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LORD CHESTERFIELD

Letters to his Son and Others

Lord Chesterfield's Letters to his Son

AND OTHERS

INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

It is one of the strange ironies of capricious fortune that Lord Chesterfield, a man of considerable consequence in his own day, should have attained to permanence of fame only by a body of very intimate personal letters written to his own son, and never intended for the publicity of the printed page. Lord Chesterfield died on 24 March, 1773, at the age of seventy-eight. Early in the following year the bookseller, James Dodsley, displayed for sale in two handsome quarto volumes, at a guinea a volume, "Letters written by the Earl of Chesterfield to his Son, Philip Stanhope, together with several other pieces on various subjects, published by Mrs. Eugenia Stanhope, London, 1774." These letters, carefully preserved by Philip Stanhope, had at his death in 1768 come into the possession of his widow; and now, when Lord Chesterfield, who had shown himself a generous father-in-law, could no longer protest, she sold them to Dodsley for the very considerable sum of £1500. It was a rather ungracious act of Mrs. Eugenia Stanhope; but to her lack of fine sensibility we owe the possession of a very charming book. To Mr. James Dodsley his venture must have been a profitable one; for the book met instant appreciation. It was copiously reviewed in the magazines; the *Monthly Review* ran a serial discussion of it in four monthly instalments from April to July, 1774. Five editions appeared before the end of the year. For contemporaries, in addition to the intrinsic interest which still endures, there was the added zest of catching off his guard in an intimate self-revelation one of the most conspicuous figures of his day. The writer in the *Monthly Review* begins his first instalment thus:

> Few characters, among the nobility of this age, and nation, are better known than that of the late ingenious and witty Earl of Chesterfield; who was alike distinguished in the polite, the political, and the learned circles. He was not, perhaps, what some one has styled a "deep genius," but he certainly had a great portion of good sense, and lively parts; he had a perfect knowledge of mankind; he was a complete gentleman, and a delightful companion.

Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, was born in London on 22 September, 1694. When Queen Anne died in 1714, Stanhope, a young man of twenty, was abroad completing his education by the conventional grand tour; but he hurried home at news of the political crisis, and in 1715, before he had quite attained the legal age of twenty-one, he was elected to Parliament as member for St. Germans, Cornwall, as a staunch Whig. His keen interest in literature won him the friendship of Pope and Arbuthnot, Swift, and Addison. "I used to think myself in company as much above me when I was with Mr. Addison and Mr. Pope, as if I had been with all the princes of Europe." [1] In 1726, on the death of his father, he succeeded to the earldom, and took his seat in the House of Lords, which he playfully called "the hospital for incurables."

Lord Chesterfield's active career as politician fell in the reigns of George I (1714–27) and George II (1727–60), perhaps the least worthy sovereigns who have ever sat on the English throne. In the bitter quarrel between George I and his son, Chesterfield threw in his lot with the Prince, in whose household he was gentleman of the bedchamber; but he made the mistake of cultivating the favour of Mrs. Howard, afterwards Countess of Suffolk, chief mistress of the Prince, and so incurring the hostility of the Princess of Wales, afterwards Queen Caroline, which carried with it the enmity of her ally, the all-powerful Walpole. As a result, despite the favour of George II, Chesterfield never attained to the political success which his abilities deserved. But as an accomplished orator he was a commanding figure in the House of Lords.

For four years, from 1728 to 1732, he was British Ambassador at The Hague. There, in the course of a life of gallantry and polite dissipation, he met Mlle du Bouchet, who became the mother of the son to whom the famous letters are addressed. For her maintenance he provided generously throughout his life, and left her in his will the sum of five hundred pounds "as a small reparation for the injury I did her." In 1733 he married Petronilla, Countess of Walsingham, a natural daughter of George I. The marriage was entirely one of convenience. The lady, who was forty years old—a year older than her husband—brought him a large fortune and received in return the prestige of his name. Each continued to maintain a separate establishment; and Chesterfield, though

[1] Letter of 9 October, 1747.

he always treated his wife with the most courteous consideration, did not in any way allow his marriage to interfere with his accustomed freedom.

In 1737 he led in the House of Lords an unsuccessful attack on Walpole's bill for restricting the liberty of the theatre; and in the winter of 1741–2 he was influential in bringing about Walpole's fall. In 1745 he was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland; and, though serious illness limited his active term of office to eight months, his excellent tact and good judgment made his brief administration memorable in the history of eighteenth-century Ireland. From 1746 to 1748, when he resigned the office, he was Secretary of State in Newcastle's ministry. In 1751 he was responsible for securing the adoption by England of the Gregorian calendar. Of his speech on this occasion he writes to his son a month later in a vein of characteristic cynicism:

> I was to bring in this bill, which was necessarily composed of law jargon and astronomical calculations, to both which I am an utter stranger. However, it was absolutely necessary to make the House of Lords think that I knew something of the matter; and also to make them believe that they knew something of it themselves, which they do not. For my own part, I could just as soon have talked Celtic or Sclavonian to them as astronomy, and they would have understood me full as well; so I resolved to do better than speak to the purpose, and to please instead of informing them. I gave them, therefore, only an historical account of calendars from the Egyptian down to the Gregorian, amusing them now and then with little episodes; but I was particularly attentive to the choice of my words, to the harmony and roundness of my periods, to my elocution, to my action. This succeeded, and ever will succeed; they thought I informed, because I pleased them; and many of them said that I had made the whole very clear to them, when, God knows, I had not even attempted it. [1]

The last twenty-five years of Chesterfield's life were spent in graceful leisure, in his garden, with his friends, among his books. He suffered severely from gout and from an increasing deafness which ultimately made conversation difficult and embarrassing. On one occasion he invited guests to dinner in the following words:

> Lord Chesterfield presents his compliments to Mr. Mallet, and he will be extremely glad to see him and Monsieur de Bussy at dinner next Wednesday; but he desires Mr. Mallet to inform Monsieur de Bussy previously that Lord Chesterfield has been dead

[1] Letter of 18 March, 1751.

these twelve years, and has lost all the advantages of flesh and blood, without acquiring any of the singular privileges of a spirit.[1]

Dr. Maty, who wrote a memoir of Chesterfield for the edition of his Miscellaneous Works, published in 1777, has preserved a famous account of the Earl's last words:

> Upon the morning of his decease, and about half an hour before it happened, Mr. Dayrolles called upon him to make his usual visit. When he had entered the room, the *valet de chambre*, opening the curtains of the bed, announced Mr. Dayrolles to his lordship. The Earl found strength enough, in a faint voice, to say, "Give Dayrolles a chair." Those were the last words he was heard to speak.

It was a gracious ending; the fine courtesy and considerateness which had ruled his life was strong in death. In his will he left two years' full wages to all his servants who had been with him five years and more, "whom I consider as unfortunate friends, my equals by Nature, and my inferiors only by the difference of our fortunes."

In the words of the Monthly Reviewer, Lord Chesterfield was not a "deep genius"; but he was a man of fine abilities, who used the advantages which came to him from his rank and great wealth, within the limits possible to complete worldliness, with excellent result.

Philip Stanhope, to whom the famous letters are addressed, was born in 1732. For his education his father made full provision of private tutors, of residence at the Universities of Lausanne and Leipsic, of an extended grand tour on which letters of introduction opened for him the best society of all the capitals. The letters, the grand aim of which is to supplement the boy's more formal education by instruction in the arts of worldly wisdom and in the graces of a fine gentleman, begin when he is a youngster of five living in London under the care of his mother, and continue until he is three-and-thirty and his father an old gentleman of seventy-one. From rather scanty knowledge, one gathers that as boy and young man Philip was not at all a bad sort. He was good-natured, good-looking, sensible, well informed; but, despite all his father's efforts, he never overcame a natural shyness and awkwardness, a brusqueness of speech, and a gaucherie, which did not conduce to success in the diplomatic service, the career which his father had chosen for him. To quick advancement in this service there was also for Philip the bar of his illegi-

[1] W. H. Craig, *Life of Lord Chesterfield*, p. 336.

timacy. He was twice elected Member of Parliament, but was too shy to qualify as an orator. He was appointed in 1756 resident at Hamburg; in 1763 he was envoy to the Diet at Ratisbon; in 1764 he became Resident Minister at the court of Dresden. This career of only moderate success was prematurely terminated by his death in 1768 at the age of thirty-six. It then came to light that Philip Stanhope had for several years been married to a worthy, but undistinguished wife, who had borne him two sons. His father's repeated counsel had in this, at least, succeeded in teaching him the art of discreet concealment under the guise of apparent frankness. Shocked as Lord Chesterfield must have been at the discovery of this imprudent marriage, he accepted the situation gracefully, and made generous provision for the support of his son's widow and the education of her little boys.

Worldling though he was, Chesterfield felt for this boy of his a very deep and tender affection. When Philip was seventeen, his father wrote to him: "Whatever I see or whatever I hear, my first consideration is, whether it can in any way be useful to you." [1] And two years later he writes: "Now that all tumultuous passions and quick sensations have subsided in me, and that I have no tormenting cares nor boisterous pleasures to agitate me, my greatest joy is to consider the fair prospect you have before you, and to hope and believe you will enjoy it." [2] Besides the father's love, there is in the letters also something of the passion of the creative artist, trying to model in a rather intractable medium a perfect work of art—the complete gentleman and courtier. "You have the means, you have the opportunities. Employ them, for God's sake, while you may, and make yourself that all-accomplished man that I wish to have you." [3] There is the same zest of artistry in the letters of worldly advice written between 1749 and 1769 to the young Lord Huntingdon, first published in 1923. These letters are in much the same vein as those to his son, save that in them parental authority gives place to the deference due to a nobleman his equal in all save years and experience. There is more than a little pathos in the affectionate concern of a father to secure for his son the only sort of happiness which his worldly philosophy thought worth while, to counteract as far as might be the harm done to the boy in the matter of his birth, particularly when both his

[1] Letter of 18 November, 1748. [2] Letter of 13 June, 1751.
[3] Letter of 28 February, 1749.

fatherly affection and the artist's zeal for his art were to be so largely frustrate. Nor did his other pupil in worldly wisdom, the Lord Huntingdon, ever attain to any public distinction. But Chesterfield was not to be discouraged. In his last years, after the death of his son, he began again with another Philip Stanhope, his godson and distant cousin who succeeded him in the earldom. To this boy, from his sixth to his fifteenth year, he wrote a series of 236 letters, first published in 1890, containing advice of the same sort. Here again he wrote in vain; for the fifth Earl of Chesterfield was described by Madame d'Arblay in her *Diary* [1] as having "as little good breeding as any man I ever met with."

But in addition to their human interest as the letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son Philip, the collection has a larger significance, as it unconsciously reveals the code of conduct and the habits of thought of a great nobleman and fine gentleman of the court of George II. It has for eighteenth-century England the same significance as that of Castiglione's *Courtier* for Italy of the Renaissance. So completely did the book reflect the temper of the age that it became a manual of "practical morality," a book of etiquette for fashioning the manners of ambitious youth, with its maxims arranged alphabetically for ready reference under such headings as Rules for Conversation, Friendship, Dignity of Manners, Pleasure, Employment of Time. In the "advertisement" to one such compilation which bears a date as late as 1813 the editor declares:

> The abilities of Lord Chesterfield, to inculcate such precepts as should form the mind and fashion the manners of youth, are too universally admired to need encomium. In the Advice of that noble Earl to his son, there are to be found such judicious remarks on men, manners, and things, connected with so intimate a knowledge of the world, that the sentiments, considered as maxims, form a very valuable system of education.

For an age when most men distrusted any sort of "enthusiasm," and agreed with Pope that good sense is the sum of all the sciences and the supreme gift of Heaven—an age to whose ideals our own seems ready in so many respects to return—the advice of Lord Chesterfield left little to desire. Yet even to the generation who first read the letters in published form, the cynical frankness of their worldly wisdom came with something of a shock. The contemporary reviewers

[1] Vol. iv., p. 355.

temper their praise with smug regrets that with so much of good counsel should go so complete a disregard of the virtue of chastity, so low an estimate of the character of women. Dr. Johnson's famous dictum that the *Letters* "teach the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing-master" is, of course, grossly untrue in both its indictments. Chesterfield regarded dancing as "a very trifling, silly thing," but one "to which people of sense are sometimes obliged to conform"; [1] and it is to polite gallantries rather than promiscuous libertinism that he gives his approval. "I should have thought that Lord ——, at his age, and with his parts and address, need not have been reduced to keeping an opera whore, in such a place as Paris, where so many women of fashion generously serve as volunteers." [2]

It is such passages as this that led the gentle poet Cowper to write of Chesterfield in his *Progress of Error*, written a half-dozen years after the publication of the *Letters*:

> Thou polished and high-finished foe to truth,
> Graybeard corrupter of our listening youth,
> To purge and skim away the filth of vice,
> That so refined it might the more entice,
> Then pour it on the morals of thy son;
> To taint *his* heart was worthy of *thine own*!

But this indictment, like the epigram of Johnson, is at best but an exaggeration of the truth. Chesterfield, who had in his make up nothing of the ascetic reformer, is in this phase of morality as in all others merely accepting the world as he finds it. "We must take most things as they are, we cannot make them what we would, nor often what they should be." [3] If strict continence is not to be expected of a young gentleman of fashion, is it after all so reprehensible that the young gentleman's father should be concerned to "purge and skim away the filth" which inheres in the more degrading associations of the undiscriminating libertine? Nor could Chesterfield, with very good grace, have urged on this natural son of his a virtue to which he himself made no pretence.

If, to notice another charge that has frequently been brought against the *Letters*, there is too much insistence on the externalities of life, on cultivating the Graces, on the duty of "shining," rather than the acquisition of solid worth, it must not be forgotten that the advice is addressed not to youth in general, but to a particular youth, Philip Stanhope, whose

[1] Letter of 19 November, 1745. [2] Letter of 6 June, 1751.
[3] Letter of 27 May, 1753.

solid qualities were obscured by a natural gaucherie of manner. And this same awkward lad must be trained for the exacting profession of diplomat and courtier. It is with this career in mind that one should read the letter of 16 October, 1747, which inculcates the fine art of subtle flattery—which must never be "abject and criminal flattery" of vice or crime.

And much of the advice needs no apology whatever:

> Speak the language of the company that you are in; and speak it purely, and unlarded with any other. Never seem wiser, nor more learned, than the people you are with. Wear your learning, like your watch, in a private pocket; and do not pull it out and strike it, merely to show that you have one.[1]

There is not only sound counsel, but much shrewd observation, such as the well-known prediction made in the letter of 25 December, 1753, of impending revolution in France:

> The French nation reasons freely, which they never did before, upon matters of religion and government . . . the officers do so too; in short, all the symptoms which I have ever met with in history, previous to great changes and revolutions in Government, now exist, and daily increase in France.[2]

But if so much of Chesterfield's prophecy is of penetrating insight, the sentence which immediately follows is not so happy:

> I am glad of it; the rest of Europe will be the quieter, and have time to recover.

But it is, after all, not so much for the advice and wise observation that one reads Chesterfield's letters as for their unfailing grace and charm. Whatever the subject of the letter, whether it be addressed to the youngster of seven just beginning to read Roman history, to the boy of sixteen, "a fine gentleman, in a scarlet coat laced with gold, a brocade waistcoat, and all other suitable ornaments,"[3] or to the young man of twenty, for whom the doors of the Paris *salons* are opening hospitably—wherever one opens the book, there is the same quality of graceful style, unaffected yet always polished, the fine flower of eighteenth-century civilization. Lord Chesterfield stands revealed in these letters as the embodiment of all that he would have wished to find in his son—"a complete gentleman, and a delightful companion," a finished practitioner of the fine art of graceful living.

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[1] Letter of 22 February, 1748.
[2] A somewhat similar sentiment is expressed in a letter of Chesterfield's to Lord Huntingdon, written 25 November, 1751.
[3] Letter of 3 April, 1747.

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THE two letters to Lord Huntingdon dated November 18, o.s. 1751, and November 21, 1752, are included in this edition by kind permission of the Medici Society.

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LETTERS TO HIS SON

MY DEAR BOY, July 24, 1739.

I was pleased with your asking me, the last time I saw you, why I had left off writing; for I looked upon it as a sign that you liked and minded my letters. If that be the case, you shall hear from me often enough; and my letters may be of use to you, if you will give attention to them; otherwise it is only giving myself trouble to no purpose; for it signifies nothing to read a thing once, if one does not mind and remember it. It is a sure sign of a little mind to be doing one thing, and at the same time to be either thinking of another, or not thinking at all. One should always think of what one is about; when one is learning, one should not think of play; and when one is at play, one should not think of one's learning. Besides that, if you do not mind your book while you are at it, it will be a double trouble to you, for you must learn it all over again.

One of the most important points in life is decency; which is to do what is proper and where it is proper; for many things are proper at one time, and in one place, that are extremely improper in another; for example, it is very proper and decent that you should play some part of the day; but you must see that it would be very improper and indecent, if you were to fly your kite, or play at nine pins, while you are with Mr. Maittaire. It is very proper and decent to dance well; but then you must dance only at balls, and places of entertainment; for you would be reckoned a fool, if you were to dance at church, or at a funeral. I hope, by these examples, you understand the meaning of the word *Decency*; which in French is *Bienséance*; in Latin *Decorum*; and in Greek Πρέπον. Cicero says of it, "Sic hoc decorum, quod elucet in vitâ, movet approbationem eorum quibuscum vivitur, ordine et constantiâ et moderatione dictorum omnium atque factorum." By which you see how necessary decency is, to gain the approbation of mankind. Again, as I am sure you desire to gain Mr. Maittaire's approbation, without which you will never have mine; I dare say you will mind and give attention to whatever he says to you, and behave yourself seriously and decently, while you are with him; afterwards play, run, and jump, as much as ever you please.