and the paths to failure are infinite.

So much for style, of which it may generally be said that you cannot be too obscure, unnatural, involved, vulgar, slipshod, and metaphorical. See to it that your metaphors are mixed, though, perhaps, this attention is hardly needed. The free use of parentheses, in which a reader gets lost, and of unintelligible allusions, and of references to unread authors—the *Kalevala* and Lycophron, and the Scholiast on Apollonius Rhodius, is invaluable to this end. So much for manner, and now for matter.

The young author generally writes because he wants to write, either for money, from vanity, or in mere weariness of empty hours and anxiety to astonish his relations. This is well, he who would fail cannot begin better than by having nothing to say. The less you observe, the less you reflect, the less you put yourself in the paths of adventure and experience, the less you will have to say, and the more impossible will it be to read your work. Never notice people’s manner, conduct, nor even dress, in real life. Walk through the world with your eyes and ears closed, and embody the negative results in a story or a poem. As to Poetry, with a fine instinct we generally begin by writing verse, because verse is the last thing that the public want to read. The young writer has usually read a great deal of verse, however, and most of it bad. His favourite authors are the bright lyrists who sing of broken hearts, wasted lives, early deaths, disappointment, gloom. Without having even had an unlucky flirtation, or without knowing what it is to lose a favourite cat, the early author pours forth laments, just like the laments he has been reading. He has too a favourite manner, the old consumptive manner, about the hectic flush, the fatal rose on the pallid cheek, about the ruined roof tree, the empty chair, the rest in the village churchyard. This is now a little *rococo* and forlorn, but failure may be assured by travelling in this direction. If you are ambitious to disgust an editor at once, begin your poem with “Only.” In fact you may as well head the lyric “Only.” {4}



## Page 9

ONLY.

Only a spark of an ember,  
Only a leaf on the tree,  
Only the days we remember,  
Only the days without thee.  
Only the flower that thou worest,  
Only the book that we read,  
Only that night in the forest,  
Only a dream of the dead,  
Only the troth that was broken,  
Only the heart that is lonely,  
Only the sigh and the token  
That sob in the saying of Only!

In literature this is a certain way of failing, but I believe a person might make a livelihood by writing verses like these—for music. Another good way is to be very economical in your rhymes, only two to the four lines, and regretfully vague. Thus:

SHADOWS.

In the slumber of the winter,  
In the secret of the snow,  
What is the voice that is crying  
Out of the long ago?

When the accents of the children  
Are silent on the stairs,  
When the poor forgets his troubles,  
And the rich forgets his cares.

What is the silent whisper  
That echoes in the room,  
When the days are full of darkness,  
And the night is hushed in gloom?

'Tis the voice of the departed,  
Who will never come again,  
Who has left the weary tumult,  
And the struggle and the pain. {5}

And my heart makes heavy answer,  
To the voice that comes no more,



To the whisper that is welling  
From the far off happy shore.

If you are not satisfied with these simple ways of not succeeding, please try the Grosvenor Gallery style. Here the great point is to make the rhyme arrive at the end of a very long word, you should also be free with your alliterations.

LULLABY.

When the sombre night is dumb,  
Hushed the loud chrysanthemum,  
Sister, sleep!  
Sleep, the lissom lily saith,  
Sleep, the poplar whispereth,  
Soft and deep!

Filmy floats the wild woodbine,  
Jonquil, jacinth, jessamine,  
Float and flow.  
Sleeps the water wild and wan,  
As in far off Toltecan  
Mexico.

See, upon the sun-dial,  
Waves the midnight's misty pall,  
Waves and wakes.  
As, in tropic Timbuctoo,  
Water beasts go plashing through  
Lilied lakes!

Alliteration is a splendid source of failure in this sort of poetry, and adjectives like lissom, filmy, weary, weird, strange, make, or ought to make, the rejection of your manuscript a certainty. The poem should, as a rule, seem to be addressed to an unknown person, and should express regret and despair for circumstances in the past with which the reader is totally unacquainted. Thus:

GHOSTS.



## Page 10

We met at length, as Souls that sit  
At funeral feast, and taste of it,  
And empty were the words we said,  
As fits the converse of the dead,  
For it is long ago, my dear,  
Since we two met in living cheer,  
Yea, we have long been ghosts, you know,  
And alien ways we twain must go,  
Nor shall we meet in Shadow Land,  
Till Time's glass, empty of its sand,  
Is filled up of Eternity.  
Farewell—enough for once to die—  
And far too much it is to dream,  
And taste not the Lethaeian stream,  
But bear the pain of loves unwed  
Even here, even here, among the dead!

That is a cheerful intelligible kind of melody, which is often practised with satisfactory results. Every form of imitation (imitating of course only the faults of a favourite writer) is to be recommended.

Imitation does a double service, it secures the failure of the imitator and also aids that of the unlucky author who is imitated. As soon as a new thing appears in literature, many people hurry off to attempt something of the same sort. It may be a particular trait and accent in poetry, and the public, weary of the mimicries, begin to dislike the original.

“Most can grow the flowers now,  
For all have got the seed;  
And once again the people  
Call it but a weed.”

In fiction, if somebody brings in a curious kind of murder, or a study of religious problems, or a treasure hunt, or what you will, others imitate till the world is weary of murders, or theological flirtations, or the search for buried specie, and the original authors themselves will fail, unless they fish out something new, to be vulgarised afresh. Therefore, imitation is distinctly to be urged on the young author.

As a rule, his method is this, he reads very little, but all that he reads is *bad*. The feeblest articles in the weakest magazines, the very mildest and most conventional novels appear to be the only studies of the majority. Apparently the would-be contributor says to himself, or herself, “well, *I* can do something almost on the level of this or that maudlin and invertebrate novel.” Then he deliberately sits down to rival the most tame, dull, and illiterate compositions that get into print. In this way bad authors become the literary parents of worse authors. Nobody but a reader of MSS. knows



what myriads of fiction are written without one single new situation, original character, or fresh thought. The most out-worn ideas: sudden loss of fortune; struggles; faithlessness of First Lover; noble conduct of Second Lover: frivolity of younger sister; excellence of mother: naughtiness of one son, virtue of another, these are habitually served up again and again. On the sprained ankles, the mad bulls, the fires, and other simple devices for doing without an introduction between hero and heroine I need not dwell. The very youngest of us is acquainted with these expedients, which, by this time of day, will spell failure.

## Page 11

The common novels of Governess life, the daughters and granddaughters of *Jane Eyre*, still run riot among the rejected manuscripts. The lively large family, all very untidy and humorous, all wearing each other's boots and gloves, and making their dresses out of bedroom curtains and marrying rich men, still rushes down the easy descent to failure. The sceptical curate is at large, and is disbelieving in everything except the virtues of the young woman who "has a history." Mr. Swinburne hopes that one day the last unbelieving clergyman will disappear in the embrace of the last immaculate Magdalen, as the Princess and the Geni burn each other to nothingness, in the *Arabian Nights*. On that happy day there will be one less of the roads leading to failure. If the pair can carry with them the self-sacrificing characters who take the blame of all the felonies that they did not do, and the nice girl who is jilted by the poet, and finds that the squire was the person whom she *really* loved, so much the better. If not only Monte Carlo, but the inevitable scene in the Rooms there can be abolished; if the Riviera, and Italy can be removed from the map of Europe as used by novelists, so much the better. But failure will always be secured, while the huge majority of authors do not aim high, but aim at being a little lower than the last domestic drivel which came out in three volumes, or the last analysis of the inmost self of some introspective young girl which crossed the water from the States.

These are general counsels, and apply to the production of books. But, when you have done your book, you may play a number of silly tricks with your manuscript. I have already advised you to make only one copy, a rough one, as that secures negligence in your work, and also disgusts an editor or reader. It has another advantage, you may lose your copy altogether, and, as you have not another, no failure can be more complete. The best way of losing it, I think and the safest, is to give it to somebody you know who has once met some man or woman of letters.. This somebody must be instructed to ask that busy and perhaps casual and untidy person to read your manuscript, and "place" it, that is, induce some poor publisher or editor to pay for and publish it. Now the man, or woman of letters, will use violent language on receiving your clumsy brown paper parcel of illegible wares, because he or she has no more to do with the matter than the crossing sweeper. The MS. will either be put away so carefully that it can never be found again, or will be left lying about so that the housemaid may use it for her own domestic purposes, like Betty Barnes, the cook of Mr. Warburton, who seems to have burned several plays of Shakespeare.

The MS. in short will go where the old moons go.

And all dead days drift thither,  
And all disastrous things.

## Page 12

Not only can you secure failure thus yourself, but you can so worry and badger your luckless victim, that he too will be unable to write well till he has forgotten you and your novel, and all the annoyance and anxiety you have given him. Much may be done by asking him for “introductions” to an editor or publisher. These gentry don’t want introductions, they want good books, and very seldom get them. If you behave thus, the man whom you are boring will write to his publisher:

Dear Brown,

A wretched creature, who knows my great aunt, asks me to recommend his rubbish to you. I send it by to-day’s post, and I wish you joy of it.

This kind of introduction will do you excellent service in smoothing the path to failure. You can arrive at similar results by sending your MS. *not* to the editor of this or that magazine, but to some one who, as you have been told by some nincompoop, is the editor, and who is *not*. He *may* lose your book, or he may let it lie about for months, or he may send it on at once to the real editor with his bitter malison. The utmost possible vexation is thus inflicted on every hand, and a prejudice is established against you which the nature of your work is very unlikely to overcome. By all means bore many literary strangers with correspondence, this will give them a lively recollection of your name, and an intense desire to do you a bad turn if opportunity arises. {6}

If your book does, in spite of all, get itself published, send it with your compliments to critics and ask them for favourable reviews. It is the publisher’s business to send out books to the editors of critical papers, but never mind *that*. Go on telling critics that you know praise is only given by favour, that they are all more or less venal and corrupt and members of the Something Club, add that *you* are no member of a *coterie* nor clique, but that you hope an exception will be made, and that your volume will be applauded on its merits. You will thus have done what in you lies to secure silence from reviewers, and to make them request that your story may be sent to some other critic. This, again, gives trouble, and makes people detest you and your performance, and contributes to the end which you have steadily in view.

I do not think it is necessary to warn young lady novelists, who possess beauty, wealth, and titles, against asking Reviewers to dine, and treating them as kindly, almost, as the Fairy Paribanou treated Prince Ahmed. They only act thus, I fear, in Mr. William Black’s novels.

## Page 13

Much may be done by re-writing your book on the proof sheets, correcting everything there which you should have corrected in manuscript. This is an expensive process, and will greatly diminish your pecuniary gains, or rather will add to your publisher's bill, for the odds are that you will have to publish at your own expense. By the way, an author can make almost a certainty of disastrous failure, by carrying to some small obscure publisher a work which has been rejected by the best people in the trade. Their rejections all but demonstrate that your book is worthless. If you think you are likely to make a good thing by employing an obscure publisher, with little or no capital, then, as some one in Thucydides remarks, congratulating you on your simplicity, I do not envy your want of common sense. Be very careful to enter into a perfectly preposterous agreement. For example, accept "half profits," but forget to observe that before these are reckoned, it is distinctly stated in your "agreement" that the publisher is to pay *himself* some twenty per cent. on the price of each copy sold before you get your share.

Here is "another way," as the cookery books have it. In your gratitude to your first publisher, covenant with him to let him have all the cheap editions of all your novels for the next five years, at his own terms. If, in spite of the advice I have given you, you somehow manage to succeed, to become wildly popular, you will still have reserved to yourself, by this ingenious clause, a chance of ineffable pecuniary failure. A plan generally approved of is to sell your entire copyright in your book for a very small sum. You want the ready money, and perhaps you are not very hopeful. But, when your book is in all men's hands, when you are daily reviled by the small fry of paragraphers, when the publisher is clearing a thousand a year by it, while you only got a hundred down, then you will thank me, and will acknowledge that, in spite of apparent success, you are a failure after all. There are publishers, however, so inconsiderate that they will not leave you even this consolation. Finding that the book they bought cheap is really valuable, they will insist on sharing the profits with the author, or on making him great presents of money to which he has no legal claim. Some persons, some authors, cannot fail if they would, so wayward is fortune, and such a Quixotic idea of honesty have some middlemen of literature. But, of course, you *may* light on a publisher who will not give you *more* than you covenanted for, and then you can go about denouncing the whole profession as a congregation of robbers and clerks of St. Nicholas.

## Page 14

The ways of failure are infinite, and of course are not nearly exhausted. One good plan is never to be yourself when you write, to put in nothing of your own temperament, manner, character—or to have none, which does as well. Another favourite method is to offer the wrong kind of article, to send to the *Cornhill* an essay on the evolution of the Hittite syllabary, (for only one author could make *that* popular;) or a sketch of cock fighting among the ancients to the *Monthly Record*; or an essay on *Ayahs in India* to an American magazine; or a biography of Washington or Lincoln to any English magazine whatever. We have them every month in some American periodicals, and our poor insular serials can get on without them: “have no use for them.”

It is a minor, though valuable scheme, to send poems on Christmas to magazines about the beginning of December, because, in fact, the editors have laid in their stock of that kind of thing earlier. Always insist on *seeing* an editor, instead of writing to him. There is nothing he hates so much, unless you are very young and beautiful indeed, when, perhaps, if you wish to fail you had better *not* pay him a visit at the office. Even if you do, even if you were as fair as the Golden Helen, he is not likely to put in your compositions if, as is probable, they fall *much* below the level of his magazine.

A good way of making yourself a dead failure is to go about accusing successful people of plagiarising from books or articles of yours which did not succeed, and, perhaps, were never published at all. By encouraging this kind of vanity and spite you may entirely destroy any small powers you once happened to possess, you will, besides, become a person with a grievance, and, in the long run, will be shunned even by your fellow failures. Again, you may plagiarise yourself, if you can, it is not easy, but it is a safe way to fail if you can manage it. No successful person, perhaps, was ever, in the strict sense, a plagiarist, though charges of plagiary are always brought against everybody, from Virgil to Milton, from Scott to Moliere, who attains success. When you are accused of being a plagiarist, and shewn up in double columns, you may be pretty sure that all this counsel has been wasted on you, and that you have failed to fail, after all. Otherwise nobody would envy and malign you, and garble your book, and print quotations from it which you did not write, all in the sacred cause of morality.

Advice on how to secure the reverse of success should not be given to young authors alone. Their kinsfolk and friends, also, can do much for their aid. A lady who feels a taste for writing is very seldom allowed to have a quiet room, a quiet study. If she retreats to her chill and fireless bed chamber, even there she may be cheived by her brothers, sisters, and mother. It is noticed that cousins, and aunts, especially aunts, are of high service in this regard. They never give an intelligent woman an hour to herself.



## Page 15

“Is Miss Mary in?”

“Yes, ma’am, but she is very busy.”

“Oh, she won’t mind me, I don’t mean to stay long.”

Then in rushes the aunt.

“Over your books again: my dear! You really should not overwork yourself. Writing something”; here the aunt clutches the manuscript, and looks at it vaguely.

“Well, I dare say it’s very clever, but I don’t care for this kind of thing myself. Where’s your mother? Is Jane better? Now, do tell me, do you get much for writing all that? Do you send it to the printers, or where? How interesting, and that reminds me, you that are a novelist, have you heard how shamefully Miss Baxter was treated by Captain Smith? No, well you might make something out of it.”

Here follows the anecdote, at prodigious length, and perfectly incoherent.

“Now, write *that*, and I shall always say I was partly the author. You really should give me a commission, you know. Well, good bye, tell your mother I called. Why, there she is, I declare. Oh, Susan, just come and hear the delightful plot for a novel that I have been giving Mary.”

And then she begins again, only further back, this time.

It is thus that the aunts of England may and do assist their nieces to fail in literature. Many and many a morning do they waste, many a promising fancy have they blighted, many a temper have they spoiled.

Sisters are rather more sympathetic: the favourite plan of the brother is to say, “Now, Mary, read us your new chapter.”

Mary reads it, and the critic exclaims, “Well, of all the awful Rot! Now, why can’t you do something like *Bootles’s Baby*?”

Fathers never take any interest in the business at all: they do not count. The sympathy of a mother may be reckoned on, but not her judgement, for she is either wildly favourable, or, mistrusting her own tendencies, is more diffident than need be. The most that relations can do for the end before us is to worry, interrupt, deride, and tease the literary member of the family. They seldom fail in these duties, and not even success, as a rule, can persuade them that there is anything in it but “luck.”

Perhaps reviewing is not exactly a form of literature. But it has this merit that people who review badly, not only fail themselves, but help others to fail, by giving a bad idea of



their works. You will, of course, never read the books you review, and you will be exhaustively ignorant of the subjects which they treat. But you can always find fault with the *title* of the story which comes into your hands, a stupid reviewer never fails to do this. You can also copy out as much of the preface as will fill your eighth of a column, and add, that the performance is not equal to the promise. You must never feel nor shew the faintest interest in the work reviewed, that would be fatal. Never praise heartily, that is the sign of an intelligence not mediocre.

## Page 16

Be vague, colourless, and languid, this deters readers from approaching the book. If you have glanced at it, blame it for not being what it never professed to be; if it is a treatise on Greek Prosody, censure the lack of humour; if it is a volume of gay verses, lament the author's indifference to the sorrows of the poor or the wrongs of the Armenians. If it has humour, deplore its lack of thoughtfulness; if it is grave, carp at its lack of gaiety. I have known a reviewer of half a dozen novels denounce half a dozen *kinds* of novels in the course of his two columns; the romance of adventure, the domestic tale, the psychological analysis, the theological story, the detective's story, the story of "Society," he blamed them all in general, and the books before him in particular, also the historical novel. This can easily be done, by dint of practice, after dipping into three or four pages of your author. Many reviewers have special aversions, authors they detest. Whatever they are criticising, novels, poems, plays, they begin by an attack on their pet aversion, who has nothing to do with the matter in hand. They cannot praise A, B, C, and D, without first assailing E. It will generally be found that E is a popular author. But the great virtue of a reviewer, who would be unreadable and make others unread, is a languid ignorant lack of interest in all things, a habit of regarding his work as a tedious task, to be scamped as rapidly and stupidly as possible.

You might think that these qualities would displease the reviewer's editor. Not at all, look at any column of short notices, and you will occasionally find that the critic has anticipated my advice. There is no topic in which the men who write about it are so little interested as contemporary literature. Perhaps this is no matter to marvel at. By the way, a capital plan is not to write your review till the book has been out for two years. This is the favourite dodge of the —, that distinguished journal.

If any one has kindly attended to this discourse, without desiring to be a failure, he has only to turn the advice outside in. He has only to be studious of the very best literature, observant, careful, original, he has only to be himself and not an imitator, to aim at excellence, and not be content with falling a little lower than mediocrity. He needs but bestow the same attention on this art as others give to the other arts and other professions. With these efforts, and with a native and natural gift, which can never be taught, never communicated, and with his mind set not on his reward, but on excellence, on style, on matter, and even on the not wholly unimportant virtue of vivacity, a man will succeed, or will deserve success. First, of course, he will have to "find" himself, as the French say, and if he does *not* find an ass, then, like Saul the son of Kish, he may discover a kingdom. One success he can hardly miss, the happiness of living, not with trash, but



## Page 17

among good books, and “the mighty minds of old.” In an unpublished letter of Mr. Thackeray’s, written before he was famous, and a novelist, he says how much he likes writing on historical subjects, and how he enjoys historical research. *The work is so gentlemanly*, he remarks. Often and often, after the daily dreadful lines, the bread and butter winning lines on some contemporary folly or frivolity, does a man take up some piece of work hopelessly unremunerative, foredoomed to failure as far as money or fame go, some dealing with the classics of the world, Homer or Aristotle, Lucian or Moliere. It is like a bath after a day’s toil, it is tonic and clean; and such studies, if not necessary to success, are, at least, conducive to mental health and self-respect in literature.

To the enormous majority of persons who risk themselves in literature, not even the smallest measure of success can fall. They had better take to some other profession as quickly as may be, they are only making a sure thing of disappointment, only crowding the narrow gates of fortune and fame. Yet there are others to whom success, though easily within their reach, does not seem a thing to be grasped at. Of two such, the pathetic story may be read, in the Memoir of *A Scotch Probationer*, Mr. Thomas Davidson, who died young, an unplaced Minister of the United Presbyterian Church, in 1869. He died young, unaccepted by the world, unheard of, uncomplaining, soon after writing his latest song on the first grey hairs of the lady whom he loved. And she, Miss Alison Dunlop, died also, a year ago, leaving a little work newly published, *Anent Old Edinburgh*, in which is briefly told the story of her life. There can hardly be a true tale more brave and honourable, for those two were eminently qualified to shine, with a clear and modest radiance, in letters. Both had a touch of poetry, Mr. Davidson left a few genuine poems, both had humour, knowledge, patience, industry, and literary conscientiousness. No success came to them, they did not even seek it, though it was easily within the reach of their powers. Yet none can call them failures, leaving, as they did, the fragrance of honourable and uncomplaining lives, and such brief records of these as to delight, and console and encourage us all. They bequeath to us the spectacle of a real triumph far beyond the petty gains of money or of applause, the spectacle of lives made happy by literature, unvexed by notoriety, unfretted by envy. What we call success could never have yielded them so much, for the ways of authorship are dusty and stony, and the stones are only too handy for throwing at the few that, deservedly or undeservedly, make a name, and therewith about one-tenth of the wealth which is ungrudged to physicians, or barristers, or stock-brokers, or dentists, or electricians. If literature and occupation with letters were not its own reward, truly they who seem to succeed might

## Page 18

envy those who fail. It is not wealth that they win, as fortunate men in other professions count wealth; it is not rank nor fashion that come to their call nor come to call on them. Their success is to be let dwell with their own fancies, or with the imaginations of others far greater than themselves; their success is this living in fantasy, a little remote from the hubbub and the contests of the world. At the best they will be vexed by curious eyes and idle tongues, at the best they will die not rich in this world's goods, yet not unconsolated by the friendships which they win among men and women whose faces they will never see. They may well be content, and thrice content, with their lot, yet it is not a lot which should provoke envy, nor be coveted by ambition.

It is not an easy goal to attain, as the crowd of aspirants dream, nor is the reward luxurious when it is attained. A garland, usually fading and not immortal, has to be run for, not without dust and heat.

### FOOTNOTES

{1} As the writer has ceased to sift, editorially, the contributions of the age, he does hope that authors will not instantly send him their MSS. But if they do, after this warning, they will take the most direct and certain road to the waste paper basket. No MSS. will be returned, even when accompanied by postage stamps.

{2} I have made a rich selection of examples from the works of living English and American authors. From the inextensive volumes of an eminent and fastidious critic I have culled a dear phrase about an oasis of style in "a desert of literary limpness." But it were hardly courteous, and might be dangerous, to publish these exotic blossoms of art.

{3} *Appreciations*, p. 18.

{4} It was the custom of Longinus, of the author of *The Bathos*, and other old critics, to take their examples of how *not* to do it from the works of famous writers, such as Sir Richard Blackmore and Herodotus. It seems altogether safer and more courteous for an author to supply his own Awful Examples. The Musical Rights in the following Poems are reserved.

{5} Or, if you prefer the other rhyme, read: *And the wilderness of men.*

{6} It is a teachable public: since this lecture was delivered the author has received many MSS. from people who said they had heard the discourse, "and enjoyed it so much."