THAT PUNCTUATION is important all agree; but how few comprehend the extent of its importance! The writer who neglects punctuation, or mis-punctuates, is liable to be misunderstood—this, according to the popular idea, is the sum of the evils arising from heedlessness or ignorance. It does not seem to be known that, even where the sense is perfectly clear, a sentence may be deprived of half its force—its spirit—its point—by improper punctuation. For the want of merely a comma, it often occurs that an axiom appears a paradox, or that a sarcasm is converted into a sermonoid.

There is no treatise on the topic—and there is no topic on which a treatise is more needed. There seems to exist a vulgar notion that the subject is one of pure conventionality, and cannot be brought within the limits of intelligible and consistent rule. And yet, if fairly looked in the face, the whole matter is so plain that its rationale may be read as we run. If not anticipated, I shall, hereafter, make an attempt at a magazine paper on “The Philosophy of Point.”

In the meantime let me say a word or two of the dash. Every writer for the press, who has any sense of the accurate, must have been frequently mortified and vexed at the distortion of his sentences by the printer’s now general substitution of a semicolon, or comma, for the dash of the MS. The total or nearly total disuse of the latter point, has been brought about by the revulsion consequent upon its excessive employment about twenty years ago. The Byronic poets were all dash. John Neal, in his earlier novels, exaggerated its use into the grossest abuse—although his very error arose from the philosophical and self-dependent spirit which has always distinguished him, and which will even yet lead him, if I am not greatly mistaken in the man, to do something for the literature of the country which the country “will not willingly,” and cannot possibly, “let die.”

Without entering now into the why, let me observe that the printer may always ascertain when the dash of the MS. is
properly and when improperly employed, by bearing in mind that this point represents a second thought—an emendation. In using it just above I have exemplified its use. The words “an emendation” are, speaking with reference to grammatical construction, put in apposition with the words “a second thought.” Having written these latter words, I reflected whether it would not be possible to render their meaning more distinct by certain other words. Now, instead of erasing the phrase “a second thought,” which is of some use—which partially conveys the idea intended—which advances me a step toward my full purpose—I suffer it to remain, and merely put a dash between it and the phrase “an emendation.” The dash gives the reader a choice between two, or among three or more expressions, one of which may be more forcible than another, but all of which help out the idea. It stands, in general, for these words—“or, to make my meaning more distinct.” This force it has—and this force no other point can have; since all other points have well-understood uses quite different from this. Therefore, the dash cannot be dispensed with.

It has its phases—its variation of the force described; but the one principle—that of second thought or emendation—will be found at the bottom of all.
These two volumes are by Morris Mattson, Esq. of Philadelphia, and we presume that Mr. Mattson is a very young man. Be this as it may, when we called Norman Leslie the silliest book in the world we had certainly never seen Paul Ulric. One sentence in the latter, however, is worthy of our serious attention. "We want a few faithful laborers in the vineyard of literature, to root out the noxious weeds which infest it." See page 116, vol. ii.

In itself, the book before us is too purely imbecile to merit an extended critique—but as a portion of our daily literary food—as an American work published by the Harpers—as one of a class of absurdities with an inundation of which our country is grievously threatened—we shall have no hesitation, and shall spare no pains, in exposing fully before the public eye its four hundred and forty-three pages of utter folly, bombast, and inanity.

"My name," commences Mr. Mattson, "is Paul Ulric. Thus much, gentle reader, you already know of one whose history is about to be recorded for the benefit of the world. I was always an enthusiast, but of this I deem it inexpedient to say much at present. I will merely remark that I possessed by nature a wild and adventurous spirit which has led me on blindly and hurriedly, from object to object, without any definite or specific aim. My life has been one of continual excitement, and in my wild career I have tasted of joy as well as of sorrow. [Oh remarkable Mr. Ulric!] At one moment I have been elevated to the very pinnacle of human happiness, at the next I have sunk to the lowest depths of despair. Still I fancied there was always an equilibrium. This may seem a strange philosophy to some, but is it the less true? The human mind is so constituted as always to seek a level—if it is depressed it will be proportionately elevated, if elevated it will be proportionately depressed. But" says Mr. U., interrupting himself, "I am growing metaphysical!" We had thought he was only growing absurd.

He proceeds to tell us of his father who was born in Lower
saxony—who went, when only a year old, to England—who, being thrown upon the parish, was initiated into the mysteries of boot cleaning—who, at the age of ten, became a vendor of newspapers in the city of London—at twelve sold potatoes in Covent Garden—at fifteen absconded from a soap-boiler in the Strand to whom he had been apprenticed—at eighteen sold old clothes—at twenty became the proprietor of a mock auction in Cheapside—at twenty-five was owner of a house in Regent Street, and had several thousand pounds in the Funds—and before thirty was created a Baronet, with the title of Sir John Augustus Frederick Geoffrey Ulric, Bart., for merely picking up and carrying home his Majesty King George the Fourth, whom Mr. U. assures us upon his word and honor, his father found lying beastly drunk, one fine day, in some gutter, in some particular thoroughfare of London.

Our hero himself was born, we are told, on the borders of the Thames, not far from Greenwich. When a well grown lad he accompanies his father to the continent. In Florence he falls in love with a Countess in her thirty-fifth year, who curls his hair and gives him sugar-plums. The issue of the adventure with the Countess is thus told.

“You have chosen them with much taste,” said the Countess; “a beautiful flower is this!” she continued, selecting one from among the number, “its vermilion is in your cheeks, its blue in your eyes, and for this pretty compliment I deserve a —— you resist eh! My pretty, pretty lad, I will! There! Another, and you may go free. Still perverse? Oh, you stubborn boy! How can you refuse? One—two—three! I shall devour you with kisses!”

* * * * * *

We have printed the passage precisely as we find it in the book—notes of admiration—dashes—Italics—and all. Two rows of stars wind up the matter, and stand for the catastrophe—for we hear no more of the Countess. Now if any person over curious should demand why Morris Mattson, Esq., has mistaken notes of admiration for sense—dashes, kisses, stars and Italics for sentiment—the answer is very simple in-
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Indeed. The author of Vivian Grey made the same mistake before him.

Indeed we have made up our minds to forward Ben D’Israeli a copy of Paul Ulric. He will read it, and if he do not expire upon the spot, it will do him more real service than the crutch. Never was there a more laughable burlesque of any man’s manner. Had Mr. Mattson only intended it as a burlesque we would have called him a clever fellow. But unfortunately this is not the case. No jackdaw was ever more soberly serious in fancying herself a peacock, than our author in thinking himself D’Israeli the second.

“Every day,” says Paul after the kissing scene, “filled me with the wonder of the winding road, where, I could not arrive, and the ‘strange and unknown’ which, I must encounter, could not be explored.”
turb and distort the meaning of every thing with which it comes in contact. But not to speak of such disturbance or distortion, a fine taste will intuitively avoid, even in trifles, all that is unnecessary or superfluous, and bring nothing into use without an object or an end. We do not wish to dwell upon this thing, or to make it of more consequence than necessary. We will merely adduce an example of the punctuation to which we have alluded. Vide page 138, vol. i. “Will no lapse of time wear away this abhorred image from your memory?—Are you madly bent on bringing down misery on your head?—I do not speak of my own suffering.—Will you forever nurse a hopeless attachment for a man whom, it must be apparent to yourself, you can never meet again?—Whom, if the perils of the field, the avenging bullet of some loyal subject, do not bring him merited punishment,—the halter may reward, or, in his most fortunate destiny, disgrace, poverty, and shame pursue:—Are you forever to love that man?”

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The second of Mr. K’s volumes is, from a naturally increasing interest taken in the fortunes of the leading characters, by far the most exciting. But we can confidently recommend them both to the lovers of the forcible, the adventurous, the stirring, and the picturesque. They will not be disappointed. A high tone of morality, healthy and masculine, breathes throughout the book, and a rigid—perhaps a too scrupulously rigid poetical justice is dealt out to the great and little villains of the story—the Tyrrells, the Wat Adairs, the Currys, and the Habershams of the drama. In conclusion, we prophesy that Horse-Shoe Robinson will be eagerly read by all classes of people, and cannot fail to place Mr. Kennedy in a high rank among the writers of this or of any other country.
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