The 50

GREATEST LOVE LETTERS

of All Time

EDITED BY DAVID H. LOWENHERZ



by David H. Lowenherz

A BYRON PREISS BOOK



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For my wife and son, whose love lights the way.

—D.H.L.

A Note to the Reader

The letters reprinted in this collection are the most authentic and definitive versions available. To preserve the intimate and original nature of these letters, we made a conscious decision to reproduce them as they were first written, complete with spelling errors, grammatical imperfections, and, in some cases, antiquated terminology. We feel that these characteristics add to the charm and character of the letters. Besides, in the heat of impassioned expression, who has time for dictionaries?

Introduction

GOING to him! Happy letter! Tell him—
Tell him the page I didn't write;
Tell him I only said the syntax,
And left the verb and the pronoun out.
Tell him just how the fingers hurried,
Then how they waded, slow, slow, slow;
And then you wished you had eyes in your pages,
So you could see what moved them so.

Tell him it wasn't a practised writer,
You guessed, from the way the sentence toiled;
You could hear the bodice tug, behind you,
As if it held but the might of a child;
You almost pitied it, you, it worked so.

from Complete Poems (1924) by Emily Dickinson

Sometimes nothing speaks louder than a silent word written on a piece of paper. With the recent advent of instant messaging and e-mail, the art of epistolary romance has made something of a comeback, albeit in the rather sterile environment of cyberspace—no handmade paper or fine penmanship here, and certainly no possibility of inhaling the fragrance of perfumed stationery!

The act of writing, however, gives us a chance to reflect in private before exposing our heart. The letters in this collection were selected not for their effusive display of affection, but for the authentic and broad range of feelings their authors reveal. Much the way light displays all the colors when broken by a prism, love expresses the spectrum of our emotions, and these letters offer a colorful glimpse into the soul of the writer.

Each letter reflects a theme or variation on the subject of love and, in doing so, provides a comprehensive definition of the word. You will read about passion, longing, despair, loss, anger, sadness, bitterness, sympathy, respect, friendship, gratitude, jealousy, doubt, and happiness. In fact, the entire range of human emotions is found in these missives.

As a dealer in rare letters and manuscripts for more than twenty years, I have been particularly fortunate to offer for sale some of the letters included in this collection, including Chagall, Hemingway, Rodgers, Sand, and Wright.

For obvious reasons, love letters rarely appear on the market—their personal nature makes them prone to destruction or to being locked away in private archives. Understandably, most people (particularly those in the public eye) prefer to keep the record of their intensely personal feelings confidential. Once sufficient time has passed, friends or relatives of the recipient sometimes give away or sell these treasured mementos. But these opportunities are infrequent.

The Hemingway letter included in this collection is just one of nearly thirty extraordinary letters written to Mary Welsh, Hemingway's last wife. They were found in a suitcase in Mary's apartment after her death, part of a larger collection of literary manuscripts and other material, including Hemingway's tax

records and a list of drugs he was using to treat depression at the end of his life. They stand out as some of the most dramatic and revealing letters I've ever read. I had the indescribable pleasure of actually holding the original document in my hands.

After years of acquiring and selling rare documents and hundreds of hours of research, you now hold in your hands a collection of some of the greatest and most unusual love letters publicly available. I have included revealing correspondences between famous couples, among them, Admiral Nelson and Lady Hamilton, Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. I have also included writers as famous as Beethoven or as little known as Marjorie Fossa, a diehard Elvis fan. I wanted this collection to offer a diverse, unusual, and not always romantic view of love—love as it is lived, not only dreamed: passionate, possessed, and faithful, or cold, distant, and deceitful.

Some letters reveal an aspect of affection not limited to an exchange between lovers. For example, the two letters by Elizabeth and Robert Browning are not written to each other, but to Elizabeth's brother, George. They are exceptionally moving documents that underscore the deep love these two outstanding nineteenth-century poets felt toward each other, but chose to communicate to a third party.

One of the most poignant love letters in this collection is associated with a sensational trial of the nineteenth-century, that of Alfred Dreyfus. Unjustly accused, tried, and convicted of espionage, this French captain was framed by his fellow officers and deported for life to Devil's Island. The astonishing details of his case are too complicated to outline here, but the correspondence between Alfred Dreyfus and his wife,

Lucie, is a testament to their undying love and faith in each other throughout their ordeal. Captain Dreyfus was determined, at all costs, to defend his honor, clear his name, and do it all for the love and respect of his wife and two young children. But, with her husband isolated on a small island in the Atlantic, it was up to Lucie to fight to overturn an unjust verdict founded on institutionalized anti-Semitism. Her ultimate success not only underscores her tenacity and courage, but her willingness, in the name of love, to rescue the honor and life of her beloved husband. So while Alfred's letter to Lucie is quite touching, the circumstances surrounding it make the contents even more so.

As our culture speeds incessantly toward faster and more convenient forms of communication, there is still something powerful in patiently scripted words, as they languorously flow onto a sheet of paper. You find yourself asking, How long did it take to choose the right word to convey the right tone and evoke the right feeling that will result, one hopes, in the right response? Was it a slow, laborious affair or a quick scribble? Coffee cup rings, tearstains, cross-outs, or smeared ink all contribute clues to the writer's state of mind.

As you read through the following letters, I hope you will not only become immersed in the feelings of those who wrote them, but will also speculate on what the recipients must have felt when they tore open the envelope and breathlessly, or anxiously, read the contents.

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Tenoler Love

Horatio Welson to Emma Hamilton

"I love you most tenderly and affectionately . . ."

Horatio Nelson (1758–1805). British admiral. Nelson, whose naval career began when he was twelve, advanced to the rank of commodore in 1796. A year later, he helped the British defeat the Spanish, French, and Dutch fleets at Cape St. Vincent and was promoted to rear admiral. That same year, he was shot in the right elbow, suffered through a botched amputation, and returned to active duty a few months later. In 1798, after his victory over the French at Abu Qir Bay (the Battle of the Nile), Nelson renewed his acquaintance with the extremely beautiful and vivacious Lady Emma Hamilton (nee Lyon; 1765–1815) who was the wife of the scholar and diplomat Sir William Hamilton. Emma had helped arrange a hero's welcome for Nelson when he returned to port in Naples, Italy, where her husband was the British envoy. Their liaison

"Thope to have letters from you who Thold bearer than any other person in this World..."



Horatio Viscount Nelson

soon resulted in the birth of a daughter, Horatia, in 1801. On Nelson's instructions, Emma purchased a country bouse, Merton Place, in Surrey, outside London, and it was here that Nelson, as he writes below, was to spend many happy days. Sir William, now best remembered for tolerating their affair, died April 6, 1803, with his wife and her lover at his side. This letter, written on board the Victory from October 11 to the 13, is one of the very last Nelson wrote to his beloved Emma, before his decisive victory over the French, and his death off Trafalgar on October 21, 1805.

Mr. Denis request of Lt. Hargraves introduction shall be attended to but it must be considered that very few opportunities offer of ever getting on board the Commander-in-chief's ship in the Winter Months and, our battle I hope will be over long before the summer days. The wind has blown so fresh these two days that the Enemy if so disposed have not had the power of putting to Sea which I am firmly of opinion they intend. God send it for our selves as well as that of our Country well over. Our friend Sutton is going home for his health. Hoste has Amphion and Sir Wm Bolton Eurydice which I hope the Admiralty will approve. This is the last chance of Sir Billys making a fortune if he is active and persevering he may do it and be easy for life. Oh my Beloved Emma how I envy Sutton going home, his going to Merton and seeing you and Horatia. I do really feel that the 25 days I was at Merton was the very happiest of my life. Would to God they were to be passed over again but that time will I trust soon come and many many more days added to them. I have been as you may believe made very uneasy or rather uncomfortable by the situation of Sir Robt. Calder. He was to have gone home in another ship . . . However