

Hilary, dejectedly. "When people are talking and laughing all round, and I am left to keep myself company in a corner, it isn't at all amusing, and I feel lonely. I suppose there are a great many celebrated people here, but I don't know one from the other, so I am no wiser."

"Never mind, I know them all. We will sit here quietly, and when anyone interesting comes along, I will let you know. Your father has been so kind to me, and has encouraged me, until I feel as strong as a giant, and greedy for work. He has asked me to come down to the Lakes to visit you some time in spring, so I may see you again before long. Now then! one of those ladies over there on the sofa is the Duchess of M——. Guess which of the three she is!"

"Oh, I know; the pretty one of course, with the blue dress, and the bonnet with the cream lace."

"Wrong! Guess again."

"The dark one with the beaded cape!"

"Wrong again! It is the grey-haired lady in the corner."

Hilary gasped, and stared aghast at the stout, shabby lady, who looked everything that was motherly and pleasant, but as different as possible from her ideas of what a duchess ought to be. Then Mr. Rayner went on to point out a poet, a painter of celebrated pictures, and half-a-dozen men and women whose names the girl had known from her youth, but who all seemed terribly disappointing in reality. She expressed her opinions in a candid manner, which seemed vastly to amuse

her hearer, and they were so merry together that Hilary saw many envious glances directed towards their corner, and realised that other people were envying her in their turn. Madge Newcome came up to say good-bye, before leaving, and elevated her eyebrows in meaning manner towards Mr. Rayner.

"You seem to be having a pleasant time. I think Mr. Rayner has such an interesting face, but people say he is so stiff and reserved that it is impossible to know him."

"He is not reserved to me!" said Hilary, consequentially. She had not forgiven Madge Newcome for her desertion an hour earlier, and shook hands with an air of dignified reserve.

(To be continued.)

PUTTING A STOP TO IT.

By FREDERICK LANGBRIDGE, Author of "Sent Back by the Angels."



REMEMBER very well how it used to be said to a young writer: "Oh, never mind about the stops, the printers will put them in."

It would have been almost as sound advice to say to the young compounder of medicines, "Oh, never mind about the preparations, the errand-boy will fill them in."

Stops are the hairpins of literature. They do not make a mode, but they fix it. The fashionable head of a beauty comes to naught when the little clips give way. And it is the same with the three heads of an argument.

The relation of punctuation to style would be a delightful subject for an essay. I wonder that the matter escaped Dr. Holmes. He could have handled it exquisitely. Only the autocrat would have had to learn a little before he lectured. Habitually he favoured, or sanctioned, that monster of double-dealing, the comma-and-dash.

With very few exceptions great stylists have been great stoppists. Bacon, Addison, Goldsmith, Landor, Thackeray, Stevenson—to name a few native masters—were all discerning and punctilious punctuators. The stops over the pages of the average novel might have been tossed by a mad bull.

Dickens—who fought his way from the style of a bank-holiday to the style of a reception—remained to the last, in the matter of punctuation, the veriest empiric. Scrupulous, almost fussy he certainly was, in this as in graver matters of style. But he had no better guides than personal fad and unscientific theory; blind men both, whom he walked into many a ditch. Often when a passage of Dickens has a slovenly look, the punctuation and not the construction is really at fault. Sometimes one breaks one's shins over a period

as ill-placed as a tray on the stairs. Again, when a comma is urgently needed, it is as hard to find as an honest man or a policeman.

That lack of precision in Dickens' practice was due to the defects of education. He had a thorough appreciation of the importance of typographical *minutiae*. In the very jots and tittles his page is richly personal. Next to Charles Lamb, he, I think, of all authors got most of mannerism out of the compositor's stick. Often he created a queer effect by some bit of perverse originality of couplet, parenthesis, dash, capital, or paragraph indentation. We all remember how he distinguished between people (with a little p) and the People (with a large P), professing a capital creed in a capital letter.

But while the scent and savour of an individuality linger about the typography of Dickens' page, the smack of literature is often absent from it. His punctuation (don't laugh if I take the matter seriously) is disappointing, unequal, irritating. Scanning it, one draws such a sigh as might have come from the breast of Fagin, when he viewed a youth with the fingers of a pianist, bungling at a pocket. Saddest of all words, as Whittier remarks, are "It might have been."

To the poet, of course—who depends almost as much upon the dressing of his page as the ladies' mercer upon the dressing of his window—punctuation is well-nigh a matter of life and death.

One of my humiliating memories is of a quatrain of Rossetti's which, after his death, Miss Christina Rossetti permitted me to quote, and wherein she discovered (in the proof only, not in the actual reprint) four departures from the author's exact and delicate disposition of the stops. Rossetti bestowed enormous care upon his punctuation. And one feels it as one reads. The hand of the literary artist is on the whole page.

And one of my proud memories is of a comma, anxiously debated between Mr. Frederick Locker and myself, whereof the London lyricist finally wrote to me, "I leave it in your hands." If that comma had been the secret heir to a kingdom, I scarcely could have felt more honoured or more burdened by the trust.

Personally (though I make no pretension to be more than a conscientious journeyman in punctuation) I am capable of reading an essay for the sake of its stops.

There are books that I long to taste, and never can, for sheer joy of their handling. There are rivulets of text that will never refresh my spirit because I cannot forego the rich pasturage of their meadows of margin. Some beautiful women affect one in the same way. One never finds out what is in them, being rooted fast to gaze at a distance.

The last page of some story contains nothing but three or four asterisks. Not a word of text, not even a *finis*. That page very nearly made me cry.

Certes, there is excellent virtue in fine and sensitive punctuation. In the hands of a master of all its subtleties—one who can fitly handle the wise and weighty colon, with its noble balance and judgment, seldom making appearance and never save for a great and worthy cause; the semi-colon full of tact and *savoir faire* as it moves between the great stops and the small, and oils the creaking wheels of society; the kindly and familiar parenthesis, with its little airs of quaintness as of one not quite of this jostling and train-catching generation, taking one by the button with a leisurely thumb and finger, or whispering confidentially behind its hand; the dotted line, infinite in suggestion, now reserved, and now mysterious, and now nodding innuendo. In the hands of a master of punctuation, the printed page shall take to itself the inflections of an eloquent voice, the play of mobile features. Think of Charles Lamb! Why, you can hear his delightful stutter as he talks. Not that he had not serious faults of punctuation; but, somehow, one loves him for them. It was the same with all his faults. One cannot help wishing he had had a few more.

No one, I think, ever equalled Lamb in that power of making a sentence die away with an infinite interrogation, an eternal suggestion. His dashes helped him there; but dashes were his weakness as well as his strength. His italics were quite inexcusable. That is, of course, in any one else. Beware of italics! They are a pasture of halfpenny novelists, a joy of wild asses.

I always take these disfigurements of the comely page as an almost conscious admission to write with grace or with precision. Italics are a brutal attempt to effect by mere beef and brawn that which should be achieved by delicacy of touch. Every word underlined is a rough order to the reader that he shall accept the wrong expression for the right.