

**LORD CHESTERFIELD'S
WORLDLY WISDOM.
SELECTIONS FROM HIS
LETTERS AND CHARACTERS**

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Lord Chesterfield's worldly wisdom. Selections from his letters and characters by George Birkbeck Hill

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GEORGE BIRKBECK HILL

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Selections from his Letters and Characters

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'Studios they appear
Of arts that polish life.'

Milton.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE great secret of education,' says Adam Smith, 'is to direct vanity to proper objects'.¹ If this is the great secret, then no man took more pains about it than the Earl of Chesterfield. He did more than direct it; he nourished and fanned its flame. Before the eyes of his son he dangled the most dazzling prizes -- prizes which could only be won by a long and laborious course, in which no effort should be relaxed and not a single moment wasted. The boy had scarcely escaped from his cradle when his father placed himself by his side, and pointed out to him, up the long flight of steep steps, the Temple of Perfection crowning the heights. She was the goddess to whom all his vows were to be addressed; hers the Temple, lofty but not inaccessible, to which laboriously he must climb. Johnson's strong and indignant saying, by its partial truthfulness, has obscured the real nature of that long series of Letters in which Chesterfield trained his son. They did much more than teach a harlot's morals and a dancing-master's manners. In them we have slowly unfolded the whole art of living as conceived by a man of keen and polished intellect, who had not been idle in his study, and who had played a considerable part on

¹ *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. 1801, ii. 153.

the stage of the world. Horace Walpole describes them as a code of laws in which the folly and worthlessness of the age are reduced to a regular system. On the back of it should be written, he says, *The Whole Duty of Man adapted to the meanest Capacities*¹. Johnson, sweeping though his condemnation had at first been, yet admitted 'that they might be made a very pretty book. Take out the immorality,' he said, 'and it should be put into the hands of every young gentleman,' for it would teach elegance of manners and easiness of behaviour². Neither he nor Horace Walpole seems to have noticed that, much as Chesterfield dwelt on elegance of manners, it formed only one part of his system of training. Had he had a son who was naturally graceful and indolent instead of one who was awkward and laborious, he would have taken industry for his chief text; to Minerva he would have directed the lad to offer his chief sacrifices; the altar of the Graces he would have left in the background.

Much as he trusted to the art of pleasing, he was far too able a man to think that the world, in England at all events, was to be won by mere courtliness. The hateful powers of favouritism were unhappily by no means worn out. He himself, it was said, had been baffled in his ambition through the mistake he had made when he courted not the wife but the mistress of the Prince who was afterwards to be George II. Sir Robert Walpole, with keener insight, had discovered that it would be with Queen Caroline and not with Mrs. Howard that the power was lodged³. In the reign of George III, the disgraceful ministry of the Earl of Bute, and the influence which after his fall that worthless favourite still possessed, when he was 'the something behind the throne

¹ Walpole's *Letters*, vi. 77.

² Boswell's *Johnson*, iii. 53.

³ Walpole's *Letters*, i. cxviii.

greater than the throne,' showed how powerful 'a King's Friend' could still be. Nevertheless, in spite of these examples, it was in Parliament that the main battle was to be fought; in Parliament that the victory was to be won. Against the House of Commons even a favourite struggled in vain. It was 'the only road to figure and fortune in this country,' said Chesterfield. 'No man can be of consequence who is not in Parliament'¹. This he had seen when he was a mere lad, and for this from an early age he had trained himself with the greatest care. If such efforts had been needful for a man of his high rank and ancient lineage, how much more needful were they for one on whom was cast the reproach of illegitimacy! Yet even by him the victory might be won, if he would take the trouble to win it. 'There is nothing in the world but poetry that is not to be acquired by application and care'². In these letters we have set down at great length, and sometimes with tiresome iteration, those rules of life which could secure success. They were not merely precepts, but a system of strict discipline, drawn up with deliberation and steadily pursued till the child had grown into the youth, the youth into the man, and guidance had henceforth become impossible. Almost every other father, Chesterfield said, and every mother without exception who had felt half the love for their son which he had felt for his, would have ruined him by their false tenderness; 'whereas I,' as he boasted to his boy with the proud satisfaction of a conscience at ease with itself, 'always made you feel the weight of my authority, that you might one day know the force of my love'³. From his infancy he had been the object of his father's most serious attention, and not his plaything. He had consulted his real

¹ Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son*, iv. 52, 273.

² *Ib.* iii. 24.

³ *Ib.* iii. 294, 368.

good and not his humours or fancies. He had indulged no silly womanish fondness, had inflicted no tenderness upon him. He had aimed at bringing him to the perfection of human nature¹. 'What depended upon me,' he said, when his son had reached his twentieth year, 'is executed. The little that remains undone depends singly upon you².'

George Fox, the man of the leather breeches, as he reviewed his long ministry and proclaimed with dying voice, 'I am clear, I am fully clear,' spoke with scarcely stronger confidence than this great and fashionable nobleman. Chesterfield's aim, measured by the standard of the world, had been high. For the child he had conceived an affection so deep that we are startled to find it in a man of whom it was said with not a little truth, that 'he had so veneered his manners that though he lived on good terms with everyone he had not a single friend³.' His letters abound in such passages as the following:—'You are the principal object of all my cares, the only object of all my hopes⁴'; 'My greatest joy is to consider the fair prospect you have before you, and to hope and believe you will enjoy it⁵'; 'You will, I both hope and believe, be not only the comfort but the pride of my age; and I am sure I will be the support, the friend, the guide of your youth⁶'; 'As you chiefly employ, or rather wholly engross my thoughts, I see every day with increasing pleasure the fair prospect which you have before you⁷.' When his hearing failed him, and he found his constitution declining day by day; when he had no longer health and spirit to carry on public business, and retirement and quiet had become his only refuge, hope was still left him. 'My only remaining ambition is to be the counsellor and

¹ *Letters*, i. 257; ii. 272; iii. 294.

² *Prior's Life of Malone*, ed. 1860, p. 357.

³ *Ib.* iii. 208.

⁴ *Ib.* iii. 231.

⁵ *Ib.* iii. 310.

⁶ *Letters*, ii. 307.

⁷ *Ib.* iii. 359.

minister of your rising ambition. Let me see my own youth revived in you¹. When his son reached his eighteenth year, he no longer addressed him as 'Dear Boy,' but as 'My dear Friend.' He bids him write to him 'not as to a father, but without reserve as to a friend².' 'You know my tenderness,' he writes on one occasion; 'yours most tenderly,' he signs himself on another³. He spared himself no trouble in his education. In letters written in French he gave him, when he was a little child, not only instruction in that language, but also in mythology, history and geography. Even when he had been advanced to high offices of state he still found time to write. Now and then he happily dropped the instructor, and fell into playfulness. Thus when he was Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland he wrote from Dublin Castle:—'You rebuke me very severely for not knowing, or at least not remembering, that you have been some time in the fifth form. Here, I confess, I am at a loss what to say for myself; for on the one hand I own it is not probable that you would not at the time have communicated an event of that importance to me; and on the other hand it is not likely that, if you had informed me of it, I could have forgotten it⁴.' As years went on, and the young man returned from his travels, he kept him with him for a few months, while he instructed him not only in manners but in constitutional history, and in English literature and composition.

In money matters he treated him with the greatest liberality. When at the age of eighteen he dismissed his tutor, and brought him out at Paris as a man of fashion, he gave him the establishment of the heir of a nobleman. The young fellow was to have his coach, his valet de chambre, his footman, and

¹ *Letters*, iv. 61.

² *Ib.* ii. 352; iii. 229.

³ *Ib.* ii. 306; iii. 100.

⁴ *Ib.* i. 220.