

CHESTERFIELD TO HIS SON

A Rude Romp in One Act

Adapted from
Lord Chesterfield's Letters to His Son

by Steven Key Meyers

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CHESTERFIELD TO HIS SON

Steven Key Meyers

For my father

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PHILIP STANHOPE, 4th
EARLOF CHESTERFIELD

A small man, flawlessly groomed and beautifully dressed; poised if self-conscious. AT RISE he is 70; soon after, he revisits the prime of manhood. He bears a strong resemblance to Charlie Chaplin.

SCENE AND TIME

The library of Chesterfield House, London,
the evening of March 16, 1769.

SOURCE

The fourth Earl of Chesterfield's letters to his son were first published in 1778. The edition used for this adaptation is Letters to His Son By the Earl of Chesterfield On the Fine Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman, ed. Oliver H.G. Leigh (New York: Dingwall-Rock, Ltd., 1925, 2 volumes)—a somewhat abridged one.

This adaptation is strict: I have not put more than two dozen words in Lord Chesterfield's mouth.

SCENE: The library of Chesterfield House, London, the evening of March 16, 1769. An armchair. A small table. A larger table set for a meal. A side chair. A dictionary. A map. A magnifying glass. A carving knife. A fan. A wigstand with wig. A parcel of letters tied with a black ribbon lies on a silver salver, with a black-bordered envelope propped against them.

AT RISE: CHESTERFIELD enters. HE wears a hat, carries a cane in one hand, an ear-trumpet in the other. In HIS pockets are a snuffbox, handkerchief and watch.

CHESTERFIELD

Thank you, John. A black-bordered letter from Dresden? Yes, I find it, thank you. A black-bordered letter—in a lady's hand? Absurd: I know no ladies at Dresden, in mourning or out of it. Years ago! The only person I know there now is the King's Resident—my son—who seems unacquainted with ladies—or women—at all. Lady's hand? None of the best. More letters? Not in a lady's hand. But I know this elegant writing: This is my hand: "Master Philip Stanhope." "Philip Stanhope, Esquire" at Leipzig, and at Venice, Rome, Paris, Turin. John!

[Raises ear-trumpet, then unties the parcel, replacing the black-bordered letter. Rummaging through letters, HE throws off old age. HE keeps the ribbon in HIS hand.]

Hah!

Dear boy: I am told, sir, that having attained the age of five, you set off on your travels, beginning by Holland. Holland is the finest of the Seven United Provinces which form the Dutch Republic. A republic is a free state without any king. I wish you favorable winds. Should you make any curious observations, be so good as to acquaint me with them. Adieu! In proportion as you deserve it, I shall always be, Yours.

Now that you are eight—oh, the improvements I expect! Do well at school and in time you will know more even than myself. I shall forgive you. What pleasure to be more learned than other boys! What honor! What applause! Caesar could not bear an equal at Rome. Why should you at school? Adieu!

Your letter pleased me, though I believe you had help. Remember you are ten years old: Write without assistance. Write as if we were conversing:

My dear papa, I spent the morning at Mr. Harte's, where I translated English into Latin, Latin into English so well that at the top of my paper he has writ optime. I likewise repeated a Greek verb, remembering that as everybody knows Latin I will distinguish myself more by Greek. Then I ran home like a little wild boy and played till dinnertime, when I ate like a wolf. Adieu, papa.

Well, sir, this is a good letter. It is important to write well. It is above forty years since I wrote one word without considering whether I could not find a better. Style is but the dress of thoughts, yet however well-proportioned your person may be, it would be indecent to exhibit it naked: It wants adornment. Think also of your gestures, your air and of your e-nun-ci-a-tion. Trust an old stager going off as you are coming on: These things form your connection with gallery and pit.

If I use words new to you, seek for them in the dictionary. For example, "connection": Noun substantive. A uniting, joining or tying together. One says of two friends, There's a great connection between them. Also of things that resemble each other, They are connected. You and I are mightily connected. There is no closer connection than that between father and son.

Translate into French:

My dear papa, You do praise me, but you make me earn those praises by working me like a galley slave. No matter, glory cannot be too dearly purchased. So thought Alexander the Great, and so thinks Philip the Little. Adieu, papa.

Parliament is the theatre where you will make your fortune and figure. Success there will remove any prejudice regarding your bir— will remove all objections. To that end, I propose to unite in you the scholar's knowledge with the courtier's breeding. It is therefore time you went abroad, to form your manners on those of the best companies, until you come of age and can enter the House of Commons: By residing in every country (you begin by Germany) you will become of every

country. You will return no longer an Englishman, but a European. Considering the care I take with you, you ought to be at thirteen what other boys are at sixteen.

People your age are as apt to think themselves wise enough as drunken men are to think themselves sober enough. You have no experience of the world. I will inoculate mine upon you and prevent the pockmarks of youth. Put on the armor of my experience. Let it clear your way of the thorns which scratched me and you will unite—join—connect—two things seldom seen in one person: the powers of youth with the caution of age. I do not so much as hint how dependent you—son of an excellent but unmarried mother—are upon me. You have neither rank nor fortune, and I shall perhaps be out of the world before you are in it. What then will you have to rely on? Eh? Nothing but your own merit. Adieu. May you continue to deserve my love! Godspeed to you and Mr. Harte!

Your friend Sir Charles Williams is returned from seeing you at Leipzig. He puffs your modesty, your vivacity, et cetera. If I had faith in love potions, I should suspect you had given him one. Fortunately—for you—Sir Charles also mentions a deficiency in the

graces: Scrambling at table. Overturms of glasses. Horseplay. Horseplay? I recommend you, sir, sacrifice to the Graces! Force them to adorn all you say and do, every word, look, tone of voice, gesture. I admit the Graces are not natives of Great Britain—of Germany still less (however, while you are there, you need not say so). But they are not inexorable ladies: They may be had. If not willingly, then ravish them—for they pave the way to the heart. Aim at the heart. Women are guided by nothing else, but even with men the heart always triumphs over reason. To strike it, intrinsic merit alone will not do: You must please.

I cannot reduce this art of pleasing to rules. Perhaps "Do as you would be done by" comes closest. Reflect how a man of fashion prepossesses you, coming into company with assurance, speaking even to people he does not know, his person pretty, motions graceful, voice harmonious, something cheerful in his features—but without laughing. Then reflect what impression an awkward, slovenly, drawling stranger makes. Yet he may have merit.

The very accoutrement of a gentleman encumbers a vulgar man. When he shambles in, his sword gets between his

legs, trips him. His clothes so constrain him, he seems their prisoner. Indeed he presents himself like a criminal at the bar: He is frightened out of his wits. His very air condemns him. Bashfulness is characteristic of the English booby. He takes the one seat where he should not sit and drops his hat. In picking it up, he drops his cane. In recovering his cane—

[drops hat]

A quarter of an hour! before he's in order enough to sip at tea—which scalds his mouth! Spills in his breeches! If someone happens to laugh, they laugh at him, he knows it. He is slighted, grows testy, issues a challenge, draws. A gentleman never suspects himself laughed at. If something malicious be said of you, conceal your anger—seem not to understand what you must resent. I always put these jackanapes out by saying, "And—?" as if the sting were still to come. "Yes, and so?" If you cannot pretend ignorance, join in the laugh. Acknowledge the hit to be a fair one. Play the thing off in seeming good humor. Do not reply in kind: Saying a witty thing makes more enemies than anything else. People fear a wit as a woman fears a

gun, which she knows will go off by itself. Any suspicion that you love somebody less than they love themselves is an insult, never forgotten and never forgiven.

At dinner our bumpkin carves—scattering sauce in everyone's face—puts his spoon into every dish, eats with his knife, picks his teeth, and when he drinks—

[Drinks, sprays.]

His hands go in perpetual motion from bosom to breeches to bosom, he makes faces, whistles, scratches his head, yawns, breaks wind or blows his nose and looks in his handkerchief—making the company sick. None of this is criminal—but does it please? The world is taken by the outside of things, and we must take the world as it is: You nor I cannot set it right. Adieu.

Who has the most friends and fewest enemies is strongest. I don't mean intimate friends—no man can hope for half a dozen in his life—but friends in the common acceptation of the word: people who would rather do you good than harm (but never put yourself in your friend's power, for he may one day be your enemy).

Young people have an unguarded openness which makes them the prey of the artful. The same tricks boys tried on you for balls, bats and halfpence, men will use for other purposes. The more you know men, the less you will trust them. Your only sure guide is he who has gone all roads and can point out to you the best.

Why did I go any bad roads? For want of a guide. My father did not desire to advise me. This you cannot say of yours. Adieu. I return your letter corrected. It had few errors, but you should know them.

Will you shirk these dictates of a sermonizing father? Advice is seldom welcome—those who need it the most like it the least. Consider them rather the advice of your best—indeed your only—friend. But do not mistake my affection for a mother's. I am your father. My care is not mere health: My object is to have you fit to live. If you should not be fit to live, I would rather you die. Affection makes me care more about the manner of your life than its length.

This thaw will undoubtedly bring me a letter from you. In it I'm glad to find that you apply yourself and reflect upon what you learn. I applaud you. Simply to

repeat other people's thoughts is the talent of a parrot—at most that of a player. But make your letters more minute as to your motions and transactions and the company you keep. Trifles concerning you are not trifles to me. Adieu.

Politeness is due even our inferiors. We don't compliment them, don't talk of their doing us the honor, et cetera, but we treat them with affability. We are all made of the same clay, some of the lumps coarser, some finer. Distinctions between us arise from fortune. Victor who cleans your shoes, Lisette who washes your linen would be your equals were they as rich as you. Being poor, they must serve you. Do not add to their misfortune by reminding them of it: Endeavor to make them forget it. Use even the beggar in the street with good breeding. Consider him the object of compassion—not of insult—and refuse him with humanity.

I must warn you against laughing. A gentleman is seen to smile—even seen to laugh: Never heard. Nothing is so ill-bred as audible laughter. True wit never made anybody laugh. Wit pleases the mind, lends a—cheerfulness to the countenance. What excites laughter

is the mob's buffoonery. A man's going to sit down thinking there's a chair behind him and—

[Falls down.]

Oh, that sets the company a-laughing. Proof how low a thing it is, not to mention the noise it makes, the distortion of the face. Since I gained the use of my reason, nobody has heard me laugh.

Your friend Sir Charles Williams is home from Germany. He dined with me last night. While I held the seals of state I never examined a prisoner so closely. I racked him—gave him the question ordinary and extraordinary—turned the screws and—extorted not one word against you. Go on so, you will be what I despaired of: Somebody. He says you have grown taller than I, except you still stoop. If you get up to five feet ten—five feet nine—I would settle for five feet eight!—even your square figure would please. Send me a thread your length exactly.

Sir Charles did let fall one absurd item: your thick e-nun-ci-a-tion. Good! God! What kind of figure will you make in company? In parliament? Who will listen?

Who will like you? Do you propose using signs in place of speech?

Oratory makes as large a share in our government as in Greece or Rome. The business of oratory is to persuade. You cannot persuade people unless you please them.

Suppose you wished Mr. Harte to give you a holiday, would you say, Give me a holiday? That would not please him. You must first speak elegantly, clearly, using proper metaphors. Tell him his goodness encourages you to ask a favor: A holiday. Give your reasons, that you have such-or-such a thing to do, place to go. Urge that as the bow is stronger for being sometimes unstrung, so the mind improves for being sometimes relaxed. And then enjoy your holiday.

I propose Demosthenes for your model. He spoke by the sea in storms to accustom himself to tumultuous public assemblies. He put stones in his mouth and opened his lips and teeth and e-nun-ci-a-ted distinctly enough to carry the length of my library. But he made his strongest push at the passions. They govern mankind. Strike at people's pride, love, ambition, you need not fear their reason. The roads to the heart lie through

the eyes and the ears. Eloquence is the sharp end of the nail, the point you hammer in to make way for your solid parts. Charm your audience, warm it, then forcibly ravish it. Adieu! I tell you truly, I shall judge of your parts by your e-nun-ci-a-tion.

Ah: Venice sees your premier excursions into polite company? Had I the ring of Gyges which renders the wearer invisible, I would go there to reconnoiter you, myself unseen. I would take you at breakfast, listen to your unguarded conversation with Mr. Harte. Hearing your pertinent questions, judicious reflections, how I should rejoice! Then I would observe you presenting yourself to men of sense, see whether your address is respectful, yet easy—modest, yet unembarrassed—whether your speech makes you intelligible. In the evening I would follow you to the assemblies and watch if you trifled gracefully. Should people cry out, Che garbato Cavaliere, il piccolo Stan'ope! Com'è disinvolto, spiritoso!, I would assume my own shape and embrace you. But if the contrary happened, if people should point—laugh—I would sink my disappointment and steal invisibly home again. Imagine me always present, seeing and hearing all that you do. Adieu. Be assured I have eyes upon you, and will have more at Rome.

When you write—which by the way you do pretty seldom—make your letters a journal of your life: the company you keep, acquaintances you make, what your pleasures are. Have you begun getting the diminutives in -etta, -ina, -ettina?

At your age, nature takes care of the body. Not so the mind. Every hour does it essential good or lasting harm. A coachman is born with organs as good as Sir Isaac Newton's, but by study Sir Isaac is as far above him as he is over his horses. The books most people read nourish the mind as whipped cream does the body—the Oriental ravings of the Arabian Nights, for example. Others loll and yawn and say they have no time to begin anything. The present moment is the only one we are sure of—as such the most valuable. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

I know a gentleman so good a manager of his time he will not lose even the minutes which calls of nature oblige him to pass in the—necessary-house.

[Sits down.]

In those moments he goes through the Latin poets—has with him a leaf or two from a cheap edition, reads them and sends them down

[balls up, drops sheet of paper]

a sacrifice to Cloacina. Follow his example. It makes any book very present in your mind. I wish I had known these things at your age. Adieu, Monseigneur. I never received the letter you refer to, if you wrote it.

[Stands up.]

P.S. Yours just received: I forbid you to cut off your hair! Your headaches cannot proceed from thence, and at your age your own hair is such an ornament, a wig such a disguise, that I— I forbid you to cut it off.

Rome will test you. Rome tests all young Englishmen. The character young men first aim at is that of a man of pleasure. But for what makes a man of pleasure they adopt what they are told instead of consulting their own appetites. But the glutton, the sot, the rotten whoremaster do not enjoy their pursuits: They are human sacrifices to false gods. I am ashamed to own to

you—but as it may be of use, I do own it—that the vices of my youth came from my wishing to be called a man of pleasure. I smoked, despite my aversion to tobacco, because I thought it made me look like a man. I hated drinking, yet I drank. Same as to gaming: I plunged into it—made myself solidly uneasy for thirty the best years of my life. Take warning: Let no one impose pleasures on you. Choose them for yourself.

I suggest the most exclusive evening assemblies as likeliest to give you pleasure. If breakfasts or idle parties into the Campagna are proposed, beg to be excused. Lay it all on me.

Englishman: "Come to breakfast tomorrow? There'll be four or five of us sauntering, illiterate English, and afterwards we'll drive out."

[Sits down on edge of armchair.]

Stanhope: I am sorry, I cannot. I must stay home all morning.

[Stands up.]

Englishman: "Then we'll come breakfast with you."

Stanhope: No, tomorrow morning I am engaged.

"Then the next day!"

I never go out before two.

"What the devil do you do?"

I study with Mr. Harte.

"Are you preparing to take holy orders, then?"

My father's orders I must take.

"You mind an old fellow a thousand miles off?"

If I don't mind his orders, he won't mind my allowance.

"The old prig threatens?"

He has never threatened me, but I had best not provoke him.

"Pooh! One angry letter would be the end to it!"

[Sits down, leans far back.]

You mistake my father. He always does more than he says. If I provoke him, he would never forgive me. I might beg and beg: He would be coolly immovable.

[Stands up.]

"He's an old dog, then. And you mean to obey your nurse Mr. Harte?"

Yes.

"Egad, I've a nurse myself, but I haven't seen his face this week and don't care a louse if I never see it again."

Mr. Harte desires only what is for my own good. I like to be with him.

"At this rate they'll call you a good young man."

That will do me no harm.

"Tomorrow evening, then? I've some fine wine."

Tomorrow? No, tomorrow I sup at Cardinal Albani's and go on to the French Ambassador's.

"How the devil can you stand those foreigners? I'm never easy with them. I don't know why, but they make me—bashful."

Not I. I get the languages and their characters by conversing with them. Are we sent abroad to herd with our countrymen?

"And their women of fashion! I never know what to say."

At least they've done you no hurt—more than you can say of the women you do converse with.

"I'd rather keep company with my surgeon than with women of fashion."

Tastes differ.

"Yours is devilish odd: The morning with your nurse, evening in company, all night afraid of Old Daddy. I'm afraid there's nothing to be made of you."

I'm afraid so, too.

[Aside:]

"Damn these finical airs. Give me a manly English buck!"

[Sits down, leans back, beams upward
sublimely.]

"Well, good night, Stanhope. You've no objection to my getting drunk? Then going to the play to gape at the lights? Then finding a whore?"

No, no, nor to your vomiting and headache tomorrow, nor to your losing your nose to your whore's pox, nor to her protector running you through the body. Good night to you, good night.

[Leers.]

Adieu.

Vice so shocks us at sight, I should as soon think of warning you against it as I would not to fall into the fire. Whereas virtue seduces us at sight, so charms us excess seems impossible. But beware!

[Drops ribbon, stands athwart it.]

Across a very fine line every virtue runs into a kindred vice. As generosity runs into profusion, the respectful goes into the abject! Economy runs into avarice. Frank becomes indiscreet. Courage, rashness. Caution, timidity. Ostentatious puritanism becomes criminal relaxation. In manners, this line is good-breeding: Beyond it is troublesome ceremony; short of it is negligence and inattention. Only good sense and attention can keep you on this line.

[Picks up ribbon.]

Hold on to my traces. Let me guide you through the maze.

Whereas civility—the disposition to accommodate others—essentially is the same everywhere, good breeding—the manner of exerting civility—is local. To

the emperor at Vienna instead of bows men drop
curtsies.

[Curtsies.]

In France nobody bows to the king nor kisses his hand,
but in England, bows are made and hands are kissed.

[While bowing:]

As to the Pope I'm not certain he doesn't offer his
breach to be kissed. (Kiss whatever his etiquette
requires.)

Common sense cannot tell me why these ceremonies came
to be, yet it tells me to conform to the good breeding
of wherever I may be. Be flexible with regard to things
not wrong in themselves.

Manners are to any particular society what morals are
to society in general: their cement and their security.
Utility introduced manners as it did commerce: I
sacrifice such a conveniency to you, you sacrifice
another to me. Good manners are the currency of
society. And as laws enforce good morals, so do rules

punish bad manners. The man who invades your property you hang. The man whose manners offend, you banish. Between kings and subjects the implied contract is protection—obedience. Among civilized people: mutual complaisance.

Some rules always hold true. It is rude to answer yes—no, without adding sir, my lord, or madam. Rude to speak of Mr. What-d'ye-call-him or Miss Thingum. Rude to finish a story with, "I forget the rest." (Very bungling.) Rude when people speak to you to play with a dog, pick your nose, twirl your snuffbox, look around so much as to say, kiss my breech. I have seen men knocked down for less. But not to be rude is not enough: Be civil. There is a gruff look and a civil look. Never argue with heat, though you know you are right. Wear your learning like your watch in your pocket. Do not pull it out and strike it to show you have one. If someone asks the time, tell it.

[Pulls out watch, strikes it.]

Do not proclaim it like the watchman. If you contradict anybody, soften it. Brutal to say, "That's not so, I know better." Rather, seem open to conviction. Say, "I

beg your pardon, I believe you mistake, if I may take the liberty of contradicting you, I am not sure, I may be mistaken, but I should rather think—" Et cetera. Look people in the face. Not doing so implies conscious guilt. Besides, you want to see what impression your words make. I trust my eyes more than my ears: People can say what they want me to hear, but faces reveal what words conceal.

[Shades eyes, scrutinizes audience.]

Thus I guess what they are saying—even thinking—when I cannot hear a word.

Your friend Sir Charles Williams sings your praises—of your modesty especially. Modesty is a fine quality. I am pleased that you avoid speaking of yourself. Some do so without provocation. Impudent! Others go to work more slyly—lament being so weak they cannot see suffering without trying to succor it, see need without relieving it, cannot help speaking truth— Oh, but they are too old to change, must rub on the best they can. (Take my word, you'll meet characters so extravagant no dramatist would set them on the stage.) Never drop one word that can be construed as fishing for applause. A

man who speaks little of himself but extols other people acquires love and esteem. Thus (by the bye) does modesty gratify vanity.

Modesty, then, is admirable. However, if it is possible to be too modest, you are. Human actions have one principle: vanity—self love—the desire of applause. Where vanity is wanting, we are listless, indolent, inert—where we should be alerte, adroit, vif. Who loves himself most is the most honest man. If you prefer, the most honest man loves himself most.

That our actions derive from self-love is a reflection much blamed, but why? I blame only mistaken vanity—taking immediate gratification for happiness. If I do a good action, am I blamable because it makes me happy? Give me virtuous actions, I will not quibble about motives. I think that next to doing a good action, the most pleasing is doing a polite one.

I confess (you are my confessor) I had vanity to a prodigious degree. I had a thirst—a rage for popularity, to make every man like me, every woman love me—even women I would not give a pinch of snuff for. My face, my figure made it an uphill game, yet often I

succeeded. To vanity I owe my success in life—to manners more than to merit. But you seem indifferent to admiration, you whose face and youth entitle you to it. You withdraw, recede, shun the light, when you should advance,

[advances downstage]

shine, dazzle.

This greets you to Paris, capital of good breeding and—other things. I love capitals—the seats of arts and sciences and the best companies, where human passions exert all their force, all their art in pursuing their objects. Other places are worth seeing. Capitals only are worth living at.

Let your dead books now give way to the living book of the world, of which there are so many readings. Knowledge of the world must be learned in the world: You cannot learn it by theory. Take your notions of things as you find they are—not as you read they should be. They never are what they should be.

Rather than your learning Plato by heart, I would now you fell in love with some coquette who will lead you a dance, supple you. Do not imagine you are at Paris to study Notre Dame. Oh no. Nocturnu versate manu, versate diurna. Turn over men by day—women by night.

[Is seen to laugh.]

By all means look at antiquities, paintings, et cetera. This is soon done. They are only outsides. The insides of men is your science. Chit-chat will not take you inside heads and hearts. You must search deep—pry open every man for his prevailing passion. Touch him but there—you touch him to the quick. If you cannot get at him through that avenue, try the serpentine ones—you will arrive.

Do not, however, go to the English coffeehouse at Paris. Monsieur le Chevalier—belaced, bepowdered—accosts you and, seeing you are a stranger, offers his services. He knows a lady—a lady of position. Well, go with him and you find a painted strumpet playing cards with sharpers dignified by titles. She receives you with delectable politeness. But how to amuse you? She never allows cards—never for above a franc. Could such

small stakes amuse you? Well, you sit down and promptly win ten francs. Supper comes up, you celebrate your luck, your hostess la marquise commences to talk sentiment. Certain oblique ogles bid you not despair. After supper, someone suggests a hand of faro. La marquise exclaims in horror, but you and your new friends prevail and sit down again. Then the operation begins. They cheat you of your money, your watch, your rings, your snuffbox, your buckles—probably for greater security murder you. In Paris this happens every day. To any party proposed, be previously engaged. Adieu. Sleep well, whoever you pass the night with. I inform you I have accounts of your behavior from channels of intelligence of which I do not apprise you.

When I first came into company—the rust of Cambridge on me—I made fine low bows, but when I was spoken to: obstupuit, vox faucibus hesit. If people whispered, I knew it was about me. If they laughed, I prayed for death—suffered like the condemned at the gallows. However: I persevered. It grew easier. I began to bow not so outré, to answer without stammering—until one evening I was so intrepid as to go up to a fine woman and say I thought it

[fingers collar]

a warm day. She answered—she thought so too. Gradually I joined the habit of politeness to the pretense of ease.

A veteran woman of condition—past her bloom but possibly having enjoyed some gallantries—can form a young fellow better than any advice. Amicable collisions with such rub off and smooth our rough corners. A young man's attentions flatter these women. Make one of them your friend—any married woman at Paris (if you are acquainted with one) will do. But take care never to drop one word of her experience, for experience implies age, and the suspicion of age no woman—not she turned of eighty!—ever forgives. Tell her, "I know my questions are troublesome, but nobody can educate me so well as you." Et cetera.

How do you pass your leisure hours? Do you attend assemblies? Little suppers? Do the women say, Ou est donc le petit Stan'ope? Que ne vient-il? Make me your confidant. Adieu.

Three mails lost! How provoking! Letters to and from me have worse luck than other people's. It breaks the thread of my instructions!

Sir Charles Williams—your friend—writes me there is still a hitch in your

[whispers word:]

e-nun-ci-a-tion. Your trade is to speak well. The speaker's trade is like the shoemaker's: Who applies most does best. Remember Demosthenes. To persuade, please: Tune your voice to harmony, mark your emphases and cadences, e-nun-ci-ate distinctly.

Imagine if they call you Muttering Stanhope. A nickname can undo a man. Get one and it will stick. What excites ridicule? Clumsiness. Singularity. Mimics lay hold of minute defects in manners, air,

[mimes word:]

e-nun-ci-a-tion.

A gentleman's polish extends to his diction. Do not like John Trott say to a new-married man, "Sir, I wish you joy," or to a man who loses his son, "Sir, I am sorry for your loss." No: Say it elegantly, adapting your expression to the occasion. Advance warmly to the bridegroom: "If you do justice to my attachment to you, you will judge of the joy that I feel upon this occasion better than I can express it." Et cetera. To the grieving man say gravely, in a low voice, "I hope you do me the justice to be convinced that I feel what you feel and shall ever be affected where you are concerned."

[Struggles for composure.]

Machiavelli said the height of ability is to unite volto sciolto and pensieri stretti—a seeming frankness with a real reserve. Be upon your guard—to put people off theirs. A man of fashion, like the chameleon, takes on every different hue. Excuse me.

[Turns away, regains composure.]

Have you a passion for anybody? They tell me Madame de Blot is pretty. Do you frequent la belle Madame de

Case? Are you in love with Madame de Berkenrode? Madame du Pain? She's handsome still, they say, and being past the glare of youth may be more willing to listen to your story. Your hour may not yet be come, but it will come. Love is like the smallpox: You get it sooner or later. Adieu, my son! May you turn out what I wish! When I reflect upon the manure I've laid upon you—

[FLASH.]

"If I durst!" What, Blot's virtue intimidates you? Berkenrode's respectability? Case's modesty? For shame! A gentleman dares! He begins his approaches by a rumor of assiduities, distant, glancing attacks, attentions ever closer. If not repulsed, he advances. After certain steps success is infallible: Those citadels always have weak places. Every man may be had one way or another—every women almost any way. The only danger in daring is not daring to dare—then they will laugh. Begin by du Pain. She is not young, her choice of lovers is not entirely hers. Vouchsafe her tender looks. Whisper you wish your only motive were friendship—but you cherish sentiments—desires—more tender.

The first time you say this, you'll feel a fool.

So much the better: Your avowal will ring true. Dare a second time, a third—Unless the place be already garrisoned, you will take it.

As to pleasing women, I should perhaps let you into certain... arcana.

Women, then, are only children of a larger growth. They have an entertaining tattle, sometimes wit—I never knew one who could act logically for four-and-twenty hours. Their beauty neglected, their understandings deprecated, their age increased, kindles them instantly.

Women have two passions: vanity — love. Everything they say and do gratifies their vanity or their love. Who flatters them most, pleases them best. No flattery is too high or too low or too gross for them to swallow. Nature has not yet formed the woman ugly enough to doubt flattery of her person: Every woman not hideous thinks herself handsome. If her face be shocking, she trusts her figure makes amends. If both are bad, she has graces, an air, a je ne sais quoi more

engaging than beauty. But the conscious beauty? Listens only to praise of her mind. Do not think I recommend abject flattery. No. No, no. But if a woman wishes to be thought handsomer than she is, her error is comfortable to her—innocent to you.

A man trifles with a woman, humors her, plays with her as with a sprightly child, but never trusts her with serious matters—though he makes her believe he does, which is what she is proudest of: They love to dabble in business. Talk to her too deep, you confound her. Too frivolously, she resents the contempt. Talk to her as below men and above children. She adores that man who talks seriously and seems to consult her. I say, seems.

These are secrets. Keep them if you would not be torn to pieces by the whole sex. In the great world a man must be gallant to the women. Adieu.

A bill for ninety pounds sterling was brought me this morning. I scrupled paying because I did not see your signature. The person desired me to look again—with my magnifying glass. I did then perceive somebody's mark—your name in the smallest hand I ever saw. I paid

it, though I had rather it were forged than have that signature be yours. Gentlemen write their names in large characters. Your hand is a truant schoolboy's. Your E and L—strangely zigzag. A genteel hand is more important than you think.

From hand to arms the transition is natural. The motion of the arms is the material part of dancing. Dancing—however silly—is one of those follies people are sometimes obliged to perform. I would not have you a dancer, but when you dance, dance well: Be not ridiculous though in a ridiculous act. The feet do not matter. If a man dances well from the waist up, moves his head properly, wears his hat well—he dances well. Arms decide whether a man is genteel. A stiffness or twist in the wrist will make any man look— Your dancing master is the most important man in Europe to you, for you must dance well in order to sit, stand or walk well. Learn to come into a room. Have him make you go out and come in presenting yourself to ministers—women—mixed companies—et cetera. Have him teach you every attitude the human body can be put into—every genteel attitude—to loll genteelly where you may be free, to lean gracefully where you may not. Ill-bred people sit bolt upright or loosen their

buckles and welter supinely with a smirk, a whiffling activity of the legs: strong indications of futility.

Dress has the same nature as dancing. Dress yourself as others do, plain but fine, and when once you are dressed in the morning, think no more of it but go through the day as if you had nothing on at all. Adieu.

Your seat in parliament is secured. Mr. Lewis brings you in at his surest borough. Break up your little establishment and come home to me: Your game begins.

Before kings meet, ministers adjust even the armchairs so they know what to expect. We want no such distrustful preliminaries: You know my tenderness, I your affection. I shall make your stay with me useful. Not perhaps pleasant: I have my glisters to administer, to inject your youth with my experience. The smallest error will not pass but call forth a look at the time, correction later on.

I am anxious at your debut upon the great stage, for I distrust your outward air. Sir Charles Williams—your witness—tells me you are inattentive. Sir Isaac Newton had a right to be inattentive from that thought his

investigations required. Do you claim that indulgence? If when we meet you are absent in mind, I warn you, I will soon be absent in body. Good! God! If you come into my room on two left legs, clothes hanging, twirling your hat, muttering, blushing, a finger in your nose? If at table you knock over my glass or hack a chicken for half an hour, slopping your sleeve in gravy? It would endanger my health. I would rise from table to escape the fever.

Think of my friend Mr. Lewis. No man better—but you have seen him. He leaves his hat in one room, his sword in another—would leave his shoes in a third if they weren't buckled to his feet. His head—hanging from a scrag neck—has received the first stroke upon the block. His arms and legs have undergone the question extraordinary upon the rack. He dances so disjointed it is grotesque. I have hinted—oh, I have hinted. Now when my piece is to be exhibited to the public: The graces! The graces! The graces! Adieu.

"You inform me of a very agreeable piece of news, namely, my election to parliament is secured." This is not elegant. "Namely?" Stiff, formal. Use "that is": "that is, my election is secured." You spell induce

E N. You spell grandeur U R E. My housemaids would not make these mistakes. One false spelling can fix ridicule upon you for the rest of your life. I knew a man who spelled wholesome without the W. He never recovered.

Two months from now your fate will be determined—one way or the other. Spectators make allowance for youth, but they will rank you by your eloquence. Your speaking must shine. I have spoken in parliament—with applause. There is little to it. Every assembly is mob—one never talks mere reason to the mob. Give them a few harmonious periods in a speech, they go home humming the tunes like people from the opera. The recipe is: Take a pinch of common sense, add some application to House rules, throw obvious thoughts in a new light, stir it up with handfuls of style. Do not overvalue your audience. When I first entered the House, I felt awe. That vanished when I found not thirty could understand reason. I spoke the first time with little concern, the second time with less, the third with none at all. Yet the people look upon a fine speaker as a phenomenon. If he walks in the Park they stare at him and cry, That is he!

I knew a young man elected to parliament laughed at for being seen through the keyhole speaking to himself in the glass. I could not join in that laugh. I thought him wise.

[Looks briefly toward door.]

I look forward to our meeting like a bride to her wedding night: Wishes, hopes, fears—agitate—terrify me. I expect pleasure but fear pain. Adieu! P.S. I forgot to give you one commission when you come over: Bring the Graces with you.

[BLACKOUT.]

[LIGHTS RISE.]

My dear friend: I heartily congratulate you upon the loss of your political maidenhead. I hear good accounts of your first speech. Two good judges sent me compliments, though they perceived you said neither all nor perhaps what you intended. You were stopped in your career—

[pause]

but recovered breath and finished. You are mortified without reason. I know the dreadful feeling of first standing up in that chamber. I am glad you stopped. Speaking in public is but a knack, and though one may not speak like Pitt, one may make a good figure in a second rank.

[Makes gesture of cancellation.]

You have set out well. Adieu.

I have disposed of your seat advantageously. Not Parliament but courts are to be the theatres of your wars! From the beginning your education was calculated for the department of foreign affairs. I think the King—after your final polish at the court of Turin—will name you his Resident at—well, Ratisbon, or perhaps Dresden. After that? It is up to you.

A general map of courts shows the ways to be crooked, that the flowers strewn over the ground conceal pits. All the paths are slippery—every slip is dangerous. Nothing is what it appears to be. The springs of everything at courts are ambition and avarice. They

create and dissolve friendships—make enemies, reconcile them. As you know, courts are the very seats of politeness, of the highest good breeding: Were they not, those who now embrace, would stab each other. Good manners, only, interpose.

Homer supposes Jupiter letting down a chain to the earth to connect him with mortals. So at court a chain connects the prince with the page of the backstairs. That page rules his lover, a chambermaid who in turn rules her mistress, who has influence over her lover—and on ad infinitum. Offend nobody at court. No one is so low that by the strange vicissitudes of human affairs he may not gain power over you. Break no link by which you climb up to the prince. Adieu.

You arrive at Turin fit for the final rubbing. Here is a little art which may assist you there. I allude to that pleasing flattery delivered behind people's backs—of course in front of those who will repeat it. Praise the great men the House of Savoy has produced. Observe that nature redoubled her efforts to produce King— King— I forget his name. Wonder where it will end—shake your head, throw up your hands, ask, In the domination of all Europe?

[Is seen to laugh.]

The highest flattery? Imitation. Suppose you invite somebody to dine. Provide their favorite dish, not without saying, "I saw you enjoy this, therefore I ordered it." "I saw you like this wine." The more trifling the thing, the more flattering your attentiveness.

The Earl of Shaftesbury launched a campaign of imitation when he wished to be a favorite with Charles the Second. The King's passion was women, so my Lord kept a whore, whom he made no use of, had no occasion for. The King heard of her, asked him if it was true. He said it was, adding he had more besides, for he loved variety. At his next levee the King saw him at a distance and said, "One wouldn't think that little man to be the greatest whoremaster in England, but I assure you he is." Lord Shaftesbury saw the general smile. The King said, "This concerns you, my Lord."

"Me, Sir?"

"I said you are the greatest whoremaster in England. Is it not true?"

Replied Lord Shaftesbury, "Perhaps I am, Sir—"

[bows]

"—of a subject."

Receiving my letters, I imagine you say, Will he never have done? Has he not said everything over and over again? No, no, no, no, no: I grudge no trouble which can help you.

Talking the other day with Sir Charles Williams, I expressed anxiety at your neglect of the graces, your want of—

He interrupted me.

"That douceur his father is master of"—he said—"is not in his nature."

I denied it. We may improve nature, I remarked.

"What! Would you have him be perfect?"

Why not?

"Impossible!"

Then as near perfect as possible. Those who aim at the mark come closer than those who leave it to chance.

"But he has a good heart, a good head. What more would you have?"

Everything more that adorns a character: manner, air, address—

"You lay too much stress on things of little consequence."

[Reacts.]

"Well, did you ever know anybody who united luster to weight, joined a courtier's grace to a statesman's solidity?"

[Stands stiffly.]

Yes, I did: The Duke of Marlborough possessed the graces to the highest degree. His figure and manner were irresistible by man or woman. Ignorant of books—extremely knowing in men. Our greatest general, sublimest diplomat. Always cool. Never any variation in his countenance. He wound up his whole machine to please. All art—no man was ever more ambitious or avaricious.

I told him, what hinders my boy from becoming another Marlborough? We wagered fifty guineas. You may win them for me.

I ask again for what I have asked for before: Admit me to your fireside, converse with me in your everyday clothes, as a friend, about your private life. Tell me your allotment of the day. How does the King's Resident at Dresden pass his evenings? What houses do you frequent? Who frequents yours? Are you forming connections? Have you vowed one of those eternal passions which lasts a month? In short,

[thumps floor]

let me in!

Few fathers care for their sons. Most care more for their money. And of those who do love their sons, few know how. They hurt them by indulgence. As fathers go, it is seldom a misfortune to be fatherless. Considering the general run of sons— You and I form the exception. Nineteen fathers in twenty—every mother—would have ruined you. Look at the Lewises, how they spoiled their son and now quarrel with him because the world forgets to treat him as mama and papa did. You cannot make me these reproaches. I never loved you in that mistaken manner. Our relations are based on truth and affection, and neither of us would change our position if we could. It is plain I have no motive in whatever I say to you but love. Adieu.

You will have read of poor Sir Charles Williams. He remains in confinement, they say for life: incurably insane—been so apparently for years. He came ranting to me that the King of Prussia was embarked on the conquest of England, then proceeded to Court, where at first they laid his exhibitions to drink, but after he took off every stitch of his clothing, chased the King the length of the state apartments, veritably offering to mount the throne of England—they handed him into

the care of the doctors. Who can say whence such frenzy comes? Poor human nature holds its reason precariously.

[Gradually resumes old age.]

I do not like the return of your fever. Have you taken out a patent on it, it lingers so? I am unwell too—weary of a life that may be called still life. I wish it were gout, the distemper of a gentleman. Rheumatism is the distemper of a coachman obliged to be out in all weathers. The leaves wither and fall and intimate that I must follow. I shall go without reluctance, only innate self-preservation makes me spin out my thread as long as I can—

[Ribbon breaks.]

In this silly world, where the chances against happiness are so great, philosophy is necessary. At seventy, I find nothing worth desiring or fearing. Winter comes. Take care to keep warm—your legs and feet especially—and lungs—and head. Adieu. Yours till death.

My dear friend, the outside of yours of the 4th—directed in your own crabbed hand—gave me more joy than the inside of any other letter ever did. However, I am alarmed—no, but concerned—at the return of your asthmatic complaint while fever persists. Chew a little rhubarb. I enclose some from my garden.

Exert your attention now to acquiring the ornamental parts of character. Many who aim to please grin ghastly grins, but you are the only person I ever knew who rejects the handsome face nature gave you. You beg to be excused, will not accept, but put on the mask of a German corporal. Change this front or nobody will knock at your door. Accustom your eyes to a certain softness, your mouth to easy smiles, your motions to that douceur to which—God knows why!—you are the sworn enemy. Without these graces you are fleet of one leg, lame of the other.

[Limps downstage.]

Without this last beautiful varnish, you will be nobody. With it—good breeding, manners, a spruce air, the glitter a young man should have: Somebody.

Anything. God bless you, my dear child! And restore you to perfect health!

[Opens black-bordered letter, reads it,
drops into chair.]

Dead and—married?

[Dictates, wrapping ribbon around hat.]

Mrs. Philip— Mrs. Philip Stanhope. Madam: An inflammation in my eyes obliges me to use another hand than my own to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the

[consults black-bordered letter]

—the 27th past. I— I—

[angrily stands up]

I am surprised his mother objects to the manner in which you buried your husband. All any rational creature can desire is not to be buried alive, how or where must be indifferent. Pray, I bid you bring your

boys here, to my house—your home—where I shall be glad to see you. Do not delay. Your humble servant.

Madam: I was so taken up in playing with the boys today I forgot what I meant to say: To wit, school. Let me know your pleasure as to where, I will attend to everything. Buy them everything they need, good but plain, and send me the account. From this time forward the boys shall cost you not one shilling. Your servant.

To Charles Stanhope and Philip Stanhope: I received today two the best written letters I ever saw—the one signed Charles Stanhope, the other Philip Stanhope. As for you, Charles, I do not wonder, for you will take pains. You will be a scholar, if you please. But you, Phil: You idle rogue, how came you to write so well? Do not your scrapes fill up your time?

You both say you want nothing. What grown-up people will say as much? But think and tell me what to bring you, and I will bring it. In the meantime, God bless you! Chesterfield.

[BLACKOUT]

[END OF PLAY]