

# EDGEWORTH MARIA

LEONORA

Maria Edgeworth

**Leonora**

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# Maria Edgeworth

## Leonora

### NOTE

Leonora, though not published until 1806, was commenced three years before that date: the circumstances under which it was written were to a certain extent unique in Maria Edgeworth's life; for we are told that throughout the time occupied in writing the story, she had in mind the offer of marriage made to her by Monsieur Edelcrantz, a Swedish gentleman of good position, "of superior understanding and mild manners," as she told her aunt in a letter partly written before the proposal and finished afterwards. This seems, from the biographies, to have been the only time this truly good and sensible woman was ever sought in marriage by any man; and it shows some of the good qualities she possessed, that though she refused him, yet from the respect she bore him and the esteem in which she held him, this story was written to a large extent with a view to his approbation, though we are told that she never knew whether or no he had read it.

On the next page is appended a list of the principal editions of this volume.

Leonora, by Maria Edgeworth, 2 vols., London, 1806.

– Another edition, with *Letters on Several Subjects*, and *An Essay on Self-Justification* (forming Vol. IV. of *Tales and Miscellaneous Pieces*, by Maria Edgeworth, 14 vols.), London, 1825.

– Another edition (Vol. XIII. of *Novels and Tales* of Maria Edgeworth, 18 vols.), London, 1832-33.

Many reprints from the stereotype plates of this edition have been issued in various forms and with varying arrangement of the stories.

Translated into French in 1807, and another edition in 1812.

*F. J. S.*

*LEONORA.*

## Letter i

### *Lady Olivia to Lady Leonora L –*

What a misfortune it is to be born a woman! In vain, dear Leonora, would you reconcile me to my doom. Condemned to incessant hypocrisy, or everlasting misery, woman is the slave or the outcast of society. Confidence in our fellow-creatures, or in ourselves, alike forbidden us, to what purpose have we understandings, which we may not use? hearts, which we may not trust? To our unhappy sex genius and sensibility are the most treacherous gifts of Heaven. Why should we cultivate talents merely to gratify the caprice of tyrants? Why seek for knowledge, which can prove only that our wretchedness is irremediable? If a ray of light break in upon us, it is but to make darkness more visible; to show us the narrow limits, the Gothic structure, the impenetrable barriers of our prison. Forgive me if on this subject I cannot speak – if I cannot think – with patience. Is it not fabled, that the gods, to punish some refractory mortal of the male kind, doomed his soul to inhabit upon earth a female form? A punishment more degrading, or more difficult to endure, could scarcely be devised by cruelty omnipotent. What dangers, what sorrows, what persecutions, what nameless evils awaits the woman who dares to rise above the prejudices of her sex!

"Ah! happy they, the happiest of their kind!"

who, without a struggle, submit their reason to be swathed by all the absurd bandages of custom. What, though they cripple or distort their minds; are not these deformities beauties in the eyes of fashion? and are not these people the favoured nurslings of the *World*, secure of her smiles, her caresses, her fostering praise, her partial protection, through all the dangers of youth and all the dotage of age?

"Ah! happy they, the happiest of their kind!"

who learn to speak, and think, and act by rote; who have a phrase, or a maxim, or a formula ready for every occasion; who follow —

"All the nurse and all the priest have taught."

And is it possible that Olivia can envy these *tideless-blooded* souls their happiness – their apathy? Is her high spirit so broken by adversity? Not such the promise of her early years, not such the language of her unsophisticated heart! Alas! I scarcely know, I scarcely recollect, that proud self, which was wont to defy the voice of opinion, and to set at nought the decrees of prejudice. The events of my life shall be related, or rather the history of my sensations; for in a life like mine sensations become events – a metamorphosis which you will see in every page of my history. I feel an irresistible impulse to open my whole heart to you, my dear Leonora. I ought to be awed by the superiority of your understanding and of your character; yet there is an indulgence in your nature, a softness in your temper, that dissipates fear, and irresistibly attracts confidence.

You have generously refused to be prejudiced against me by busy, malignant rumour; you have resolved to judge of me for yourself. Nothing, then, shall be concealed. In such circumstances I cannot seek to extenuate any of my faults or follies. I am ready to acknowledge them all with self-humiliation more poignant than the sarcasms of my bitterest enemies. But I must pause till I have summoned courage for my confession. Dear Leonora, adieu!

*Olivia.*

## Letter ij

### *Olivia to Leonora*

Full of life and spirits, with a heart formed for all the enthusiasm, for all the delicacy of love, I married early, in the fond expectation of meeting a heart suited to my own. Cruelly disappointed, I found – merely a husband. My heart recoiled upon itself; true to my own principles of virtue, I scorned dissimulation. I candidly confessed to my husband, that my love was extinguished. I proved to him, alas! too clearly, that we were not born for each other. The attractive moment of illusion was past – never more to return; the repulsive reality remained. The living was chained to the dead, and, by the inexorable tyranny of English laws, that chain, eternally galling to innocence, can be severed only by the desperation of vice. Divorce, according to our barbarous institutions, cannot be obtained without guilt. Appalled at the thought, I saw no hope but in submission. Yet to submit to live with the man I could not love was, to a mind like mine, impossible. My principles and my feelings equally revolted from this legal prostitution. We separated. I sought for balm to my wounded heart in foreign climes.

To the beauties of nature I was ever feelingly alive. Amidst the sublime scenes of Switzerland, and on the consecrated borders of her classic lakes, I sometimes forgot myself to happiness. Felicity, how transient! – transient as the day-dreams that played upon my fancy in the bright morning of love. Alas! not all creation's charms could soothe me to repose. I wandered in search of that which change of place cannot afford. There was an aching void in my heart – an indescribable sadness over my spirits. Sometimes I had recourse to books; but how few were in unison with my feelings, or touched the trembling chords of my disordered mind! Commonplace morality I could not endure. History presented nothing but a mass of crimes. Metaphysics promised some relief, and I bewildered myself in their not inelegant labyrinth. But to the bold genius and exquisite pathos of some German novelists I hold myself indebted for my largest portion of ideal bliss; for those rapt moments, when sympathy with kindred souls transported me into better worlds, and consigned vulgar realities to oblivion.

I am well aware, my Leonora, that you approve not of these my favourite writers: but yours is the morality of one who has never known sorrow. I also would interdict such cordials to the happy. But would you forbid those to taste felicity in dreams who feel only misery when awake? Would you dash the cup of Lethe from lips to which no other beverage is salubrious or sweet?

By the use of these opiates my soul gradually settled into a sort of pleasing pensive melancholy. Has it not been said, that melancholy is a characteristic of genius? I make no pretensions to genius: but I am persuaded that melancholy is the habitual, perhaps the natural state of those who have the misfortune to feel with delicacy.

You, my dear Leonora, will class this notion amongst what you once called my refined errors. Indeed I must confess, that I see in you an exception so striking as almost to compel me to relinquish my theory. But again let me remind you, that your lot in life has been different from mine. Alas! how different! Why had not I such a friend, such a mother as yours, early to direct my uncertain steps, and to educate me to happiness? I might have been – . But no matter what I might have been – . I must tell you what I have been.

Separated from my husband, without a guide, without a friend at the most perilous period of my life, I was left to that most insidious of counsellors – my own heart – my own weak heart. When I was least prepared to resist the impression, it was my misfortune to meet with a man of a soul congenial to my own. Before I felt my danger, I was entangled beyond the possibility of escape. The net was thrown over my heart; its struggles were to no purpose but to exhaust my strength. Virtue commanded me to be miserable – and I was miserable. But do I dare to expect your pity, Leonora, for such an attachment? It excites your indignation, perhaps your horror. Blame, despise, detest me; all this would I rather bear than deceive you into fancying me better than I really am.

Do not, however, think me worse. If my views had been less pure, if I had felt less reliance on the firmness of my own principles, and less repugnance to artifice, I might easily have avoided some appearances, which have injured me in the eyes of the world. With real contrition I confess, that a fatal mixture of masculine independence of spirit, and of female tenderness of heart, has betrayed me into many imprudences; but of vice, and of that meanest species of vice, hypocrisy, I thank Heaven, my conscience can acquit me. All I have now to hope is, that you, my indulgent, my generous Leonora, will not utterly condemn me. Truth and gratitude are my only claims to your friendship – to a friendship, which would be to me the first of earthly blessings, which might make me amends for all I have lost. Consider this before, unworthy as I am, you reject me from your esteem. Counsel, guide, save me! Without vanity, but with confidence I say it, I have a heart that will repay you for affection. You will find me easily moved, easily governed by kindness. Yours has already sunk deep into my soul, and your power is unlimited over the affections and over the understanding of

*Your obliged  
Olivia.*



**Letter ii**  
***From Lady Leonora L – to her mother, the  
Duchess of –, enclosing the preceding letters***

I am permitted to send you, my dear mother, the enclosed letters. Mixed with what you may not approve, you will, I think, find in them proofs of an affectionate heart and superior abilities. Lady Olivia is just returned to England. Scandal, imported from the continent, has had such an effect in prejudicing many of her former friends and acquaintance against her, that she is in danger of being excluded from that society of which she was once the ornament and the favourite; but I am determined to support her cause, and to do everything in my power to counteract the effects of malignity. I cannot sufficiently express the indignation that I feel against the mischievous spirit of scandal, which destroys happiness at every breath, and which delights in the meanest of all malignant feelings – the triumph over the errors of superior characters. Olivia has been much blamed, because she has been much envied.

Indeed, my dear mother, you have been prejudiced against her by false reports. Do not imagine that her fascinating manners have blinded my judgment: I assure you that I have discerned, or rather that she has revealed to me, all her faults: and ought not this candour to make a strong impression upon my mind in her favour? Consider how young, how beautiful she was at her first entrance into fashionable life; how much exposed to temptation, surrounded by flatterers, and without a single friend. I am persuaded that she would have escaped all censure, and would have avoided all the errors with which she now reproaches herself, if she had been blessed with a mother such as mine.

*Leonora L —*

## Letter iv

### *The Duchess of – to her daughter*

My dearest Child,

I must answer your last before I sleep – before I can sleep in peace. I have just finished reading the rhapsody which it enclosed; and whilst my mind is full and warm upon the subject, let me write, for I can write to my own satisfaction at no other time. I admire and love you, my child, for the generous indignation you express against those who trample upon the fallen, or who meanly triumph over the errors of superior genius; and if I seem more cold, or more severe, than you wish me to be, attribute this to my anxiety for your happiness, and to that caution which is perhaps the infirmity of age.

In the course of my long life I have, alas! seen vice and folly dressed in so many different fashions, that I can find no difficulty in detecting them under any disguise; but your unpractised eyes are almost as easily deceived as when you were five years old, and when you could not believe that your pasteboard nun was the same person in her various changes of attire.

Nothing would tempt you to associate with those who have avowed themselves regardless of right and wrong; but I must warn you against another, and a far more dangerous class, who, professing the most refined delicacy of sentiment, and boasting of invulnerable virtue, exhibit themselves in the most improper and hazardous situations; and who, because they are without fear, expect to be deemed free from reproach. Either from miraculous good fortune, or from a singularity of temper, these adventurous heroines may possibly escape with what they call perfect innocence. So much the worse for society. Their example tempts others, who fall a sacrifice to their weakness and folly. I would punish the tempters in this case more than the victims, and for them the most effectual species of punishment is contempt. Neglect is death to these female lovers of notoriety. The moment they are out of fashion their power to work mischief ceases. Those who from their character and rank have influence over public opinion are bound to consider these things in the choice of their associates. This is peculiarly necessary in days when attempts are made to level all distinctions. You have sometimes hinted to me, my dear daughter, with all proper delicacy, that I am too strict in my notions, and that, unknown to myself, my pride mixes with morality. Be it so: the pride of family, and the pride of virtue, should reciprocally support each other. Were I asked what I think the best guard to a nobility in this or in any other country, I should answer, VIRTUE. I admire that simple epitaph in Westminster Abbey on the Duchess of Newcastle: – "Her name was Margaret Lucas, youngest sister to the Lord Lucas of Colchester; – a noble family, for all the brothers were valiant and all the sisters virtuous."

I look to the temper of the times in forming rules for conduct. Of late years we have seen wonderful changes in female manners. I may be like the old marquis in Gil Blas, who contended that even the peaches of modern days had deteriorated; but I fear that my complaints of the degeneracy of human kind are better founded than his fears for the vegetable creation. A taste for the elegant profligacy of French gallantry was, I remember, introduced into this country before the destruction of the French monarchy. Since that time, some sentimental writers and pretended philosophers of our own and foreign countries have endeavoured to confound all our ideas of morality. To every rule of right they have found exceptions, and on these they have fixed the public attention by adorning them with all the splendid decorations of eloquence; so that the rule is despised or forgotten, and the exception triumphantly established in its stead. These orators seem as if they had been employed by Satan to plead the cause of vice; and, as if possessed by the evil spirit, they speak with a vehemence which carries away their auditors, or with a subtlety which deludes their better judgment. They put extreme cases, in which virtue may become vice, or vice virtue: they exhibit criminal passions in constant connexion with the most exalted, the most amiable virtues; thus making use of the best feelings of human nature for the worst purposes, they engage pity or admiration perpetually on the

side of guilt. Eternally talking of philosophy and philanthropy, they borrow the terms only to perplex the ignorant and seduce the imagination. They have their systems and their theories, and in theory they pretend that the general good of society is their sole immutable rule of morality, and in practice they make the variable feelings of each individual the judges of this general good. Their systems disdain all the vulgar virtues, intent upon some *beau ideal* of perfection or perfectibility. They set common sense and common honesty at defiance. No matter: their doctrine, so convenient to the passions and soporific to the conscience, can never want partisans; especially by weak and enthusiastic women it is adopted and propagated with eagerness; then they become personages of importance, and zealots in support of their sublime opinions; and they can read – and they can write – and they can talk – and they can *effect a revolution in public opinion*! I am afraid, indeed, that they can; for of late years we have heard more of sentiment than of principles; more of the rights of woman than of her duties. We have seen talents disgraced by the conduct of their possessors, and perverted in the vain attempt to defend what is unjustifiable.

Where must all this end? Where the abuse of reason inevitably ends – in the ultimate law of force. If in this age of reason women make a bad use of that power which they have obtained by the cultivation of their understanding, they will degrade and enslave themselves beyond redemption; they will reduce their sex to a situation worse than it ever experienced even in the ages of ignorance and superstition. If men find that the virtue of women diminishes in proportion as intellectual cultivation increases, they will connect, fatally for the freedom and happiness of our sex, the ideas of female ignorance and female innocence; they will decide that one is the effect of the other. They will not pause to distinguish between the use and the abuse of reason; they will not stand by to see further experiments tried at their expense, but they will prohibit knowledge altogether as a pernicious commodity, and will exert the superior power which nature and society place in their hands, to enforce their decrees. Opinion obtained freedom for women; by opinion they may be again enslaved. It is therefore the interest of the female world, and of society, that women should be deterred by the dread of shame from passing the bounds of discretion. No false lenity, no partiality in favour of amusing talents or agreeable manners, should admit of exceptions which become dangerous examples of impunity. The rank and superior understanding of a *delinquent* ought not to be considered in mitigation, but as aggravating circumstances. Rank makes ill conduct more conspicuous: talents make it more dangerous. Women of abilities, if they err, usually employ all their powers to justify rather than to amend their faults.

I am afraid, my dear daughter, that my general arguments are closing round your Olivia; but I must bid you a good night, for my poor eyes will serve me no longer. God bless you, my dear child.

## Letter v

### *Leonora to her mother*

I agree with you, my dear mother, that in these times especially, it is incumbent upon all persons, whose rank or reputation may influence public opinion, to be particularly careful to support the cause of female honour, of virtue, and religion. With the same object in view, we may however differ in the choice of means for its attainment. Pleasure as well as pain acts upon human creatures; and therefore, in governing them, may not reward be full as efficacious as punishment? Our sex are sufficiently apprised of the fatal consequences of ill conduct; the advantages of well-earned reputation should be at least as great, as certain, and as permanent.

In former times, a single finger pointed at the scutcheon of a knight challenged him to defend his fame; but the defiance was open, the defence was public; and if the charge proved groundless, it injured none but the malicious accuser. In our days female reputation, which is of a nature more delicate than the honour of any knight, may be destroyed by the finger of private malice. The whisper of secret scandal, which admits of no fair or public answer, is too often sufficient to dishonour a life of spotless fame. This is the height, not only of injustice, but of impolicy. Women will become indifferent to reputation, which it is so difficult, even by the prudence of years, to acquire, and which it is so easy to lose in a moment, by the malice or thoughtlessness of those who invent or who repeat scandal. Those who call themselves the world often judge without listening to evidence, and proceed upon suspicion with as much promptitude and severity as if they had the most convincing proofs. But because Cæsar, nearly two thousand years ago, said, that his wife ought not even to be suspected, and divorced her upon the strength of this sentiment, shall we make it a general maxim, that suspicion justifies punishment? We might as well applaud those, who when their friends are barely suspected to be tainted with the plague, drive them from all human comfort and assistance.

Even where women, from the thoughtless gaiety of youth, or the impulse of inexperienced enthusiasm, may have given some slight cause for censure, I would not have virtue put on all her gorgon terrors, nor appear circled by the vengeful band of prudes; her chastening hand will be more beneficially felt if she wear her more benign form. To place the imprudent in the same class with the vicious is injustice and impolicy; were the same punishment and the same disgrace to be affixed to small and to great offences, the number of *capital* offenders would certainly increase. Those who were disposed to yield to their passions would, when they had once failed in exact decorum, see no motive, no fear to restrain them; and there would be no pause, no interval between error and profligacy. Amongst females who have been imprudent, there are many things to be considered which ought to recommend them to mercy. The judge, when he is obliged to pronounce the immutable sentence of the law, often, with tears, wishes that it were in his power to mitigate the punishment: the decisions of opinion may and must vary with circumstances, else the degree of reprobation which they inflict cannot be proportioned to the offence, or calculated for the good of society. Among the mitigating circumstances I should be inclined to name even those which you bring in aggravation. Talents, and what is called genius, in our sex are often connected with a warmth of heart, an enthusiasm of temper, which expose to dangers from which the coldness of mediocrity is safe. In the illuminated palace of ice, the lights which render the spectacle splendid, and which raise the admiration of the beholders, endanger the fabric and tend to its destruction.

But you will tell me, dear mother, that allusion is not argument – and I am almost afraid to proceed, lest you should think me an advocate for vice. I would not shut the gates of mercy, inexorably and indiscriminately, upon all those of my own sex, who have even been *more than imprudent*.

"He taught them shame, the sudden sense of ill —

Shame, Nature's hasty conscience, which forbids  
Weak inclination ere it grows to will,  
Or stays rash will before it grows to deeds."

Whilst a woman is alive to shame, she cannot be dead to virtue. But by injudicious or incessant reproach, this principle, even where it is most exquisite, may be most easily destroyed. The mimosa, when too long exposed to each rude touch, loses its retractile sensibility. It ought surely to be the care of the wise and benevolent to cherish that principle, implanted in our nature as the guard of virtue, that principle upon which legislators rest the force of punishment, and all the grand interests of society.

My dear mother, perhaps you will be surprised at the style in which I have been writing, and you will smile at hearing your Leonora discuss the duties of legislators, and the grand interests of society. She has not done so from presumption, or from affectation. She was alarmed by your supposing that her judgment was deluded by fascinating manners, and she determined to produce *general* arguments, to convince you that she is not actuated by particular prepossession. You see that I have at least some show of reason on my side. I have forborne to mention Olivia's name: but now that I have obviated, I hope by reasoning, the imputation of partiality, I may observe that all my arguments are strongly in her favour. She had been attacked by slander; *the world* has condemned her upon suspicion merely. She has been imprudent; but I repeat, in the strongest terms, that I am *convinced of her innocence*; and that I should bitterly regret that a woman with such an affectionate heart, such uncommon candour, and such superior abilities, should be lost to society.

Tell me, my dear mother, that you are no longer in anxiety about the consequences of my attachment to Olivia.

*Your affectionate daughter,*  
*Leonora.*

## Letter vi

### *The Duchess of – to her daughter*

You lament, my dear child, that such an affectionate heart, such great abilities as Olivia's should be lost to society. Before I sympathise in your pity, my judgment must be convinced that it is reasonable.

What proofs has Lady Olivia given of her affectionate heart? She is at variance with both her parents; she is separated from her husband; and she leaves her child in a foreign country, to be educated by strangers. Am I to understand, that her ladyship's neglecting to perform the duties of a daughter, a wife, and a mother, are proofs of an affectionate heart? As to her superior talents, do they contribute to her own happiness, or to the happiness of others? Evidently not to her own; for by her account of herself, she is one of the most miserable wretches alive! She tells you that "*she went to foreign climes in search of balm for a wounded heart, and wandered from place to place, looking for what no place could afford.*" She talks of "*indescribable sadness – an aching void – an impenetrable prison – darkness visible – dead bodies chained to living ones;*" and she exhibits all the disordered furniture of a "diseased mind." But you say, that though her powers are thus insufficient to make herself happy, they may amuse or instruct the world; and of this I am to judge by the letters which you have sent me. You admire fine writing; so do I. I class eloquence high amongst the fine arts. But by eloquence I mean something more than Dr Johnson defines it to be, "the art of speaking with fluency and elegance." This is an art which is now possessed to a certain degree by every boarding-school miss. Every scribbling young lady can now string sentences and sentiments together, and can turn a period harmoniously. Upon the strength of these accomplishments they commence heroines, and claim the privileges of the order; privileges which go to an indefinite and most alarming extent. Every heroine may have her own code of morality for her private use, and she is to be tried by no other; she may rail as loudly as she pleases "at the barbarous institutions of society," and may deplore "*the inexorable tyranny of the English laws.*" If she find herself involved in delicate entanglements of crossing duties, she may break through any one, or all of them, to extricate herself with a noble contempt of prejudice.

I have promised to reason calmly; but I cannot repress the terror which I feel at the idea of my daughter's becoming the friend of one of these women. Olivia's letters are, I think, in the true heroine style; and they might make a brilliant figure in a certain class of novels. She begins with a bold exclamation on "the misfortune of being born a woman! —*the slave or the outcast of society, condemned to incessant hypocrisy!*" Does she mean modesty? Her manly soul feels it "*the most degrading punishment that omnipotent cruelty could devise, to be imprisoned in a female form.*" From such a masculine spirit some fortitude and magnanimity might be expected; but presently she begs to be pitied, for a broken spirit, and more than female tenderness of heart. I have observed that the ladies who wish to be men are usually those who have not sufficient strength of mind to be women.

Olivia proceeds in an ironical strain to envy, as "*the happiest of their sex, those who submit to be swathed by custom.*" These persons she stigmatizes with the epithet of *tideless-blooded*. It is the common trick of unprincipled women to affect to despise those who conduct themselves with propriety. Prudence they term *coldness*; fortitude, *insensibility*; and regard to the rights of others, *prejudice*. By this perversion of terms they would laugh or sneer virtue out of countenance; and, by robbing her of all praise, they would deprive her of all immediate motive. Conscious of their own degradation, they would lower everything, and everybody, to their own standard: they would make you believe, that those who have not yielded to their passions are destitute of sensibility; that the love which is not blazoned forth in glaring colours is not entitled to our sympathy. The sacrifice of the strongest feelings of the human heart to a sense of duty is to be called mean, or absurd; but the

shameless phrensy of passion, exposing itself to public gaze, is to be an object of admiration. These heroines talk of strength of mind; but they forget that strength of mind is to be shown in resisting their passions, not in yielding to them. Without being absolutely of an opinion, which I have heard maintained, that all virtue is sacrifice, I am convinced that the essential characteristic of virtue is to bear and forbear. These sentimentalists can do neither. They talk of sacrifices and generosity; but they are the veriest egotists – the most selfish creatures alive.

Open your eyes, my dear Leonora, and see things as they really are. Lady Olivia thinks it a sufficient excuse for abandoning her husband, to say, that she found "*his soul was not in unison with hers.*" She thinks it an adequate apology for a criminal attachment, to tell you that "*the net was thrown over her heart before she felt her danger: that all its struggles were to no purpose, but to exhaust her strength.*"

If she did not feel her danger, she prepared it. The course of reading which her ladyship followed was the certain preparation for her consequent conduct. She tells us that she could not endure "*the commonplace of morality, but metaphysics promised her some relief.*" In these days a heroine need not be a moralist, but she must be a metaphysician. She must "*wander in the not inelegant labyrinth;*" and if in the midst of it she comes unawares upon the monster vice, she must not start, though she have no clue to secure her retreat.

From metaphysics Lady Olivia went on to German novels. "*For her largest portions of bliss, for those rapt moments which consigned vulgar realities to oblivion,*" she owns herself indebted to those writers, who promise an ideal world of pleasure, which, like the *mirage* in the desert, bewilders the feverish imagination. I always suspected the imagination of these *women of feeling* to be more susceptible than their hearts. They want excitation for their morbid sensibility, and they care not at what expense it is procured. If they could make all the pleasures of life into one cordial they would swallow it at a draught in a fit of sentimental spleen. The mental intemperance that they indulge in promiscuous novel-reading destroys all vigour and clearness of judgment; everything dances in the varying medium of their imagination. Sophistry passes for reasoning; nothing appears profound but what is obscure; nothing sublime but what is beyond the reach of mortal comprehension. To their vitiated taste the simple pathos, which o'ersteps not the modesty of nature, appears cold, tame, and insipid; they must have *scènes* and a *coup de théâtre*; and ranting, and raving, and stabbing, and drowning, and poisoning; for with them there is no love without murder. Love, in their representations, is indeed a distorted, ridiculous, horrid monster, from whom common sense, taste, decency, and nature recoil.

But I will be calm. – You say, my dear Leonora, that your judgment has not been blinded by Lady Olivia's fascinating manners; but that you are strongly influenced in her favour by that candour, with which she has revealed to you all her faults. The value of candour in individuals should be measured by their sensibility to shame. When a woman throws off all restraint, and then desires me to admire her candour, I am astonished only at her assurance. Do not be the dupe of such candour. Lady Olivia avows a criminal passion, yet you say that you have no doubts of her innocence. The persuasion of your unsuspecting heart is no argument: when you give me any proofs in her favour, I shall pay them all due attention. In the meantime I have given you my opinion of those ladies who place themselves in the most perilous situations, and then expect you to believe them safe.

Olivia's professions of regard for you are indeed enthusiastic. She tells you, that "*your power is unlimited over her heart and understanding, that your friendship would be to her one of the greatest of earthly blessings.*" May be so – but I cannot wish you to be her friend. With whatever confidence she makes the assertion, do not believe that she has a heart capable of feeling the value of yours. These sentimental, unprincipled women make the worst friends in the world. We are often told that, "poor creatures! they do nobody any harm but themselves;" but in society it is scarcely possible for a woman to do harm to herself without doing harm to others; all her connexions must be involved in the consequences of her imprudence. Besides, what confidence can you repose in them? If you

should happen to be an obstacle in the way of any of their fancies, do you think that they will respect you or your interest, when they have not scrupled to sacrifice their own to the gratification of their passions? Do you think that the gossamer of sentiment will restrain those whom the strong chains of prudence could not hold?

O! my dearest child, forcibly as these arguments carry conviction to my mind, I dread lest your compassionate, generous temper should prevent their reaching your understanding. Then let me conjure you, by all the respect which you have ever shown for your mother's opinions, by all that you hold dear or sacred, beware of forming an intimacy with an unprincipled woman. Believe me to be

*Your truly affectionate mother.*



## Letter vij

### *Leonora to her mother*

No daughter ever felt more respect for the opinions of a parent than I do for yours, my dearest mother; but you have never, even from childhood, required from me a blind submission – you have always encouraged me to desire conviction. And now, when the happiness of another is at stake, you will forgive me if I am less disposed to yield than I should be, I hope, if my own interest or taste were alone concerned.

You ask me what proofs I have of Lady Olivia's innocence. Believe me, I have such as are convincing to my unbiassed judgment, and such as would be sufficient to satisfy all your doubts, were I at liberty to lay the whole truth before you. But even to exculpate herself, Olivia will not ruin in your opinion her husband, of whom you imagine that she has no reason to complain. I, who know how anxious she is to obtain your esteem, can appreciate the sacrifice that she makes; and in this instance, as in many others, I admire her magnanimity; it is equal to her candour, for which she is entitled to praise even by your own principles, dear mother: since, far from having *thrown off all restraint*, she is exquisitely susceptible of shame.

As to her understanding – have no persons of great talents ever been unfortunate? Frequently we see that they have not been able, by all their efforts and all their powers, to remedy the defects in the characters and tempers of those with whom they have unhappily been connected. Olivia married very young, and was unfortunately mistaken in her choice of a husband: on that subject I can only deplore her error and its consequences: but as to her disagreements with her own family, I do not think her to blame. For the mistakes we make in the choice of lovers or friends we may be answerable, but we cannot be responsible for the faults of the relations who are given to us by nature. If we do not please them, it may be our misfortune; it is not necessarily our fault. I cannot be more explicit, without betraying Lady Olivia's confidence, and implicating others in defending her.

With respect to that attachment of which you speak with so much just severity, she has given me the strongest assurances that she will do everything in her power to conquer it. Absence, you know, is the first and the most difficult step, and this she has taken. Her course of reading displeases you: I cannot defend it: but I am persuaded that it is not a proof of her taste being vitiated. Many people read ordinary novels as others take snuff, merely from habit, from the want of petty excitement; and not, as you suppose, from the want of exorbitant or improper stimulus. Those who are unhappy have recourse to any trifling amusement that can change the course of their thoughts. I do not justify Olivia for having chosen such *comforters* as certain novels, but I pity her and impute this choice to want of fortitude, not to depravity of taste. Before she married, a strict injunction was laid upon her not to read any book that was called a novel: this raised in her mind a sort of perverse curiosity. By making any books or opinions contraband, the desire to read and circulate them is increased; bad principles are consequently smuggled into families, and being kept secret, can never be subject to fair examination. I think it must be advantageous to the right side of any question, that all which can be said against it should be openly heard, that it may be answered. I do not for I know that virtue has a tongue to answer her. The more vice repeats her assertions, the better; because when familiarized, their boldness will not astound the understanding, and the charm of novelty will not be mistaken for the power of truth. We may observe, that the admiration for the class of writers to whom you allude, though violent in its commencement, has abated since they have been more known; and numbers, who began with rapture, have ended with disgust. Person of vivacious imaginations, like Olivia, may be caught at first view by whatever has the appearance of grandeur or sublimity; but if time be allowed for examination, they will infallibly detect the disproportions, and these will ever afterwards shock their taste: if you will not allow leisure for comparison – if you say, do not look at such strange

objects, the obedient eyes may turn aside, but the rebel imagination pictures something a thousand times more wonderful and charming than the reality. I will venture to predict, that Olivia will soon be tired of the species of novels which she now admires, and that, once surfeited with these books, and convinced of their pernicious effects, she will never relapse into the practice of novel reading.

"Hate when vice can bolt her arguments;"

As to her taste for metaphysical books – Dear mother, I am very daring to differ with you in so many points; but permit me to say, that I do not agree with you in detesting metaphysics. People may lose themselves in that labyrinth; but why should they meet with vice in the midst of it? The characters of a moralist, a practical moralist, and a metaphysician, are not incompatible, as we may see in many amiable and illustrious examples. To examine human motives, and the nature of the human mind, is not to destroy the power of virtue, or to increase the influence of vice. The chemist, after analysing certain substances, and after discovering their constituent parts, can lay aside all that is heterogeneous, and recompound the substance in a purer state. From analogy we might infer, that the motives of metaphysicians ought to be purer than those of the vulgar and ignorant. To discover the art of converting base into noble passions, or to obtain a universal remedy for all mental diseases, is perhaps beyond the power of metaphysicians; but in the pursuit useful discoveries may be made.

As to Olivia's letters – I am sorry I sent them to you; for I see that they have lowered, instead of raising her in your opinion. But if you criticise letters, written in openness and confidence of heart to a private friend, as if they were set before the tribunal of the public, you are – may I say it? – not only severe, but unjust; for you try and condemn the subjects of one country by the laws of another.

Dearest mother, be half as indulgent to Olivia as you are to me: indeed you are prejudiced against her, and because you see some faults, you think her whole character vicious. But would you cut down a fine tree because a leaf is withered, or because the canker-worm has eaten into the bud? Even if a main branch were decayed, are there not remedies which, skilfully applied, can save the tree from destruction, and perhaps restore it to its pristine beauty?

And now, having exhausted all my allusions, all my arguments, and all my little stock of eloquence, I must come to a plain matter of fact —

Before I received your letter I had invited Lady Olivia to spend some time at L – Castle. I fear that you will blame my precipitation, and I reproach myself for it, because I know it will give you pain. However, though you will think me imprudent, I am certain you would rather that I were imprudent than unjust. I have defended Olivia from what I believe to be unmerited censure; I have invited her to my house; she has accepted my proffered kindness; to withdraw it afterwards would be doing her irreparable injury: it would confirm all that the world can suspect: it would be saying to the censorious – I am convinced that you are right, and I deliver your victim up to you.

Thus I should betray the person whom I undertook to defend: her confidence in me, her having but for a moment accepted my protection, would be her ruin. I could not act in so base a manner.

Fear nothing for me, my best, but too anxious friend. I may do Lady Olivia some good; she can do me no harm. She may learn the principles which you have taught me; I can never catch from her any tastes or habits which you would disapprove. As to the rest, I hazard little or nothing. The hereditary credit which I enjoy in my maternal right enables me to assist others without injuring myself.

*Your affectionate daughter,  
Leonora.*

**Letter viij**  
***The Duchess of – to her daughter***

My dearest Child,  
I hope that you are in the right, and that I am in the wrong.  
*Your affectionate mother.*

## Letter ix

### *Olivia to Madame de P –*

Prepare yourself, my ever dear and charming Gabrielle, for all the torments of jealousy. Know, that since I came to England I have formed a new friendship with a woman who is interesting in the extreme, who has charmed me by the simplicity of her manners and the generous sensibility of her heart. Her character is certainly too reserved: yet even this defect has perhaps increased her power over my imagination, and consequently over my affections. I know not by what magic she has obtained it, but she has already an ascendancy over me, which would quite astonish *you*, who know my wayward fancies and independent spirit.

Alas! I confess my heart is weak indeed; and I fear that all the power of friendship and philosophy combined will never strengthen it sufficiently. O, Gabrielle! how can I hope to obliterate from my soul that attachment which has marked the colour of my destiny for years? Yet such courage, such cruel courage is required of me, and of such I have boasted myself capable. Lady Leonora L – , my new friend, has, by all the English eloquence of virtue, obtained from me a promise, which, I fear, I shall not have the fortitude to keep – but I must make the attempt – Forbid R\*\*\* to write to me – Yes! I have written the words – Forbid R\*\*\* to write to me – Forbid him to think of me – I will do more – if possible I will forbid myself henceforward to think of him – to think of love – Adieu, my Gabrielle – All the illusions of life are over, and a dreary blank of future existence lies before me, terminated only by the grave. To-morrow I go to L – Castle, with feelings which I can compare only to those of the unfortunate la Vallière when she renounced her lover, and resolved to bury herself in a cloister. – Alas! why have not I the resource of devotion?

*Your unhappy  
Olivia.*

## Letter x

### *General B – to Mr L –*

Publish my travels! – Not I, my dear friend. The world shall never have the pleasure of laughing at General B – 's trip to Paris. Before a man sets about to inform others, he should have seen, not only the surface but the bottom of things; he should have had, not only a *vue d'oiseau*, but (to use a celebrated naval commander's expression) a *vue de poisson* of his subject. By this time you must have heard enough of the Louvre and the Tuilleries, and Versailles, and la petit Trianon, and St Cloud – and you have had enough of pictures and statues; and you know all that can be known of Bonaparté, by seeing him at a review or a levee; and the fashionable beauties and *celebrated characters* of the hour have all passed and repassed through the magic lantern. A fresh showman might make his figures a little more correct, or a little more in laughable caricature, but he could produce nothing new. Alas! there is nothing new under the sun. Nothing remains for the moderns, but to practise the oldest follies and newest ways. Would you, for the sake of your female friends, know the fashionable dress of a Parisian *elegante*, see Seneca on the transparent vestments of the Roman ladies, who, like these modern belles, were generous in the display of their charms to the public. No doubt these French republicanists act upon the true Spartan principle of modesty: they take the most efficacious method to prevent their influence from being too great over the imaginations of men, by renouncing all that insidious reserve which alone can render even beauty permanently dangerous.

Of the cruelties of the revolution I can tell you nothing new. The public have been steeped up to the lips in blood, and have surely had their fill of horrors.

But, my dear friend, you say that I must be able to give a just view of the present state of French society, and of the best parts of it, because I have not, like some of my countrymen, hurried about Paris from one *spectacle* to another, seen the opera, and the play-houses, and the masked balls, and the gaming-houses, and the women of the Palais Royale, and the lions of all sorts; gone through the usual routine of presentation and public dinners, drunk French wine, damned French cookery, and "come home content." I have certainly endeavoured to employ my time better, and have had the good fortune to be admitted into the best *private societies* in Paris. These were composed of the remains of the French nobility, of men of letters and science, and of families, who, without interfering in politics, devote themselves to domestic duties, to literary and social pleasures. The happy hours I have passed in this society can never be forgotten, and the kindness I have received has made its full impression upon an honest English heart. I will never disgrace the confidence of my friends by drawing their characters for the public.

Cæsar, in all his glory, and all his despotism, could not, with impunity, force a Roman knight<sup>1</sup> to go upon the stage: but modern anecdote-mongers, more cruel and insolent than Cæsar, force their friends of all ages and sexes to appear, and speak, and act, for the amusement or derision of the public.

My dear friend, is not my resolution, never to favour the world with my tour, well grounded? I hope that I have proved to your satisfaction, that I could tell people nothing but what I do not understand, or what is not worth telling them, or what has been told them a hundred times, or what, as a gentleman, I am bound not to publish.

*Yours truly,*  
*J. B.*

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<sup>1</sup> Laberius.

## Letter xi

### *Olivia to Madame de P –*

*L – Castle.*

Friendship, my amiable and interesting Gabrielle, is more an affair of the heart than of the head, more the instinct of taste than the choice of reason. With me the heart is no longer touched, when the imagination ceases to be charmed. Explain to me this metaphysical phenomenon of my nature, and, for your reward, I will quiet your jealousy, by confessing without compunction what now weighs on my conscience terribly. I begin to feel that I can never love this English friend as I ought. She is *too English*— far too English for one who has known the charms of French ease, vivacity, and sentiment; for one who has seen the bewitching Gabrielle's infinite variety.

Leonora has just the figure and face that you would picture to yourself for *une belle Anglaise*; and if our Milton comes into your memory, you might repeat, for the quotation is not too trite for a foreigner —

"Grace is in all her steps, heaven in her eye,  
In every gesture dignity and love."

But then it is grace which says nothing, a heaven only for a husband, the dignity more of a matron than of a heroine, and love that might have suited Eve before she had seen this world. Leonora is certainly a beauty; but then a beauty who does not know her power, and who, consequently, can make no one else feel its full extent. She is not unlike your beautiful Polish princess, but she has none of the charming Anastasia's irresistible transitions from soft, silent languor, to brilliant, eloquent enthusiasm. All the gestures and attitudes of Anastasia are those of taste and sentiment, Leonora's are simply those of nature. *La belle nature*, but not *le beau idéal*. With a figure that would grace any court, or shine upon any stage, she usually enters a room without producing, or thinking of producing, any sensation; she moves often without seeming to have any other intention than to change her place; and her fine eyes generally look as if they were made only to see with. At times she certainly has a most expressive and intelligent countenance. I have seen her face enlightened by the fire of genius, and shaded by the exquisite touches of sensibility; but all this is merely called forth by the occasion, and vanishes before it is noticed by half the company. Indeed, the full radiance of her beauty or of her wit seldom shines upon any one but her husband. The audience and spectators are forgotten. Heavens! what a difference between the effect which Leonora and Gabrielle produce! But, to do her justice, much of this arises from the different *organization* of French and English society. In Paris the insipid details of domestic life are judiciously kept behind the scenes, and women appear as heroines upon the stage, with all the advantages of decoration, to listen to the language of love, and to receive the homage of public admiration. In England, gallantry is not yet *systematised*, and our sex look more to their families than to what is called society for the happiness of existence. And yet the affection of mothers for their children does not appear to be so strong in the hearts of English as of French women. In England ladies do not talk of the *sentiment of maternity* with that elegance and sensibility with which you expatiate upon it continually in conversation. They literally are *des bonnes mères de famille*, not from the impulse of sentiment, but merely from an early instilled sense of duty, for which they deserve little credit. However, they devote their lives to their children, and those who have the misfortune to be their intimate friends are doomed to see them half the day, or all day long, go through the part of the good mother in all its diurnal monotony of lessons and caresses. All this may be vastly right — it is a pity it is so tiresome. For my part I cannot conceive how persons of superior taste and talents can submit to it, unless it be to make themselves a reputation, and that you know

is done by writing and talking on the general principles, not by submitting to the minute details of education. The great painter sketches the outline, and touches the principal features, but leaves the subordinate drudgery of filling up the parts, finishing the drapery, &c., to inferior hands.

Upon recollection, in my favourite "Sorrows of Werter," the heroine is represented cutting bread and butter for a group of children: I admire this simplicity in Goethe; 'tis one of the secrets by which he touches the heart. Simplicity is delightful by way of variety, but always simplicity is worse than *toujours perdrix*. Children in a novel or a drama are charming little creatures: but in real life they are often insufferable plagues. What becomes of them in Paris I know not; but I am sure that they are never in the way of one's conversations or reveries; and it would be a blessing to society if English children were as inaudible and invisible. These things strike me sensibly upon my return to England, after so long an absence. Surely, by means of the machinery of masters, and governesses, and schools, the manufacture of education might be carried on without incommoding those who desire to see only the finished production. Here I find the daughter of an English duke, a woman in the first bloom of youth, of the highest pretensions in point of rank, beauty, fashion, accomplishments, and talents, devoting herself to the education of two children, orphans, left to her care by an elder sister. To take charge of orphans is a good and fine action; as such it touches me sensibly; but then where is the necessity of sacrificing one's friends, and one's pleasures, day after day, and hour after hour, to mere children? Leonora can persevere only from a notion of duty. Now, in my opinion, when generosity becomes duty it ceases to be virtue. Virtue requires free-will: duty implies constraint. Virtue acts from the impulse of the moment, and never tires or is tired; duty drudges on in consequence of reflection, and, weary herself, wearies all beholders. Duty, always laborious, never can be graceful; and what is not graceful in woman cannot be amiable – can it, my amiable Gabrielle? But I reproach myself for all I have written. Leonora is my friend – besides, I am really obliged to her, and for the universe would I not hint a thought to her disadvantage. Indeed she is a most excellent, a faultless character, and it is the misfortune of your Olivia not to love perfection as she ought.

My charming and interesting Gabrielle, I am more out of humour with myself than you can conceive; for in spite of all that reason and gratitude urge, I fear I cannot prefer the insipid virtues of Leonora to the lively graces of Gabrielle.

As to the cold husband, Mr L – , I neither know nor wish to know anything of him; but I live in hopes of an agreeable and interesting accession to our society to-day, from the arrival of Leonora's intimate friend, a young widow, whose husband I understand was a man of a harsh temper: she has gone through severe trials with surprising fortitude; and though I do not know her history, I am persuaded it must be interesting. Assuredly this husband could never have been the man of her choice, and of course she must have had some secret unhappy attachment, which doubtless preyed upon her spirits. Probably the object of her affection, in despair at her marriage, plighted his faith unfortunately, or possibly may have fallen a sacrifice to his constancy. I am all impatience to see her. Her husband's name was so ruggedly English, that I am sure you would never be able to pronounce it, especially if you only saw it written; therefore I shall always to you call her Helen, a name which is more pleasing to the ear, and more promising to the imagination. I have not been able to prevail upon Leonora to describe her friend to me exactly; she says only, that she loves Helen too well to over-praise her beforehand. My busy fancy has, however, bodied forth her form, and painted her in the most amiable and enchanting colours. Hark! she is just arrived. Adieu.

*Olivia.*

## Letter xij

### *From Mrs C – to Miss B –*

Having now had the honour of spending nearly a week in the society of the celebrated enchantress, Lady Olivia, you will naturally expect that I should be much improved in the art of love: but before I come to my improvements I must tell you, what will be rather more interesting, that Leonora is perfectly well and happy, and that I have the dear delight of exclaiming ten times an hour, "Ay, just as I thought it would be! – Just such a wife, just such a mistress of a family I knew she would make."

"*Not to admire*" is an art or a precept which I have not been able to practise much since I came here. Some philosophers tell us that admiration is not only a silly but a fatiguing state of mind; and I suppose that nothing could have preserved my mind from being tired to death but the quantity of bodily exercise which I have taken. I could if I pleased give you a plan and elevation of this castle. Nay, I doubt not but I could stand an examination in the catalogue of the pictures, or the inventory of the furniture.

You, Helen! – you who could not remember the colour of Lady N – 's *new* curtains after you had seen them at least a hundred times!

Lady N – was indifferent to me, and how could I hang up her curtains in my memory? By what could they hold? Do you not know, Margaret... all the fine things that I could say, and that quartos have said before me, about the association of ideas and sensations, &c.? Those we love impart to uninteresting objects the power of pleasing, as the magnet can communicate to inert metal its attractive influence.

Till Mr L – was Leonora's lover I never liked him much. I do not mean to call him inert. I always knew that he had many excellent qualities; but there was nothing in his temper peculiarly agreeable to me, and there was something in his character that I did not thoroughly understand; yet since he is become Leonora's husband I find my understanding much improved, and I dare say it will soon be so far enlarged, that I shall comprehend him perfectly.

Leonora has almost persuaded me to like Lady Olivia. Not to laugh at her would be impossible. I wish you could see the way in which we go on together. Our first setting out would have diverted you. Enter Lady Olivia breathless, with an air of theatric expectation – advances to embrace Helen, who is laughing with Leonora – her back turned towards the side of the stage at which Olivia enters – Olivia pauses suddenly, and measures Helen *with a long look*. What passes in Lady Olivia's mind at this moment I do not know, but I guess that she was disappointed wofully by my appearance. After some time she was recovered, by Leonora's assistance, from her reverie, and presently began to admire my vivacity, and to find out that I was Clarissa's Miss Howe – no, I was Lady G. – no, I was Heloise's Clara: but I, choosing to be myself, and insisting upon being an *original*, sunk again visibly and rapidly in Olivia's opinion, till I was in imminent danger of being *nobody*. Leonora again kindly interposed to save me from annihilation; and after an interval of an hour or two dedicated to letter-writing, Lady Olivia returned and seated herself beside me, resolved to decide what manner of woman I was. Certain novels are the touchstones of feeling and *intellect* with certain ladies. Unluckily I was not well read in these; and in the questions put to me from these sentimental statute-books, I gave strange judgments, often for the husband or parents against the heroine. I did not even admit the plea of destiny, irresistible passion, or *entraînement*, as in all cases sufficient excuse for all errors and crimes. Moreover, I excited astonishment by calling things by obsolete names. I called a married woman's having a lover *a crime*! Then I was no judge of virtues, for I thought a wife's making an intimate friend of her husband's mistress was scandalous and mean; but this I was told is the height of delicacy and generosity. I could not perceive the propriety of a man's liking two women at the



same time, or a woman's having a platonic attachment for half a dozen lovers; and I owned that I did not wish divorce could be as easily obtained in England as in France. All which proved that I have never been out of England – a great misfortune! I dare say it will soon be discovered that women as well as madeira cannot be good for anything till they have crossed the line. But beside the obloquy of having lived only in the best company in England, I was further disgraced by the discovery, that I am deplorably ignorant of metaphysics, and have never been enlightened by any philanthropic transcendental foreign professor of humanity. Profoundly humiliated, and not having yet taken the first step towards knowledge, the knowing that I was ignorant, I was pondering upon my sad fate, when Lady Olivia, putting her hand upon my shoulder, summoned me into the court of love, there in my own proper person to answer such questions as it should please her ladyship to ask. For instance: – "Were you ever in love? – How often? – When? – Where? – And with whom?"

Never having stood a cross-examination in public upon these points, I was not quite prepared to reply; and I was accused of giving evasive answers, and convicted of blushing. Mr L – , who was present at this examination, enjoyed, in his grave way, my astonishment and confusion, but said not one word. I rallied my spirits and my wits, and gave some answers which gained the smile of the court on my side.

From these specimens you may guess, my dear Margaret, how well this lady and I are likely to agree. I shall divert myself with her absurdities without scruple. Yet notwithstanding the flagrancy of these, Leonora persuades me to think well of Olivia; indeed I am so happy here, that it would be a difficult matter at present to make me think ill of anybody. The good qualities which Leonora sees in her are not yet visible to my eyes; but Leonora's visual orb is so cleared with charity and love, that she can discern what is not revealed to vulgar sight. Even in the very germ she discovers the minute form of the perfect flower. *The Olivia* will, I hope, in time blow out in full perfection.

*Yours affectionately,*  
*Helen C – .*

## Letter xiiij

### *Olivia to Madame de P –*

*Monday.*

O my Gabrielle! this Helen is not precisely the person that I expected. Instead of being a dejected beauty, she is all life and gaiety.

I own I should like her better if she were a little more pensive; a tinge of melancholy would, in her situation, be so becoming and natural. My imagination was quite disappointed when I beheld the quickness of her eyes and frequency of her smiles. Even her mode of showing affection to Leonora was not such as could please me. This is the first visit, I understand, that she has paid Leonora since her marriage:—these friends have been separated for many months. — I was not present at their meeting; but I came into the room a few minutes after *Helen's* arrival, and I should have thought that they had seen one another but yesterday. This *dear Helen* was quite at ease and at home in a few moments, and seemed as if she had been living with us for years. I make allowance for the ease of well-bred people. Helen has lived much in the world, and has polished manners. But the heart — the heart is superior to politeness; and even ease, in some situations, shows a want of the delicate *tact* of sentiment. In a similar situation I should have been silent, entranced, absorbed, in my sensations — overcome by them, perhaps — dissolved in tears. But in Helen there appeared no symptoms of real sensibility — nothing characteristic — nothing profound — nothing concentrated: it was all superficial, and evaporated in the common way. I was provoked to see Leonora satisfied. She assures me that Helen has uncommonly strong affections, and that her character rather exceeds than is deficient in enthusiasm. Possibly; but I am certain that Helen is in no danger of becoming romantic. Far from being abstracted, I never saw any one seem more interested and eager about every present occurrence — pleased, even to childishness, with every passing trifle. I confess that she is too much of this world for me. But I will if possible suspend my judgment, and study her a few hours longer before I give you my definitive opinion.

*Thursday.*

Well, my Gabrielle, my *definitive opinion* is that I can never love this friend of Leonora. I said that she had lived much in the world — but only in the English world: she has never seen any other; therefore, though quite in a different style from Leonora, she shocks me with the same nationality. All her ideas are exclusively English: she has what is called English good sense, and English humour, and English prejudices of *all sorts*, both masculine and feminine. She takes fire in defence of her country and of her sex; nay, sometimes blushes even to awkwardness, which one would not expect in the midst of her good breeding and vivacity. What a difference between her vivacity and that of my charming Gabrielle! as great as between the enlargement of your mind and the limited nature of her understanding. I tried her on various subjects, but found her intrenched in her own contracted notions. All new, or liberal, or sublime ideas in morality or metaphysics she either cannot seize, or seizes only to place in a ridiculous point of view: a certain sign of mediocrity. Adieu, my Gabrielle. I must send you the pictures, whether engaging or forbidding, of those with whom your Olivia is destined to pass her time. When I have no events to relate, still I must write to convey to you my sentiments. Alas! how imperfectly! — for I have interdicted myself the expression of those most interesting to my heart. Leonora, calmly prudent, coolly virtuous, knows not what it costs me to be faithful to this cruel promise. Write to me, my sympathizing, my tender friend!

*Your ever unhappy*  
*Olivia.*

## Letter xiv

### *Mrs C – to Miss B –*

*July 10th.*

Some very good people, like some very fine pictures, are best at a distance. But Leonora is not one of these: the nearer you approach the better you like her, as in arabesque-work you may admire the beauty of the design even at a distance, but you cannot appreciate the delicacy of the execution till you examine it closely, and discover that every line is formed of grains of gold almost imperceptibly fine. I am glad that the "small sweet courtesies of life" have been hailed by one sentimental writer at least. The minor virtues are not to be despised even in comparison with the most exalted. The common rose, I have often thought, need not be ashamed of itself even in company with the finest exotics in a hothouse; and I remember, that your brother, in one of his letters, observed, that the common cock makes a very respectable figure even in the grand Parisian assembly of all the stuffed birds and beasts in the universe. It is a glorious thing to have a friend who will jump into a river, or down a precipice, to save one's life: but as I do not intend to tumble down precipices, or to throw myself into the water above half a dozen times, I would rather have for my friends persons who would not reserve their kindness wholly for these grand occasions, but who could condescend to make me happy every day, and all day long, even by actions not sufficiently sublime to be recorded in history or romance.

Do not infer from this that I think Leonora would hesitate to make *great* sacrifices. I have had sufficient experience of her fortitude and active courage of mind in the most trying circumstances, whilst many who talked more stoutly shrunk from *committing* themselves by actions.

Some maxim-maker says, that past misfortunes are good for nothing but to be forgotten. I am not of his opinion: I think that they are good to make us know our winter from our summer friends, and to make us feel for those who have sustained us in adversity that most pleasurable sensation of human mind – gratitude.

But I am straying unawares into the province of sentiment, where I am such a stranger that I shall inevitably lose my way, especially as I am too proud to take a guide. Lady Olivia \*\*\*\* may perhaps be very fond of Leonora: and as she has every possible cause to be so, it is but reasonable and charitable to suppose that she is: but I should never guess it by her manner. She speaks of her friendship sometimes in the most romantic style, but often makes observations upon *the enviable coolness and imperturbability of Leonora's disposition*, which convinces me that she does not understand it in the least. Those who do not really feel always pitch their expressions too high or too low, as deaf people bellow or speak in a whisper. But I may be mistaken in my suspicions of Olivia; for *to do the lady justice*, as Mrs Candour would say, she is so affected that it is difficult to know what she really feels. Those who put on rouge occasionally are suspected of wearing it constantly, and never have any credit for their natural colour; presently they become so accustomed to common rouge, that mistaking scarlet for pale pink, they persist in laying on more and more, till they are like nothing human.

*Yours affectionately,*  
*Helen C – .*

## Letter xv

### *Olivia to Madame de P –*

I have found it! I have found it! dear Gabrielle, rejoice with me! I have solved the metaphysical problem, which perplexed me so cruelly, and now I am once more at peace with myself. I have discovered the reason why I cannot love Leonora as she merits to be loved – she has obliged me; and the nature of obligation is such, that it supposes superiority on one side, and consequently destroys the equality, the freedom, the ease, the charm of friendship. Gratitude weighs upon one's heart in proportion to the delicacy of its feelings. To minds of an ordinary sort it may be pleasurable, for with them it is sufficiently feeble to be calm; but in souls of a superior cast, it is a poignant, painful sensation, because it is too strong ever to be tranquil. In short —

""Tis bliss but to a certain bound —  
Beyond, 'tis agony."

For my own part, the very dread that I shall not be thought to express enough deprives me of the power to speak, or even to feel. Fear, you know, extinguishes affection; and of all fears the dread of not being sufficiently grateful operates the most powerfully. Thus sensibility destroys itself. — Gracious Heaven! teach me to moderate mine.

In the nature of the obligation with which Leonora has oppressed my heart, there is something peculiarly humiliating. Upon my return to this country I found the malignant genius of scandal bent upon destroying my reputation. You have no idea of the miserable force of prejudice which still prevails here. There are some women who emancipate themselves, but then unluckily they are not in sufficient numbers to keep each other in countenance in public. One would not choose to be confined to the society of people who cannot go to court, though sometimes they take the lead elsewhere. We are full half a century behind you in civilization; and your revolution has, I find, afforded all our stiffened moralists *incontrovertible* arguments against liberty of opinion or conduct in either sex.

I was thunderstruck when I saw the grave and repulsive faces of all my female acquaintance. At first I attributed everything that was strange and disagreeable to English reserve, of which I had retained a sufficiently formidable idea: but I presently found that there was some other cause which kept all these nice consciences at a distance from my atmosphere.

Would you believe it, I saw myself upon the point of being quite excluded from good society. Leonora saved me from this imminent danger. Voluntarily, and I must say nobly, if not gracefully, Leonora came forward in my defence. Vanquishing her natural English timidity, she braved the eyes, and tongues, and advice of all the prudes and old dowagers my enemies, amongst whom I may count the superannuated duchess her mother, the proudest dowager now living. When I appeared in public with a personage of Leonora's unblemished reputation, scandal, much against her will, was forced to be silent, and it was to be taken for granted that I was, in the language of prudery, perfectly innocent. Leonora, to be consistent in goodness, or to complete her triumph in the face of the world, invited me to accompany her to the country. — I have now been some weeks at this superb castle. Heaven is my witness that I came with a heart overflowing with affection; but the painful, the agonizing sense of humiliation mixed with my tenderest sentiments, and all became bitterness insufferable. O Gabrielle! you, and perhaps you alone upon earth, can understand my feelings. Adieu! — pity me — I must not ask you a single question about — I must not write the name for ever dear — What am I saying? where are my promises? — Adieu! — Adieu!

*Your unhappy*  
*Olivia.*

## Letter xvi

### *Mrs C – to Miss B –*

*July 16th.*

As I have never thought it my duty in this mortal life to mourn for the absurdities of my fellow-creatures, I should now enjoy the pleasure of laughing at Lady Olivia, if my propensity were not checked by a serious apprehension that she will injure Leonora's happiness. From the most generous motives dear Leonora is continually anxious to soothe her mind, to persuade and reason her into common sense, to re-establish her in public opinion, and to make her happy. But I am convinced that Lady Olivia never will have common sense, and consequently never can be happy. Twenty times a day I wish her at the antipodes, for I dread lest Leonora should be implicated in her affairs, and involved in her misery.

Last night this foolish woman, who unluckily is graced with all the power of words, poured forth a fine declamation in favour of divorce. In vain Leonora reasoned, expostulated, blushed. Lady Olivia cannot blush for herself; and though both Mr L – and I were present, she persisted with that vehemence which betrays personal interest in an argument. I suspect that she is going to try to obtain a divorce from her husband, that she may marry her lover. Consider the consequences of this for Leonora. – Leonora to be the friend of a woman who will brave the infamy of a trial at Doctors' Commons! But Leonora says I am mistaken, and that all this is only Olivia's way of talking. I wish then, that, if she does not intend to act like a fool, she would not talk like one. I agree with the gentleman who said that a woman who begins by playing the fool, always ends by playing the devil. Even before me, though I certainly never solicit her confidence, Lady Olivia talks with the most imprudent openness of her love affairs; not, I think, from ingenuousness, but from inability to restrain herself. Begin what subject of conversation I will, as far from Cupid as possible, she will bring me back again to him before I know where I am. She has no ideas but on this one subject. Leonora, dear kind-hearted Leonora, attributes this to the temporary influence of a violent passion, which she assures me Olivia will conquer, and that then all her great and good qualities will, as if freed from enchantment, re-assume their natural vigour. *Natural!* – there is nothing natural about this sophisticated lady. I wish Leonora would think more of herself and less of other people. As to Lady Olivia's excessive sensibility, I have no faith in it. I do not think either the lover or the passion so much to be feared for her, as the want of a lover and the habit of thinking that it is necessary to be in love. \* \* \* \* \*

*Yours affectionately,*  
*Helen C – .*

## Letter xvij *General B – to Mr L –*

*Paris, Hôtel de Courlande.*

My dear L – ,

When you ask a countryman in England the way to the next town, he replies, "Where do you come from, master?" and till you have answered this question, no information can you obtain from him. You ask me what I know of Lady Olivia – . What is your reason for asking? Till you have answered this question, hope for no information from me. Seriously, Lady Olivia had left Paris before I arrived, therefore you cannot have my judgment of her ladyship, which I presume is all you could depend upon. If you will take hearsay evidence, and if you wish me to speak to general character, I can readily satisfy you. Common repute is loud and unanimous in favour of her talents, beauty, and fashion: there is no resisting, I am told, the fascination of her manners and conversation; *but* her opinions are fashionably liberal, and her practice as liberal as her theories. Since her separation from her husband, her lover is publicly named. Some English friends plead in her favour platonic attachment: this, like benefit of clergy, is claimed of course for a first offence: but Lady Olivia's Parisian acquaintance are not so scrupulous or so old-fashioned as to think it an offence; they call it an *arrangement*, and to this there can be no objection. As a French gentleman said to me the other day, with an unanswerable shrug, "Tout le monde sait que R\*\*\* est son amant; d'ailleurs, c'est la femme la plus aimable du monde."

As to Lady Olivia's friend, Mad. de P – , she sees a great deal of company: her house is the resort of people of various descriptions; ministers, foreigners, coquettes, and generals; in short, of all those who wish without scandal or suspicion to intrigue either in love or politics. Her assemblies are also frequented by a few of *l'ancien régime*, who wish to be in favour with the present government. Mad. de P – , of a noble family herself, and formerly much at court, has managed matters so as to have regained all her husband's confiscated property, and to have acquired much influence with some of the leading men of the day. In her manners and conversation there is an odd mixture of frivolity and address, of the airs of coquetry and the jargon of sentiment. She has the politeness of a French countess, with *exquisite* knowledge of the world and of *les convenances*, joined to that freedom of opinion which marks the present times. In the midst of all these inconsistencies, it is difficult to guess what her real character may be. At first sight, I should pronounce her to be a silly woman, governed by vanity and the whim of the moment: but those who know her better than I do believe her to be a woman of considerable talents, inordinately fond of power, and uniformly intent upon her own interest, using coquetry only as a means to govern our sex, and frivolity as a mask for her ambition. In short, Mad. de P – is a perfect specimen of the combination of an *intrigante* and an *élégante*, a combination often found in Paris. Here women mingle politics and gallantry – men mix politics and epicurism – which is the better mixture?

I have business of importance to my country to transact to-day, *therefore* I am going to dine with the modern Apicius. Excuse me, my dear friend, if I cannot stay at present to answer your questions about divorce. I must be punctual. What sort of a negotiator can he make who is too late at a minister's dinner? Five minutes might change the face of Europe.

*Yours truly,*  
J. B.

## Letter xviii *Madame de P – to Olivia*

*Paris.*

My incomparable Olivia! your letters are absolutely divine. I am *maussade*, I *vegetate*. I cannot be said to live the days when I do not hear from you. Last Thursday I was disappointed of one of these dear letters, and *Brave-et-tendre* told me frankly that I was so little amiable he should not have known me. – As to the rest, pardon me for not writing punctually: I have been really in a chaos of business and pleasure, and I do not know which fatigues most. But I am obliged to attend the ministers every day, for the sake of my friends.

A thousand and a thousand thanks for your pictures of your English friends: sketches by a masterly hand must be valuable, whatever the subject. I would rather have the pictures than the realities. Your Helen and your Lady Leonora are too good for me, and I pity you from my soul for being shut up in that old castle. I suppose it is like an old castle in Dauphiny, where I once spent a week, and where I was nearly frightened to death by the flapping of the old tapestry behind my bed, and by the bats which flew in through the broken windows. They say, however, that our *châteaux* and yours are something different. Of this I have no clear conception.

I send you three comforters in your prison – a billet-doux, a new novel, and a pattern of my sandal: a billet-doux from R\*\*\* says everything for itself; but I must say something for the new novel. Zenobie, which I now send you, is the declared rival of Seraphine. Parties have run high on both sides, and applications were made and inuendoes discovered, and wit and sentiment came to close combat; and, as usual, people talked till they did not understand themselves. For a fortnight, wherever one went the first words to be heard on entering every *salon* were Seraphine and Zenobie. – Peace or war. – Mlle. Georges and Mlle. Duchesnois were nothing to Seraphine and Zenobie. For Heaven's sake tell me which you prefer! But I fear they will be no more talked of before I have your answer. To say the truth, I am tired of both heroines, for a fortnight is too long to talk or think of any one thing.

I flatter myself you will like my sandals: they are my own invention, and my foot really shows them to advantage. You know I might say, as Du P\*\*\* said of himself, "J'ai un pied dont la petitesse échappe à la vitesse de la pensée." I thought my poor friend Mad. Dumarais would have died with envy, the other day, when I appeared in them at her ball, which, by the by, was in all its decorations as absurd and in as bad taste as usual. For the most part these *nouveaux riches* lavish money, but can never purchase taste or a sense of propriety. All is gold: but that is not enough; or rather that is too much. – In spite of all that both the Indies, China, Arabia, Egypt, and even Paris can do for them, they will be ever out of place, in the midst of their magnificence: they will never even know how to ruin themselves nobly. They must live and die as they were born, ridiculous. Now I would rather not exist than feel myself ridiculous. But I believe no one living, not even le petit d'Heronville, knows himself to be an object of ridicule. There are no looking-glasses for the mind, and I question whether we should use them if there were. D'Heronville is just as you left him, and as much my amusement as he used to be yours. He goes on with an eternal galimatias of patriotism, with such a self-sufficient air and decided tone! never suspecting that he says only what other people make him say, and that he is listened to, only to find out what *some people* think. Many will say before fools what they would not hazard before wise men; not considering that fools can repeat as well as parrots. I once heard a great man remark that the only spies fit to be trusted are those who do not know themselves to be such, who have no salary but what their vanity pays them, and who are employed without being accredited.

But trêve de politique! – My charming Olivia, I know, abhors politics as much as I detest metaphysics, from all lips or pens but hers. Now I must tell you something of your friends here.

O – talks nonsense as agreeably as ever, and dances as divinely. 'Tis a pity he cannot always dance, for then he would not ruin himself at play. He wants me to get him a regiment – as if I had any power! – or as if I would use it for this purpose, when I know that my interesting friend Mad. Q – would break her poor little heart if he were to quit her.

*Mon Coeur* is as pretty as ever; but she is now in affliction. She has lost her dear little dog Corisonde. He died suddenly; almost in her arms! She will erect a monument to him in her charming *jardin Anglois*. This will occupy her, and then "Time, the comforter" – Inimitable Voltaire!

Our dear *Brillante* has just had a superb *hommage* from her lover the commissary – a necklace and bracelets of the finest pearls: but she cannot wear them yet: her brother having died last week, she is in deep mourning. This brother was not upon good terms with her. He never forgave the divorce. He thought it a disgrace to have a sister *une divorcée*; but he was full of prejudice, poor man, and he is dead, and we need think no more of him or of his faults.

Our ci-devant chanoine, who married that little Meudon, is as miserable as possible, and as ridiculous: for he is jealous of his young wife, and she is a *franche-coquette*. The poor man looks as if he repented sincerely of his errors. What a penitent a coquette can make of a husband! Bourdaloue and Massillon would have tried their powers on this man's heart in vain.

Did I tell you that Mad. G – is a second time divorced? But this time it is her husband's doing, not hers. This handsome husband has spent all the immense fortune she brought him, and now procures a divorce for *incompatibility of temper*, and is going to marry another lady, richer than Mad. G – , and as great a fool. This system of divorce, though convenient, is not always advantageous to women. However, in one point of view, I wonder that the rigid moralists do not defend it, as the only means of making a man in love with his own wife. A man divorces; the law does not permit him to marry the same woman afterwards; of course this prohibition makes him fall in love with her. Of this we have many edifying examples besides Fanchette, who, though she was so beautiful, and a tolerable actress, would never have drawn all Paris to the Vaudeville if she had not been a *divorcée*, and if it had not been known that her husband, who played the lover of the piece, was dying to marry her again. Apropos, Mad. St Germain is acting one of her own romances, in the high sublime style, and threatens to poison herself for love of her perjured inconstant – but it will not do.

Madame *la Grande* was near having a sad accident the other night: in crossing the Pont-neuf her horses took fright; for there was a crowd and *embarras*, a man having just drowned himself – not for love, but for hunger. How many men, women, and children, do you think, drowned themselves in the Seine last year? Upwards of two hundred. This is really shocking, and a stop should be put to it by authority. It absolutely makes me shudder and reflect; but *après nous le déluge* was La Pompadour's maxim, and should be ours.

Mad. Folard *se coiffe en cheveux*, and Mad. Rocroix crowns herself with roses, whilst all the world knows that either of them is old enough to be my mother. In former days a woman could not wear flowers after thirty, and was *bel esprit* or *dévot*e at forty, for it was thought bad taste to do otherwise. But now everybody may be as young as they please, or as ridiculous. Women have certainly gained by the new order of things.

Our poor friend *Vermeille* se meurt de la poitrine – a victim to tea and late hours. She is an interesting creature, and my heart bleeds for her: she will never last till winter.

Do you know, it is said, we shall soon have no wood to burn. What can have become of all our forests? People should inquire after them. The Venus de Medicis has at last found her way down the Seine. It is not determined yet where to place her: but she is at Paris, and that is a great point gained for her. You complained that the Apollo stands with his back so near the wall, that there is no seeing half the beauties of his shoulders. If I have any influence, Venus shall not be so served. I have been to see her. She is certainly divine – but not French. I do not despair of seeing her surpassed by our artists.

Adieu, my adorable Olivia. I should have finished my letter yesterday; but when I came home in the morning, expecting to have a moment sacred to you and friendship, who should I find established



in an arm-chair in my cabinet but our old countess *Ci-devant*. There was no retreat for me. In the midst of my concentrated rage I was obliged to advance and embrace her, and there was an end of happiness for the day. The pitiless woman kept me till it was even too late to dress, talking over her family misfortunes; as if they were anything to me. She wants to get her son employed, but her pride will not let her pay her court properly, and she wants me to do it for her. Not I, truly. I should shut my doors against her but for the sake of her nephew *le roué*

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