

Choice 17

Walpole's Last Letter to Lady Ossory

Walpole's first letter to Lady Ossory that has survived is dated Sept. 12, 1761, just before the coronation of George III when she was still the Duchess of Grafton. "If anything could make me amends, Madam, for not seeing the finest figure in the world walk at the Coronation," Walpole wrote, "it would be the letter and the *découpure* that I have received from your Grace: I will carry the latter to that ceremony, to prevent the handsomest peeresses from gaining any advantage in my eyes by an absence that I fear they are all wicked enough to enjoy." The *découpure* of herself and her Grafton baby daughter, who is tossing up a chubby arm behind her, is at Farmington. It was cut by Huber of Geneva, according to Walpole's note on it, and is the runner-up in this Choice to Walpole's last letter to her, which he dictated to Kirgate 15 January 1797, six weeks before he died.

The letter that went through the post is not at Farmington; what I am saving is Kirgate's copy of it on which Walpole wrote the date, the last line, and his signature, "O."

Jan. 15, 1797

My dear madam,

You distress me infinitely by showing my idle notes, which I cannot conceive can amuse anybody. My old-fashioned breeding impels me every now and then to reply to the letters you honour me with writing, but in truth very unwillingly, for I seldom can have anything particular to say; I scarce go out of my own house, and then only to two or three very private places, where I see nobody that really knows anything, and what I learn comes from newspapers, that collect intelligence from coffee-houses; consequently what I neither believe nor report. At home I see only a few charitable elders, except about fourscore nephews and nieces of various ages, who are each brought to me about once a year, to stare at me as the Methusalem of the family, and they can only speak of their own contemporaries, which interest me no more than if they talked of their dolls, or bats and balls. Must not the result of all this, Madam, make me a very entertaining correspondent? And can such letters be worth showing?



Duchess of Grafton, *découpage* of herself and her baby daughter.

My Dear M^{rs} To Lady

Jan. 1797
Rehand to Lady Ossory by
her own Nurse. MS. A. 1. 1.

You distress me infinitely by shewing my idle Notes about, which I cannot
conceive can amuse anybody. My old fashioned Boeding impels me every now &
then to reply to the Letters you honour me with writing, but in truth very unwillingly,
for I seldom can have anything particular to say; I scarce go out of my own House,
and then only to two or three very private Places, where I see nobody that really
knows anything, and what I learn comes from Newspapers, that collect Intelligence
from Coffee Houses, consequently, what I neither believe nor report. At Home I see only
a few charitable Elders, except about four score Nephews and Nieces of various Ages, who
are each brought to me about once a Year, to stare at me as the Methusalem of
the Family, and they can only speak of their own Contemporaries, which interest
me no more than if they talked of their Dolls, ^{or} Bats and Balls. Must not the
Result of all this, Madam, make me a very entertaining Correspondent? and can
such Letters be worth shewing? or can I have any spirit when reduced to dictate?
Oh, my good Madam, dispense with me from such a Task, and think how it
must add to it to apprehend such Letters being shewn. Pray send me no more
such Laurels, which I desire no more than ~~to have~~ ^{their} Leaves when decked with
a Scrap of Tinsel, and stuck on Twelfth Cakes that lye on the Shop boards of
Pastry Cooks at Christmas: I shall be quite content with a Sprig of Rosemary
thrown after me, when the Parson of the Parish commits my Dust to Dust.
With then pray, and accept the repetition of your sincere Servant.

* ^{in his pocket}
Lady Ossory died ~~the day after the date of this Letter~~ after the date of this Letter. Q
It was the last Letter Lady Ossory wrote & the last line is alone written
by him. Thus in this Volume may be found the first Letter & the last
Letter he ever wrote. MS. A. 1. 1.

(This note was written by Miss Baring the Editor of the Letters, by Command of
the Hon^{ble} Anne Seymour Damer sole surviving Ed. of Lady Ossory as I was sole Ed. to all the same.)
MS. A. 1. 1.

Horace Walpole to Lady Ossory, 15 January 1797.

or can I have any spirit when so old and reduced to dictate? Oh, my good Madam, dispense with me from such a task, and think how it must add to it to apprehend such letters being shown. Pray send me no more such laurels, which I desire no more than their leaves when decked with a scrap of tinsel, and stuck on Twelfth-cakes that lie on the shop-boards of pastry-cooks at Christmas: I shall be quite content with a sprig of rosemary thrown after me, when the parson of the parish commits my dust to dust. Till then, pray, Madam, accept the resignation of

Your ancient servant,

O.

Walpole's letters to Lady Ossory outnumber all others except those to Mann. There are 450 of them and they are the best, I think, he ever wrote. She was for him the ideal correspondent because, buried in the country with her kind but dull husband, she longed for news of the great world she had lost when divorced by Grafton for *crim. con.* with Ossory, and Walpole compassionately sent her the news in his most carefully composed and humourous style. If he kept her letters, they were returned to her on his death, as his will directed letters from living persons should be, but Vernon Smith couldn't find them in 1848 when he brought out his edition of Walpole's letters to her and I have found only one. While trying to identify Walpole's letters at Farmington to and from unknown correspondents, I discovered one of a few lines in a large flowery hand that had been at Upton. Walpole (a paper-saver) wrote some notes for his *Memoirs* on the back of it and I filed it with them. That it was from Lady Ossory is proved by comparison with a letter of hers to George Selwyn in the Society of Antiquaries. Walpole's use of her letter as scrap paper suggests that he did not keep her letters and that their destruction occurred more than a century before the fire in the muniment room at Euston, the Duke of Grafton's house, where her letters would have gone on her death had they survived.

Anne Liddell was the only child of the first Lord Ravensworth. In 1756 at the age of eighteen she married the third Duke of Grafton, by whom she had a daughter and a son. It was not a model marriage, for she had "a violent itch for play" and he had sixteen illegitimate children, a total in excess of the most tolerant marriage counsellor's allowance. Among his mistresses was Nancy Parsons whose history, according to Lady Louisa Stuart in one of her notes on the Selwyn correspondence, "almost rivals that of Ninon l'Enclos." The Graftons tried a trip abroad to rescue their marriage. "I announce her Grace of Grafton, a passion of mine,"

Walpole wrote Mann in 1761 before the Graftons set out for Florence. She was, Walpole said, "not a regular beauty, but one of the finest women you ever saw, and with more dignity and address. She is one of our first great ladies." Not only did the Graftons travel together, they had another son; but they separated in 1765.

The following year Walpole commended to the Duchess's attention the second Earl of Upper Ossory, whom he had met in Paris and found "one of the properest and most amiable young men I ever knew. . . . If you don't like [him] much, I shall wonder, Madam." No letter of recommendation was ever more successful, for within three years the Duchess bore Lord Ossory a daughter. There is little about this in Walpole's letters. He called it "an event I am very sorry for, as I wish well to both sides," but when the Duke of Grafton turned against General Conway, Walpole turned against him and wrote the phrase that has become the Duke's epitaph: "The Duke of Grafton, like an apprentice, thinking the world should be postponed to a whore and a horse-race."

Two months before her baby was born the Duchess retired to Richmond where the divorce proceedings show she saw only her parents and Lord Ossory. The depositions of the witnesses (who were mostly servants) fill 199 pages. Everyone testified that Lord Ossory was frequently with the Duchess. Robert Falgate, one of her footmen, recalled how some months before the baby was born he saw the Earl of Euston [then aged seven] "pushing and thumping at his mother's door. He called several times to her Grace and said, 'Mamma let me in.'" Robert Falgate "heard Mrs Duparg, her Grace's maid, call out and say 'My Lord Euston, your Mamma is not within,' and his Lordship said she was within: and the deponent . . . said that her Grace was then at home, and Lord Ossory was with her." There is a good deal about not ringing for candles when Lord Ossory was in the house, but the account was written with decorum.

Three days after the Duchess was divorced she married Ossory. After they returned from a trip abroad, it was not to the glory Lady Ossory had known as the Duchess of Grafton. Divorced women were banished from the Court of George III, and although the smart world did not enjoy going to Court, it was humiliating to be excluded. To make matters worse, her former husband had become Prime Minister, so secure in public life that he carried his latest mistress to the opera even before the Queen. Lady Ossory's first child by Ossory was Lady Anne Fitzpatrick, and Walpole's letters are, as one would expect, full of affectionate references to her.

Lady Ossory took her amiable young husband (he was eight years her junior) to Ampthill, his Bedfordshire estate, where she remained, except for rare excursions to town, until she died in 1804. When the Duke of Queensberry visited them in the first year of their marriage he reported to George Selwyn that the Ossorys "live but a dull life, and there must be a great deal of love on both sides not to tire." As time went on Lady Ossory withdrew her husband from politics and had him give up his regiment. She permitted him to continue his racing, but he was miserable at Newmarket without her. Buried in the country with him she depended upon her London friends for the news of the world in which she had once been so shining a figure. She corresponded with Horace Walpole, George Selwyn, and her sister-in-law, Lady Holland, apologizing to all for being a dull correspondent. "I can write to you about nothing but the first notes of the blackbirds, and the first opening of the buds, which are very interesting to me, but not very amusing at second hand." She had two more daughters by Ossory and adored them; the country with her children was preferable to London with its censoriousness, yet she counted on her friends in the great world to keep her informed of everything that went on.

Walpole sent her all the latest chit-chat, who was in, who out, who was marrying whom and how much was being settled on the young people, who was giving balls, who was dying. He amused her with accounts of the new books and plays, of Mr Herschel's new planet, Captain Cook's new islands, and Sir Joseph Banks's new birds and beasts. He wrote verses for her and her youngest Ossory daughters. It can be imagined what Walpole's letters meant to her. She showed them about and praised them to the skies. He scolded her for it; she would spoil everything by making him self-conscious. "You distress me infinitely by showing my idle notes," his last letter to her began, and there is no doubt he meant it. Posterity was in the back of his mind, but he didn't want her talking about it. I think he was more in love with her than with any other woman in his life. In one of his early letters to her he might be thinking of her as a successor to the Grifona who had contributed to his education as a young man in Florence.

Where, I wondered, were the originals of his letters? They were first printed in 1848, by Vernon Smith, Lord Lyveden, after which they vanished. When Mrs Toynbee was preparing her edition in 1900 she corresponded with Lord Castletown, who was then the head of the Fitzpatrick family as Lord Ossory had been in his day. "Lord Castletown has succeeded in finding out where the letters are," he wrote Mrs Toynbee, "but as they are in Stranger's hands it may be some time before he gets them." Three

years later his agent closed the correspondence with "there is some doubt if they are still in existence." This suggested that Stranger had put the letters into the fire, but to edit so large and important a correspondence from a nineteenth-century text would be deplorable. I had to hunt for the originals.

My first move was a failure. The current Lord Lyveden, the great-grandson of the letters' first editor, was the most obvious person to approach, but no one, not even the *Peerage*, knew what had become of him. His sister did not answer my letter. The *Peerage* showed several collaterals and there was always Somerset House and its wills, but I had become skeptical of wills and collaterals as a means of finding missing family papers. Then English friends persuaded me to use the "Agony Column" of the *Times*. I had heard that its "Personals," "Come home. I love you, Alice," really meant, "It is safe to land the opium at Hull on Tuesday," and believed that it was not the place for the Yale Walpole; but, No, I was assured, "everybody" used the Personal Column.

R. W. Chapman and Dudley Massey helped me with my advertisement: "HORACE WALPOLE. Mr W. S. Lewis, Brown's Hotel, Dover Street, W.1., is anxious to secure information of the whereabouts of letters to and from Horace Walpole for use in the Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence." This appeared for three consecutive days with prompt results. I heard from owners of old laces and second-hand Rolls-Royces; two young women offered their companionship. A lady in Belgrave Square wrote that she had hundreds of Walpole's letters, but they turned out to be the printed volumes of the 1848 edition. I was about to cross off the Agony Column as another failure when this letter arrived:

Bishop's Lydeard House
Taunton

Aug. 4, 1935

Dear Sir,

I notice an advertisement in The Times for correspondence of Horace Walpole. I have thirty years between him and his cousin Lady Ossory—these were all published by my grandfather the Rt Honble Vernon Smith, the first Lord Lyveden: so it is possible they may be of no use to you.

Yrs faithfully,
R. Vernon

Lady Ossory was not Walpole's cousin, but that was a small error. I called Mr Vernon on the telephone because we were sailing soon and there was no time for the gavotte of correspondence. Were these the

originals of Walpole's letters, I asked with the Belgrave Square lady in mind, or was he referring to the edition of them his grandfather published in 1848? These were the manuscripts, Vernon replied; at least they were written in ink on paper. That sounded like manuscript, all right. Might I go down that afternoon to see them? No, he was just about to leave for a week's yachting at Cowes.

"Look here," he said suddenly, "I don't know anything about you, but you are staying at Brown's, so you must be all right. I'll send them up to you." This seemed too hazardous and there is the axiom: a house that has one fine thing will have others. It was left that we should call at Bishop's Lydeard House Monday-week after lunch.

It proved to be a lovely Queen Anne house protected from the road by a high brick wall. It was in confusion because the Vernons, fresh from Cowes, had not yet put away their bags, the drawing-room was being done up, and the cook had just left. When Vernon let us in, the slight awkwardness of the occasion was heightened by his wearing a suit identical to mine. Later we found we had a London tailor in common who thought it quite safe to sell the same pattern to customers who lived as far apart as Bishop's Lydeard in Somerset, and Farmington, Connecticut.

Vernon led us into a small library on the left. "Well, there they are!" and he waved at a pile of letters on a shelf.

There they were, the letters allegedly destroyed in Ireland a generation earlier, one of the most brilliant collections of letters ever written.

"But," I said, "there aren't four hundred letters here."

"How do you know there should be four hundred?" Vernon asked quickly.

When I said I thought he would find there were exactly 400 in his grandfather's edition he looked it up and found that the last letter, the famous "Pray send me no more such laurels," was numbered four hundred.

"Shouldn't we count them?" I asked.

Vernon got out an aged card table; we put on our spectacles and went to work, releasing the letters from the corset strings that had cut cruelly into their edges. There were only 279 out of the 400, but Vernon found four more when he went to have a look at the place where they were kept. At this juncture his wife burst into the room, flourishing a beautiful tortoise-shell ear trumpet and full of apologies for not being on hand when we arrived, but she was trying to get a new cook from Taunton.

"Mr Lewis says there should be more letters, darling. Have you any idea where they could be?"

Mrs Vernon disappeared and returned almost at once with another batch that she tossed on the table and hurried off; a cook was about to telephone. The new letters came to about a hundred. After we had counted them Mrs Vernon made a third entrance.

"Sorry, dear, Mr Lewis says there must be more still."

"Was there ever such a man!" she said and left abruptly, returning at once with still another batch and departing again.

I wanted to find the letters, my advertisement said, "for use in the Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence," as I now reminded Vernon, and I added one must, if possible, edit from the originals.

Mrs Vernon swept into the room for the fourth time as I said this.

"You are not wanting to carry off the family papers to *America*?" she asked, her ear trumpet at the ready. (She pronounced "America" with the inflection of extreme distaste that some Britons used at the time.) Since carrying the letters to America was just what I was hoping to do and since Vernon did not seem averse, I was less valiant than I should have been under the power of Mrs Vernon's gaze, voice, and ear trumpet. I can't recall what I faltered out in my abasement, but I was thankful when she bore me away to her bedroom to admire the drawing of Lady Ossory by William Hamilton that was given to Walpole in 1773.

At tea Mrs Vernon asked where we were spending the night.

"At Dunster," I replied.

"At the inn?"

"No."

"At the *Castle*?"

"Yes."

This changed everything, for it introduced a common friend, Geoffrey Luttrell, whose family acquired Dunster Castle in 1365, and who had asked us to stay with him whenever we were in his neighborhood. I told the Vernons that I would like to buy the letters, but if they didn't want to sell them, couldn't I, please, have them photostated? The British Museum would do it, but many of the letters had been cut into by the corset strings and I said that we would repair them well at home. The Vernons promised to let me have their decision in the morning. During the evening they prudently called the Castle to make certain we really were there. When we stopped at Bishop's Lydeard House on our way home the letters were ready for me to make what use I would of them for a year.

On landing in New York I took them to the Public Library where its

friendly Librarian, Harry Lydenberg, put the manuscript repairing section at my disposal. The letters were mended and the worst damaged were put on silk. Then the whole collection was photostated and sent to Farmington where I found that fifty of the letters were unpublished. Were there still fifty more at Bishop's Lydeard? The day before we got there in 1936 Mrs Vernon found them in the attic.

How had Vernon happened to answer my advertisement? He read it, he told me later, on the first morning it appeared while he and his wife were on their way to Scotland and he had nothing else to read. "I think I'll answer this fellow," he said to his wife. She urged him not to, but on the return journey two days later he noticed my third appearance in the Agony Column and said, "I *will* write him." Before our arrival Mrs Vernon prudently took out half the letters, as she later confessed.

On Lady Ossory's death the letters went to her son by the Duke of Grafton, the little boy who pounded on her door and called for his mamma while she was with Lord Ossory. His son, the 5th Duke, turned them over to Vernon Smith, who published 400 of them. A generation later when his house in Eaton Square was broken up, Robert Vernon saw the letters lying about unwanted in the library and took them. They had been copied by a clerk at Bentley's for £16 (Mrs Vernon kindly gave me the Account of Publication and Sale of the book). The clerk's heart was not in his work, for he overlooked fifty letters. Thirty of them were written in 1778 when Walpole was at the height of his epistolary powers. We read of Dr Franklin and General Washington and the hatefulness of a war in which Englishmen fought Englishmen, but world events remain where they belong in an intimate correspondence, in the background. Of more concern to Walpole and Lady Ossory was the news brought to him one day when, as he was about to set off on a visit, the postman handed him a letter that told of the imminent death of Lord Ossory's sister, Lady Holland. "It was," Walpole wrote Lady Ossory, "one of those moments in which nothing is left to us but resignation and silence. . . . Life seems to me as if we were dancing on a sunny plain on the edge of a gloomy forest when we pass in a moment from glare to gloom and darkness."

And a month later:

I have fallen into a taste that I never had in my life, that of music. The swan, you know, Madam, is drawing towards its end, when it thinks of warbling. . . . I am quite enchanted with Mr Gammon, the Duke of Grafton's brother-in-law. It is the most melodious voice I ever heard. . . . I was strolling in the gardens

[of Hampton Court] in the evening with my nieces, who joined Lady Schaub and Lady Fitzroy, and the former asked Mr Gammon to sing. His taste is equal to his voice, and his deep notes, the part I prefer, are calculated for the solemnity of Purcell's music, and for what I love particularly, his mad songs and the songs of sailors. It was moonlight and late, and very hot, and the lofty façade of the palace, and the trimmed yews and canal, made me fancy myself of a party in Grammont's time—so you don't wonder that by the help of imagination I never passed an evening more deliciously. When by the aid of some historic vision and local circumstance I can romance myself into pleasure, I know nothing transports me so much. . . . I sometimes dream, that one day or other somebody will stroll about poor Strawberry and talk of Lady Ossory—but alas! I am no poet, and my castle is of paper, and my castle and my attachments and I, shall soon vanish and be forgotten together!