

**CLASSIC FRENCH
LETTERS; SELECTED AND
EDITED WITH NOTES**

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Classic French Letters; Selected and Edited with Notes by Edward Lorraine Walter

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BY

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INTRODUCTION.

A SELECTION of French letters for class-room purposes must necessarily include the four letter-writers represented in this book. An adequate selection of even these alone would increase the size of the volume beyond all reasonable bounds, and I have therefore thought it wise to confine my selections to them, and have only tried by my choice to give an impression as near to completeness as my limits would allow of their characteristic qualities. No one who has not tried it can know the difficulty of determining what to leave out in such a selection as this, and I shall have accomplished as much as I dare to hope for, if those who know and love Mme de Sévigné, who have felt the great intellectual power of Mme de Maintenon, who have been subjugated by the inexhaustible variety of interest and unconquerable gayety of spirit of Voltaire, always dying and never dead, who have pitied the aimless life and hopeless passion of Mme du Deffand, shall find in this volume some of the letters they most love; it is certain that they will miss many others.

The interest attaching to correspondence such as that of the writers represented here is twofold, historical and literary. The actual events revealed by their letters are not usually very important, but the history which deals with events alone should be termed a

chronicle rather than a history, and in no other way, except perhaps from memoirs, can be gathered so satisfactorily as from the unrestrained correspondence of persons who are in the center of things an acquaintance with what is so hard to define and so important to possess, with the spirit of the age. It is the accumulation of small details about the daily life of considerable personages which often makes intelligible their most important actions; the real causes of the war of the Spanish succession, which began several years after Mme de Sévigné's death, can be better understood from her correspondence than from three-fourths of the histories that professedly deal with it.

The literary interest is much more complex. In my opinion, the first and indispensable requirement for this is that the letters reveal to us the writer, not his opinions or his history, but the man himself, in his weakness and his strength, his unreasoned tastes and his unfounded prejudices; they must be letters and not essays. Whatever does not meet this need may have great interest and value, but must rank in another class. I know of course the danger and the difficulty of classification; if any one chooses to pronounce Burke's Letter on the French Revolution or the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller the very ideal of letter-writing, there is nothing to be said. But the ordinary man would shrink with horror and alarm at the receipt of such letters, and the judgment of the ordinary man on such a point must be accepted as conclusive.

But no selection possible in a book of this size can make clear the historical interest in a collection of letters, nor the self-revelation of the writer, and I have

had to content myself with choosing what seemed to me best adapted to show what are the other qualities which give these letters, especially those of Mme de Sévigné and Voltaire, so important a position in French literature. About the only quality which they have in common is facility; whether the letter is long or short, it is evident that it has not been the result of long preparation and conscious effort. Aside from this, the interest is as various as the writers. Keats and Pope or Macaulay and Addison are hardly more unlike than Mme de Sévigné and Mme de Maintenon. In what I shall say about the single writers, I shall try to point out what are the principal sources of their charm.

The classic period of French letter-writing began with Jean Balzac and Voiture in the first half of the seventeenth century. Before this, to be sure, there were letters of importance; Montaigne had shown that his *Essays* were not the only means at his command for painting himself; the correspondence of Henry IV., of Marguerite of Angoulême, of Duplessis-Mornay and others, is enough to show that the art of Cicero was not unknown to the great lords and men of letters of the French Renaissance. But of these letters, some were not published until later, others were comparatively unknown, and all were written before the language had taken its definitive form, that is, definitive so far as the will of the literary legislators could make it so. Balzac and Voiture contributed much to fix the character of French prose, and so far are worth studying, but the letters of Balzac were written for publication, not for the eyes of friends, and the labored familiarity of his style makes all natural and simple enjoyment impossible. Voiture was a

professed *bel esprit*, and this reputation interferes with all naturalness. His vivacity is sometimes too plainly summoned up for the occasion, and our modern taste tires very soon of what seems to us pure affectation.

In the second half of the century were written the letters of Mme de Sévigné and Mme de Maintenon, but they were not published until the next century, except the letters to Bussy, which were printed in his correspondence in 1696. The most important collection of the period is that of Bussy himself, in which he displays in a characteristic way his *esprit*, his insolence, his cynicism and considerable literary skill. The letters of Guy Patin are inferior in general interest to those of Bussy, but are almost or quite equal to them, having a style of great vivacity and revealing a character of undoubted originality. There are a few charming letters of La Fontaine, and nearly all the poets and orators and men of letters have left some letters, some of which are not without their peculiar charm.

Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, marquise de Sévigné, perhaps the greatest letter-writer that the world has to show, passed a very uneventful life. She was born at Paris, in 1626, the only child of her parents, and was left an orphan at a very early age. But she never lacked the tenderest care; her maternal grandparents, and at their death her mother's brother, the *bien bon*, as she affectionately calls him, were guardians and counselors not to be surpassed in tenderness and wisdom. Her education was the best that the time could afford. She counted among her teachers Chapelain and Ménage, who, though made the butt of ridicule afterwards by Boileau and Molière, were cer-

tainly learned men and judicious teachers. At eighteen she was married to the marquis de Sévigné, a gentleman of Brittany, and a distant relative of the famous coadjutor, the cardinal de Retz. She was left a widow in 1651 with two children. The rest of her life was spent in the society of her friends and especially of her children, in Paris, in Brittany at her castle of Rochers, and in Provence, where her daughter, the comtesse de Grignan, exercised a too liberal hospitality. She died at Grignan of smallpox in 1696.

It is hard to imagine anybody reading the correspondence of Mme de Sévigné without falling desperately in love with her; even Horace Walpole, the most selfish and indifferent of English men of letters in the last century, called her Our Lady of Livry, and spoke and thought of her as a saint. If she was too gay, too robust in body and mind to correspond to our ordinary idea of a saint, she was not lacking in anything that could make us love those who are not saints. The most important of her letters are addressed to her daughter, who had married the acting governor of Provence and spent much of her time at a distance from her mother which then seemed immense. For more than twenty years, Mme de Sévigné kept up an active interchange of letters with her daughter, broken only by her infrequent visits to Provence or by her daughter's visits to Paris. Her friends, among whom were reckoned many of the best known characters of the century, la Rochefoucauld, Mme de La Fayette, Villars, de Retz, de Chaulnes, Mme Scarron, afterwards Mme de Maintenon, etc.; her position, which was good enough to ensure early knowledge of any interesting news in court or state, but not so high as to make it dangerous