INTRODUCTION

§ 1. HOW TO WRITE FRENCH CORRECTLY

Two pieces of advice may be fitly offered at the beginning of this ‘Junior Manual.’ One belongs to the moral sphere and concerns the reader’s attitude to the study of French. The other is of a practical character, showing the way in which he can best use this book.

It is impossible to read large numbers of French papers in the School Certificate Examinations without feeling that many of the candidates have not taken their French studies very seriously. The nature, even more than the number, of the mistakes they make in French Composition suggests that they look upon gross errors as trifling accidents which may befall anyone and are unavoidable by any known method. It is certainly difficult to translate even very simple English into correct French. But it is not impossible. No great change is required in the Syntax or in the Order of Words. Observe the rules of French Grammar, and most of the difficulties disappear. To write a piece of French prose free from at least elementary grammatical errors is a task well within the powers of British boys and girls and one which many of them successfully perform. But it demands time and concentrated effort, and it presupposes a frame of mind in which an error of gender or tense appears in its true light. In Mathematics an elementary mistake ruins the whole calculation, yet it is no more blameworthy than a wrong gender or a wrong tense. To know a rule, and not apply it, is just as silly in a French Examination as

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it would be in a game. The most helpful question which a prospective candidate can ask himself is not, ‘Shall I pass?’ but, ‘Shall I deserve to pass?’ If, as may be hoped, future generations of British boys and girls come to write French more correctly than their predecessors, it will not be by a change of method, but by a change of heart.

As regards the way in which this book should be used, we suggest that the Introduction be first read without the sections in small type, then read in full and gradually mastered. The better it is known, the less difficulty will be found with the Passages for Translation. The examples should be committed to memory. In themselves they best teach the rules which they illustrate, many of them illustrate other rules at the same time, and most are stock phrases, sure to be useful in writing French. It is easier and more practical to learn concrete instances than abstract rules, and a repertory of ready-made expressions is the first requisite in all language-study. The Model Lessons can be taken as the reader proceeds through the book. In writing the Passages for Translation, there will be further opportunity of revising the Introduction until the facts stated therein become familiar. When that stage has been reached, the reader will have gone a long way in the art of writing correct French.

§ 2. ON ACQUIRING THE NECESSARY STOCK OF WORDS

The real difficulty in French Composition is not so much to find suitable French words as to use French words correctly in the sentence. When a candidate coming out of the Examination Room is asked by a
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friend how he fared, he will often say, ‘I have done very badly. I could not for the life of me think of the French for so-and-so.’ He may in fact have done very badly, but not for that reason. By not knowing a word here and there, he will only have forfeited a mark here and there, and the total loss cannot have been very heavy. Nor will he have sunk very low in the esteem of the Examiners, who realize that a word quite common in French may not happen to have occurred in the particular French books which the candidate has read. Words really uncommon are known to none of his competitors and cannot therefore affect his place in the order of merit.

Errors in grammar and syntax are much more deadly. They will not be confined to any part of the passage for translation, but will occur throughout and make up a formidable total to be deducted from the available marks. They will excite little commiseration. They show that the candidate has not a proper grip of the elements and they warrant the darkest suspicions as to the soundness of his attainments in French. Insufficient vocabulary is thus a lesser evil than slovenly grammar and faulty syntax.

Yet words are the material with which Composition builds. Without them, it is impossible to construct a sentence and display one’s knowledge of grammar and syntax. The first step towards French composition must therefore be to acquire the necessary stock of words and phrases. These can only be learned gradually, as the student extends his reading in French and as he proceeds through this book. Meantime, and indeed at all times, he must do the best he can with the words he does know. It is extremely dangerous to coin words; ‘ascendre,’ ‘exemplifier,’ ‘exertions,’

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‘vivide,’ and the like do not, unhappily, exist in French, and the Examination Room is not a safe place from which to advocate their adoption by the French Academy.

There are two methods of learning words, and both must be applied. The first, and the better, is by the context, in the course of general reading. The context will often show not only what a word means, but also what manner of word it is, how it is used, what associations it carries with it. When the meaning has been verified in the Dictionary, a word so learned will be of the greatest value for general purposes. It will be of the greatest value also for composition purposes, but only on condition that it is learned complete, i.e. together with its gender, spelling and accents, if any. To know a word without its gender and spelling is to run the risk of making a grammatical error. Reading of a good prose Anthology is the best means of increasing one’s vocabulary, because the frequent change of author and the variety of subject-matter provide the richest material. But the word-lore acquired in reading is apt to be vague. To be of real service in composition, it must be verified in the Dictionary and a watchful eye kept on gender and spelling. Composition itself is a valuable aid. If after writing an exercise one commits to memory all the words and phrases in the ‘fair copy,’ one very quickly builds up a large vocabulary useful not only in writing French, but in reading and speaking it.

The second method supplements the first. It is to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, and ‘learn off’ lists of words likely to be required in writing French, together with their English meaning, their spelling and gender. This method may be followed in any of the
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well-known ‘Vocabularies for Repetition’ and ‘Phrase-Books.’ It is possible to use these unintelligently and get little benefit from the exercise. But it is also possible to apply one’s mind to the task, reflect upon what one learns and associate it with what one already knows, and thus acquire a useful nucleus of words known thoroughly and completely and ready for instant use. It is an effort of memory, but it is not to be despised for that reason. Memory plays as great a part as judgment in the initial stages of all language-study.

§ 3. AIDS TO MEMORY

In applying both methods, we must not neglect certain aids to memory which save time and trouble. When we learn a foreign language we are dealing with facts in very large numbers. It is clearly desirable that these facts should not be kept separate, but linked together. Words fall naturally into groups and it is best to learn them in these groups.

The first is more than a group, it is a family, i.e. those words which are derived from a common source. You know a friend better when you make acquaintance with the other members of his family. His father and mother, his brothers and sisters, throw some light on his character and general outlook. In character, as well as in features, there may be a family likeness. So it is with words. It may not be absolutely necessary, but it is always useful, to know where a word comes from. It is not essential to know that crêer = ‘to create’ comes from the Latin verb creare, but it is quite worth while, when we learn crêer, to make the acquaintance of the other members of the family, viz. le créateur, ‘the creator,’ la créature, ‘the creature,’ la création,
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‘creation.’ When we learn *une rose* we naturally associate it with its Latin ancestor *rosa* for gender, or its English relative ‘rose’ for meaning, and it is convenient to learn at the same time its derivatives, such as *le rosier*, ‘the rose-bush,’ *la roseraie*, ‘the rose-garden,’ the diminutive *rosette*, and the adjective *rose*, ‘pink.’ Having made the acquaintance of that family, we may find it well to bear in mind that it has no connection with the family next door, despite the similarity of name, *la rosée*, ‘the dew’ (Latin *ros*), *arroser*, ‘to water,’ *un arrosoir*, ‘a watering-can.’

Another basis of grouping is meaning, not derivation. When we learn that ‘a shop’ is *une boutique*, it is convenient to learn that there is another word for ‘shop,’ *un magasin*. They do not have quite the same meaning; no two words ever have. *Une boutique* is a small (retail) shop, and we had best learn it with a suitable adjective attached to remind us both of its meaning and its gender: *une petite boutique*. *Un magasin* is a large (wholesale) shop or store, e.g. ‘les Grands Magasins du Louvre.’ To associate such words is the best way both of remembering them and of realizing the difference in their usage.

Words also may be learned with their opposites. They are often of similar formation and the chances are that both will be required in the same passage. In a passage describing, shall we say, a sloping meadow the author, having told us what was to be seen ‘at the top,’ *en haut*, will probably tell us also what was to be seen ‘at the foot,’ *en bas*. If he has been speaking about ‘up the river,’ *en amont*, he may, before he has finished, say something about ‘down the river,’ *en aval*. And since the memory tends to link together as many ideas as possible, it will be all the easier to remember
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these expressions when we reflect that *amont* comes from Latin *ad montem* and means ‘in the direction of the *mountain,*’ while *aval,* coming from Latin *ad vallem,* means ‘in the direction of the *valley.*’

In learning words with their opposites, derivation is thus often a useful aid. This is especially so with regard to prefixes. *Un rang* is ‘rank’ or ‘order’; *arranger* is ‘to put things in some order,’ *déranger* is the opposite, ‘to disarrange,’ ‘to disturb’; *un bouton* is ‘a button,’ *boutonner* is ‘to button,’ *déboutonner,* ‘to unbutton’; *une barque* is ‘a boat,’ *embarquer,* ‘to put aboard,’ *débarquer,* ‘to put ashore.’ We must employ any means we can devise to fix new words in our memory.

§ 4. NAMES OF COUNTRIES AND TOWNS AND THEIR INHABITANTS

There is one particular class of words which must be learned by a special means, the names of countries and their inhabitants. They are very important. They are sure to be wanted frequently in examinations, particularly for historical prose, and it looks bad not to know at least the more common ones. Yet candidates are remarkably ignorant of all that concerns names of countries and towns. They know of course, though they do not always remember, that a definite article is required before the name of a country, e.g. England = *l’Angleterre* (except in apostrophe: ‘Douce France! France, mère des arts!’), and are woefully apt to extend this usage to names of towns and say ‘la Rome,’ ‘le Paris,’ etc., which is ridiculous. (The article is required only when the name is qualified: ancient Rome, *la Rome antique; le Paris de Louis XV.*) But they seldom
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know the French names. Since geography, like charity, begins at home, it is not too much to expect everyone to know, besides l’Angleterre (f.) and anglais: la Grande-Bretagne, and britannique [with one t and two n’s]; l’Écosse (f.), écossais; l’Irlande (f.), irlandais [both without an e]; le pays de Galles [le pays de is necessary, except of course in the title, le Prince de Galles] and gallois [which must not be confused with gaulois = ‘Gaulish’]. The names of at least the chief European countries and their inhabitants should also be learned, and learned exactly, i.e. with the proper gender and spelling. L’Allemagne = ‘Germany’ is to be distinguish from l’Allemande = ‘the German lady’ as carefully as la Belgique = ‘Belgium’ from la Belge = ‘the Belgian lady.’ The French names of a few important towns are also useful acquisitions; such are: Antwerp, Anvers; Brussels, Bruxelles; The Hague, La Haye; Edinburgh, Édimbourg; Warsaw, Varsovie.

The final s, so common in French, must not be forgotten: Londres = London, Versailles, Douvres = Dover, and Gènes = Genoa. On the other hand, an s must not be tacked on to Lyon and Marseille, which have none.

The names of the inhabitants of a country or a town generally end either in -ois or in -ais. Each must be learned separately. Thus français, portugais, marseillais, lyonnais; but gallois, suédois, lillois, bruxellois.

N.B. 1. The adjective is spelled with a small letter, the noun with a capital: une armée française, but un Français.

2. With feminine names of countries, both ‘in’ and ‘to’ are regularly expressed by en: Il est établi en France depuis dix ans; il est allé en Amérique. When the name is qualified, dans is substituted for en: Il y a beaucoup
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de mines dans la France du Nord; il est allé dans l’Amérique du Sud. The reason for this is that en is generally vague and dans precise. When the name is masculine, au (aux) is used, not en: Il a un frère aux États-Unis, un autre au Japon; il va souvent au Pérou; similarly: Il y a des mines de charbon au pays de Galles. Exceptionally, ‘in India’ is aux Indes, although Inde is a feminine noun.

3. With names of even large towns ‘in’ is à: à Londres, à Paris.

§ 5. Spelling

For composition purposes it is useless to learn a word without at the same time learning the exact spelling. Those which we find most frequently misspelled are as follows, the letter or letters requiring special attention being shown in italics:

- accueil
- écueil
- négligence
- adresser
- ennemi
- neige
- agrandir
- exagérer
- prétention
- agréable
- exemple
- public, fem.
- bataille
- fatigant
- publiqne
- canon
- grec, fem.
- recueil
- caractère
- grecque
- réflexion
- conscientieux
- langage
- responsable
- correspondance
- mariage
- ressembler
- correspondant
- marier
- vieillard

[N.B. la vieille = ‘the old woman’ is to be distinguished from la veille = ‘the eve.’]

How are we to remember the above spellings? Not altogether by reasoning. That would help us, as regards the u which is inserted in accueil, écueil, recueil, to show that the e is hard. The pronunciation will
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keep us right with *neige, veille, vieillard, vieille*. Reasoning would help us also in the case of *grecque*, feminine of *grec* = Greek; if there were no *c*, the *e* would require an accent as in *un chèque*. To carry such reasoning further, however, would be dangerous. Thus in *fatiguer* the stem is *fatigu-* and all parts of the verb take the *u*, but *fatigant* does not. The only thing to be done is to have a good look at the spellings above and fix one’s attention on the dubious letter. Spellings are best learned by the eye. There are, however, some facts to which it is useful to direct attention now:

1. Such general rules as that final *n* is doubled in composition, e.g. the *n* in *million* becomes *nn* in *millionnaire*: so also *canonnier, prisonnier, raisonnable*, etc.

2. The spelling of such common forms as: *quelque chose*, always written in two words, though *quelquefois* is written in one; *plus tôt* = ‘sooner,’ but *plutôt* = ‘rather’; *leurs* and *plusieurs*, feminine plurals, but taking no *e*: leurs femmes, plusieurs choses.

3. The practice of elision: The *i* of *si* is elided only before *il* (ils), the *e* of *presque* and *quelque* only in *presqu’île* (f.) = a ‘peninsula’ and *quelqu’un; e* must not be elided before an *h* aspirate. Note particularly *le onze mars, le haut, le huitième, le héros* [but *l’héroïne*].

4. The verbal endings, *-ais, -ait, -aient*.

Confusion of these forms, which are all pronounced alike, is often more a slip than an error, and is not uncommon in France. But it is very dangerous in this country, because what may really be a mistake in spelling looks like a grave error in grammar—as grave as the use of ‘je porta’ for *je portai*, which is a potent factor in the reduction of marks, whether ignorance or inadvertence be the cause.