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**ANDREW**

HOW TO FAIL  
IN LITERATURE:  
A LECTURE

Andrew Lang

**How to Fail in Literature: A Lecture**

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How to Fail in Literature: A Lecture / A. Lang — «Public Domain»,

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# Andrew Lang

## How to Fail in Literature: A Lecture

### PREFACE

*This Lecture was delivered at the South Kensington Museum, in aid of the College for Working Men and Women. As the Publishers, perhaps erroneously, believe that some of the few authors who were not present may be glad to study the advice here proffered, the Lecture is now printed. It has been practically re-written, and, like the kiss which the Lady returned to Rodolphe, is revu, corrigé, et considérablement augmenté.*

A. L.

## 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.

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.

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 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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