

- How we write letters to friends and other people today has radically changed; and letters may soon be outmoded.

## "I TAKE UP MY PEN"

"I take up my pen to write you these few lines hoping that they find you in the pink as they leave me at present. These hallowed words cannot be found in any *Model Letter-Writer*, among the instructions on how to accept a luncheon invitation from a Lady of Title, but they are to be seen on a million yellowing pages, on letters tied up in faded ribbon and coming from Flanders, Gallipoli, Alamein, Burma, bringing proof of affection, of love, of, even, just being alive.

The books of model letters flinch at nothing — complaints to landlords about the drains, appeals to the Pope, proposals of marriage, commiserations on assorted bereavements, from husbands to second cousins once removed: and now, indeed, finally removed. They are particularly strong on lovers' tiffs, on taxing a fiancée with flirtations behaviour else-

where, or upbraiding her for being aloof.

But nowadays letter-writing is on the way out. Oral communication has become too easy and time, it seems, far too precious. It is not the day for those determined scribblers, Lord Byron and Lord Chesterfield. I doubt if it was ever the day for Lord Chesterfield, for a man who could write such acres of chilling advice to his son and who could find it in him to state that there is nothing so ill-bred as audible laughter. Poor little Chesterfield was on the receiving end of these daunting missives at an age when letters should have been a delight.

At school I inflicted on my parents letters of excruciating boredom. We had a system of awards and punishments called Stars and Stripes. Stars were good; stripes were bad. They were totted up every week and the

results put up, for all to see, on a notice-board.

But I doubt if the middle-aged, or over, are going to miss letters very much. It is bitter to discover as one ages that nine out of ten letters are unwelcome. They require answering, they contain bills requiring payment, they ask advice, they tell a tale of woe, they make nuisances of themselves. Least of all will I miss what one may call the Literary Letter, the letter containing the phrase beautiful, the language flowery, the letter seen in the mind's eye of the writer firmly on the printed page.

The decline in regular letter-writing has brought an increasingly popular replacement — the Christmas circu-

lar letter, a yearly round-up of family news of which fifty or so more or less legible copies are made and sent round. This, like a summons to a cocktail party, 'does' everybody at one fell swoop. But, unlike cocktail parties, you are expected to remember what happened last time.

One day, even these will vanish, unmourned by me. It will be all jabber-jabber-jabber on our built-in telephones with the person one's speaking to appallingly available on a telly-screen, all glaring teeth and smiles and jaw-jaw-jaw. Or will computers, suitably programmed, take over our letter-writing? — *By Arthur Marshall, The Listener, November 1966.*