CHESTERFIELD'S LETTERS TO HIS SON: SELECTIONS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9781760570729

Chesterfield's letters to his son: selections by Philip Dormer Stanhope Chesterfield

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd. Cover @ 2017

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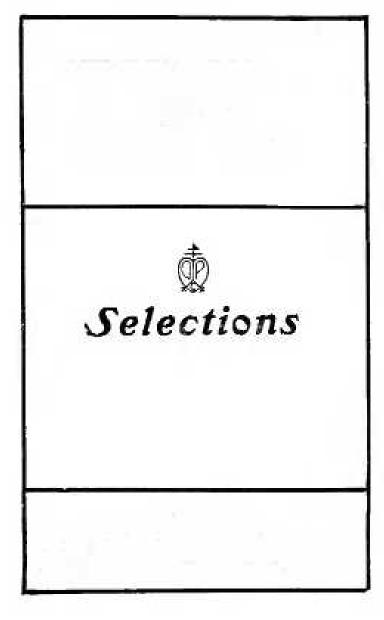
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PHILIP DORMER STANHOPE CHESTERFIELD

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Prefatory Remarks

PHILIP DORMER STANHOPE, Earl of Chesterfield, 1694-1773, has had the fate of being generally misunderstood. Doctor Johnson, then Mr., a poor scholar but in the prime of life, seems to have mistaken a delay in an interview, and to have abused his lordship very soundly ever afterward, although on Chesterfield's side there was not wanting a most gracious movement toward reconciliation where no offence had been given. To this misconception we owe one of the finest and manliest letters ever written; but we cannot overlook the blunder.

☆ Prefatory Remarks

After this, too, came the condemnation of the celebrated letters,—a savage epigram, only partially true, and redeemed by a more favourable criticism. If Mr. Dickens painted —as it has been said he did—Sir John Chester from Lord Chesterfield, he equally mistook the man; and we are sorry to add to this list of those who have followed Johnson's lead, Mrs. Oliphant, in her recent admirable "Historical Sketches."

The simple truth is, that men are to be judged by the places, temper of the times, nay, even the very atmosphere which surrounds them,—and Chesterfield lived in a lax, immoral time, when a mistress was as well recognised in polite society as a concubine was in the days of King David. The Cupidan

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déchainé at The Hague, a beautiful young lady, a governess or dame de compagnie, set her wits against his, and suffered the usual penalty; she fell, and this son to whom these letters are written was the result. But if Chesterfield was not a Christian gentleman, he was in some sense a gentleman ; Mademoiselle, or, as she was called, Madame de Bouchet, was always treated with distinguished politeness, and when he died he left her a legacy as some slight recompense for the injury he had done He married a lady of blood her. royal, though crossed by a bar sinister [daughter of George I, and the Duchess of Kendal], and this lady grew very fond of his son Philip and respectfully greeted the mother; and for this son more than a thousand letters attest the

father's affection; he is placed under the care of an excellent clergyman, he is urged to pay the greatest attention to his mother, to his tutor, to his morals, to his upright, straightforward behaviour, to his honesty. "I don't speak of religion," writes his father, "I am not in a position to do so; the excellent Mr. Harte will do that." We don't defend Chesterfield's faults, but we must speak for his virtues. Not one father in ten thousand, in those days, was so good, so tender, and so wise; his son grew up to marry a lady of whom his father knew nothing till a widow and two children came as suppliants, in that splendid room in Chesterfield House where the old earl sate in lonely greatness. He forgave the dead son's offence, and behaved