HORACE WALPOLE'S LETTERS: A SELECTION

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649050581

Horace Walpole's Letters: A Selection by Horace Walpole & Stuart J. Reid

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

HORACE WALPOLE & STUART J. REID

HORACE WALPOLE'S LETTERS: A SELECTION

Trieste

1919.

HORACE WALPOLE'S LETTERS

A SELECTION

With an Introduction by

STUART J. REID

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LIMITED
LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK
AND MELBOURNE. MCMIV

INTRODUCTION.

Is letter writing, in the artistic sense, a lost accomplishment? There are plenty of people who would not linger long over a reply. It is often asserted that Rowland Hill and the penny post killed the old-fashioned style of letter. That is not true, however, for it survived in old-fashioned hands into the mid-Victorian era, when it received its *coup de grâce* by the invention of what our fathers, when in a superior mood, called that "modern abomination," the ubiquitous post-card. Correspondence has since its advent grown pithy, brisk, prosaic. The majority of men have not the time in this cast-iron, express-paced age, with its telegraphs and telephones, and constant business and social demands, for the old elaborate letter of genial gossip and kindly compliment. Sentiment, some would even say, is at a discount, and whatever may be the cause, imagination and fancy, to say nothing of wit and humour, have grown curiously rare under a penny stamp. The world is too much with us now. Our interests are too many, our work too insistent,

our mental indolence perhaps too great, for that expansive style of correspondence which has vanished for the most part with quill pens and sealing wax. In former times people wrote more slowly; to send or receive a letter was itself an event, the cost of postage was a consideration, and a letter in consequence had to justify its existence. It was a human document, which reflected, as in a mirror, the writer's experiences, and often his moods and fancies as well, for a week, a month, or a year. In former times people wrote what were veritable news-letters—the annals of a quiet neighbourhood, perhaps, or the chit-chat and scandal of a great town.

But the printing press now brings great affairs and small to everybody's door, whilst the electric wires annihilate space by carrying, for the nimble sixpence, such messages as brook no delay. They are always, moreover, at the service of indolent people who do not grudge a silver coin when it saves them the trouble of handling a pen. The old-fashioned news-letter is as much out of the running to-day as a stage coach would be if its driver elected to enter into competition with the mechanical celerity of a locomotive. The social conditions which spoil the letter, in the hands of most people at least, are apt to beggar its writer. He is so driven for time—or at least imagines as much—and so elbowed about

by his fellows, that he seldom allows his fancy to run riot between an inkstand and a sheet of paper. Open confession, it is notorious, is good for the soul; that, perhaps, is the reason why so many modern letters begin with apologies for a brevity which does not spell wit. Nevertheless, for all that, I protest that letter-writing is not a lost art. The grace of the fashion thereof is a secret which is still in the keeping of many a man of sense and woman of sensibility. The art survives, if the conditions are changed, though it must be admitted the multitude—rank and education at discretion—have neither part nor lot in the goodly heritage of the pen which makes pictures, interprets moods, and opens the windows of the soul.

Lord Chesterfield, whose claims to speak on such a subject are indisputable, was accustomed to assert—the statement is to be accepted with the proverbial pinch of salt—that the less trouble a man took with a letter, the better it would be. Possibly that might be so if (but that is an impossible demand) we could select the writer. But nothing can exonerate the ordinary man from the necessity of taking pains. Ease, naturalness, lightness of touch, felicity of phrase, the power to pass from one subject to another without constraint, the gift of self-interpretation within due limits, and the imagination and sympathy which are necessary to place

the writer at the point of view of the reader, are qualities which are never common. Still, when all this is admitted, letters which deserve to rank as literature must possess more subtle claims to distinction. Lowell used to say that a letter ought always to be the genuine and natural flower of a person's disposition, and in harmony both with the writer and the season; and he held that when the seal was broken it ought to stand revealed, fresh and fragrant as new-mown hay. Other critics, Julius Hare for example, declare that nothing can rival in ease and grace, so far at least as the ordinary affairs of life are concerned, the well-bred charm which a woman of sense and sensibility contrives, with unconscious art, to impart to her letters. He held that such a woman easily conquers the secret of grace and charm. Men, he thought, grow didactic, or satirical, when they pass beyond the sphere of practical business, but woman, at her best, follows a more excellent way.

Who is the greatest letter-writer that English literature has known? It is a difficult question to answer, for personal predilections and individual tastes count for much in such a direction. Suppose we take four acknowledged masters in letters and ask them to whom they will give their vote and interest. If we find them all selecting the same

man, I for one will not set up the right of private judgment against the decision of such a bench of judges. Lord Byron was not inclined to go into rhapsodies over other people's work, but even so blasé a critic declared that Horace Walpole, in those wonderful pen-and-ink pictures of his times and the tumult and frivolity of them, which were written now from Arlington Street, and now from Strawberry Hill, had bequeathed to the world "incomparable letters." Sir Walter Scott, who was a cautious, level-headed man except in speculations with publishers and in expenditure over Abbotsford, held stoutly that Horace Walpole—though he had the misfortune to be born on the wrong side of the Tweed, and was not assuredly a man after the genial Wizard's own heart—was the "best letter-writer in the English language." Sydney Smith, who lavished his wit with prodigal vivacity on every chance correspondent, and used with airy nonchalance his art of putting things to put them right, wrote to a friend in 1820 these words: "Read, if you have not read, wherever you can find them, all Horace Walpole's Letters—the best wit ever published in that shape." William Makepeace Thackeray, who knew the freaks and foibles of Society not less perfectly than the shining qualities of literary style, shared the same opinion. "Nothing," said he, "can be more cheery than