LETTERS OF LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU

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LADY MARY MONTAGU belongs to that class of writers widely but not intimately known. Everyone who pretends to an acquaintance with English authors is aware that she wrote about life in Turkey, and that she was connected with the introduction into Britain of inoculation against smallpox, but her letters have never attained the popularity of Horace Walpole's, and even among educated people comparatively few are now familiar with them.

Some twenty-five years before George I rather unwillingly left the court of Hanover to become King of England, Mary Pierrepont was born in the circle of Whig aristocracy. As her mother died when she was a small child, she was sent to live for some years with her paternal grandmother, who was one of the distinguished Evelyn family, and who no doubt gave a bent to the girl's mind, an influence that was strengthened by a regular correspondence between the two after Mary returned to her father's care. As a girl in her "teens" she lived part of the year at the London home of her father, and the rest at one of his country houses under the charge of an old governess, who, she says, was a hindrance rather than a help to her education. In fact she was almost entirely self-educated. Accustomed to browse freely in the libraries of her grandmother and her father, she read the popular French romances of the day in an Englished form. She taught herself Latin, and acquired considerable knowledge of classical antiquities. Occasionally when in London she had masters in French and Italian. She received encouragement and some instruction from the famous Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury, to whom she dedicated her translation of Epictetus. In a letter written from the country in her twentieth year she tells about being much alone: "I have leisure to pass whole days in reading . . . My study at present is nothing but dictionaries and grammars." Of her neighbours here she wrote, forty years before her cousin, Henry Fielding, drew his famous picture of Squire Western: "Insensible of other pleasures than hunting and drinking . . . Their mornings are spent among hounds, and the nights with as beastly companions, with what liquor they can get."

She had a long life before her—something over the three score and ten—which falls into four unequal periods, each with its characteristic letters. Instead of commenting on them in general, we shall try to get closer to the subject by considering each group in turn. The periods are as follows: *First*, courtship and early married life, with the odd love-letters to Mr. Wortley; *Second*, the short term of her husband's office when he was ambassador to Turkey, with the famous letters to friends in England; *Third*, a long stretch of twenty-one years in England, for which comparatively few letters have been preserved, the most important being a group written to her sister, Lady Mar, in Paris; *Fourth*, her residence on the Continent from her fiftieth to her seventieth year, with an important series of letters to her daughter, Lady Bute.

I. Courtship and Early Married Life—1708-1716
Age, 19-27

Among the friends of her girlhood were the Misses Wortley, with one of whom, Anne, Lady Mary used to exchange letters. In the background prompting Anne was her brother Edward attracted by his sister's intelligent and vivacious correspondent; not long after Anne's untimely death we find him writing in his own name to Lady Mary and receiving answers from her. Love letters I suppose we may call them, though they are coloured with fault-finding, and Edward expresses more dissatisfaction and distrust than love. Nevertheless, before long they were discussing marriage, often in no hopeful spirit. After a cool meeting Wortley writes that his reason is against the match: "I condemn what I do, and yet I fear I must do it"; and she, while confessing her affection, declares, "Now I will oblige you with a new proof of my generosity—I'll never see you more . . . and this is the last letter I shall send. If you write, be not displeased if I send it back unopened." Yet in spite of all the bickering neither was willing to break the bond that had grown up between them. It is easy to understand the fascination drawing Wortley to Lady Mary, a beautiful young girl, high-born and high-spirited, not unacquainted with the frivolities of London Town and the gatherings at Nottingham races, unusually well read for the times, independent in judgment, witty, and accustomed to speak or write in a ready, lively style. But it is not so easy to see why she put up so much with him. True, he was personable, of good family, wealthy, well educated,

and a friend of the prominent writers of the time—Congreve, Addison and Steele—but rather cold and cautious, and slightly inclined to dullness and commonplace. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these "love letters" are without expressions of affection.

Edward writes, "I would die to be secure of your heart, though but for a moment." She often confesses her preference for him without any flame of passion: "I can esteem, I can be a friend, but I don't know whether I can love;" and again, "Did you really esteem me, had you any tender regard for me, I could, I think, pass my life in any station happier with you than in all the grandeur of the world with any other."

At last Mr. Wortley applied to Lady Mary's father for his daughter's hand, and was favourably received on condition that he agree to settle his entire estate on his hypothetical eldest son. With this condition the suitor would not comply; whereupon the Earl broke off negotiations, saying that he had no inclination to see his grandchildren beggars. Not long afterwards in the usual eighteenth century fashion, he decided to bestow his daughter elsewhere. A suitor considered eligible presented himself, and the daughter was instructed to accept. When she objected that she did not love the man, she was told that there was no necessity of loving, that there were very few women in London in love with their husbands, and yet many were happy. Faced with this exigency, the pair decided to defy the father and elope.

After their marriage Mr. Wortley was absent from home for weeks at a time, occupied in London with his political career, though not making much progress. With the accession of George I, however, and the triumph of the Whigs, he was appointed to a responsible post; and two years later, through the influence of his friend Addison and his relative Lord Halifax, he was named Ambassador to the Porte.

Though the letters of this first period are less important than subsequent ones, they are not without their own attractions. In them we find early instances of Lady Mary's characteristic ways of thinking and expressing herself. For example she displays a quality not common in youth,—the predominance of common sense and reason over romantic feeling. She writes that everyone desires happiness, and in her imagination the key to a happy married life is *friendship* between the married pair:

> I rather choose to use the word *friendship* than *love*; because in the general sense that word is spoke, it signifies a passion rather founded on fancy than reason; and when I say friendship, I mean a mixture of tenderness and esteem, and which a long acquaintance increases, not decays . . . an entire communication of thoughts, wishes, interests, and pleasures . . . a mutual esteem which naturally carries with it a pleasing sweetness of conversation, and terminates in the desire of making one or another happy.

The witty, ironical mood which so frequently possesses her when writing later to her sister, Lady Mar, is reflected in a letter written from York some time after her marriage. The cold climate of York, she declares, causes "love to be as forced up here as melons"; hence they find the case of Mr. Vanbrugh, (the well-known dramatist) ridiculous:

> Heaven, no doubt, compassionating our dullness, has inspired him with a passion that makes us all ready to die with laughing; 'tis credibly reported that he is endeavouring at the honourable state of matrimony, and vows to lead a sinful life no more. Whether pure holiness inspires his mind, or dotage turns his brain, is hard to find . . . But you know Van's taste was always odd; his inclination to ruins has given him a fancy for Mrs. Yarborough; he sighs and ogles that it would do your heart good to see him; and she is not a little pleased (that) ,in so small a proportion of men amongst such a number of women, a whole man should fall to her share.

II. Letters from Turkey—1716-1718. Age, 27-29

These letters first brought fame to Lady Mary, and notwithstanding the flight of over two hundred years, time has scarcely withered their freshness. Placed in a new and strange environment, endowed with a lively curiosity an enquiring mind and a talent for description, accustomed to make unconventional and independent appraisal of what she saw and learned as well as witty comments on it, she wrote accounts of perennial vitality. Moreover there was considerable variety in her correspondents, from lady friends interested chiefly in dress, jewels, and the usages of Turkish society, to learned men like the Abbé Conti, to whom, among lighter topics, she wrote about Turkish notions of life and morals, and the Mohammedan religion.

The newly appointed ambassador to the Porte left England with his wife and small son in August, 1716, and did not arrive at their destination till the following March. They took the overland route, going by Rotterdam, Cologne, Vienna, and

Belgrade. Their long stay at Vienna was broken by a trip into Germany with a visit of some weeks at Hanover, where George I and the Prince of Wales were staying at the time. From the different places at which they stopped on this leisurely journey Lady Mary sent to her friends in England lively accounts of continental court life and social customs. These, however, we shall pass over, coming directly to the letters from Constantinople.

To her sister she describes in detail her Turkish dress, and adds some particulars of what would now be called "beauty-parlor practices" among the ladies of the Ottoman capital. "They generally shape their eyebrows; and the Greeks and Turks have a custom of putting round their eyes (on the inside) a black tincture that, at a distance or by candle-light, adds very much to the blackness of them." She goes on to say, "They dye their nails a rose-colour. I own I cannot enough accustom myself to this fashion to find any beauty in it"; an opinion with which hosts of men and women to-day will agree. Her experience with a beauty lotion was unpleasant:

> I have had a present of a small quantity . . . of the best sort and with great joy applied it to my face, expecting some wonderful effect to my advantage. The next morning the change indeed was wonderful; my face was swelled to a very extraordinary size, and all over as red as my Lady B's. It remained in this lamentable state three days . . . and to add to my mortification Mr. W. reproached my indiscretion without ceasing. However my face is since in *statu quo*; nay,I am told by the ladies here that it is much mended by the operation, which, I confess, I cannot perceive in my looking-glass.

The interior of the harem she describes as richly decorated and furnished with fine carpets. At one end of the rooms the floor is raised to form a sort of sofa which is covered with rich cloth and supplied with many cushions covered with silk and satin shot through with threads of gold; and Lady Mary declares, "These seats are so convenient and easy I shall never endure chairs as long as I live". The ladies spent most of their time, however, in the chiosk or latticed garden-room, busied with their music or embroidery. The oddest dwelling that she mentions belonged to a schoolmaster, who, on being asked to show her his own apartment, pointed to a large cypress tree in the garden, on the top of which was a place for a bed for himself, and a little lower, one for his wife and two children, who slept there every night: "I was so diverted with the fancy I resolved

to examine his nest nearer; but after going up fifty steps I found I had still fifty to go, and then I must climb from branch to branch with some hazard of my neck. I thought it the best way to come down again." The incident well illustrates Lady Mary's lively curiosity as well as her energy.

Of movable furniture she has little to say, though she does mention one extraordinary article:

> (Their way of warming themselves is by) a machine called a *tendour*, the height of two feet, in the form of a table, covered with a fine carpet or embroidery. This is made only of wood, and they put into it a small quantity of hot ashes, and sit with their legs under the carpet. At this table they work, read, and very often sleep; and if they chance to dream, kick down the *tendour*, and the hot ashes commonly set the house on fire. There were five hundred houses burnt in this manner about a fortnight ago.

She gives a lively description of a ladies' public bath where about two hundred women and girls were present. She was in travelling dress, but was the only person in the room that was clothed; and when the principal Turkish lady would have undressed her for the bath, she excused herself: "I was at last forced to open my shirt and show them my stays; which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine that it was not in my power to open it—which contrivance they attributed to my husband."

One reason for the freshness of these old letters is the writer's interest in people; either groups in movement such as the great processional pageant at the sultan's army camp, or individuals like the Turkish ladies of high degree who entertained her. Her dinner with the Grand vizier's lady, a simple devout woman of about fifty, her visit to the beautiful Fatima which so charmed her that she wrote, "I could not help fancying that I had been some time in Mahomet's paradise", and her reception by the Sultana Hafitèn, constant to the memory of her murdered lord—all are sketched with spirit for her English friends. Her liveliness of body and mind led her to go sight-seeing in Constantinople masked in a Turkish veil, which "is become not only very easy but agreeable to me; and if it was not, I would be content to endure some inconveniency to content a passion so powerful with me as curiosity." Her informality was in marked contrast to the love of ceremony of her friend, the wife of the French ambassador, who when she went abroad. was always attended by a large retinue.

Along with her other activities she tried to keep up her studies. In a letter to Pope she enclosed a translation of a Turkish love lyric with the remark, "You see I am pretty far gone in Oriental learning; and to say truth, I study very hard." Elsewhere she gave an outline of her week's programme: "Tuesday is devoted to reading English—Wednesday, studying the Turkish language—Thursday, classical authors—Friday, spent in writing."

Her descriptions are often enlivened by witty asides, as when she tells of being shown a picture of the Virgin Mary drawn by the hand of St. Luke, and adds, "Very little to the credit of his painting". When telling the Abbé Conti of the Mohammedan teaching about women, how if they are to be admitted to the inferior paradise prepared for good females, they must get married and have children, she comments, "This is a piece of theology very different from that which teaches nothing to be more acceptable to God than a vow of perpetual virginity; which divinity is most rational, I leave you to determine".

We may pass over her accounts of the Koran and the Mohammedan religion, but note this report of a peculiar sect that she came across in Bulgaria:

> These people living between Christians and Mahometans, and not being skilled in controversy, declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best; but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they very prudently follow both, and go to the mosques on Fridays and to the church on Sundays, saying for their excuse, that at the day of judgment they are sure of protection from the true prophet; but which that is, they are not able to determine in this world. I believe there is no other race of mankind have so modest an opinion of their own capacity.

That she learned a good deal about eastern manners, morals, and sects, there is no doubt. On their way out the Wortleys were detained at Belgrade (then in Turkish hands) for three weeks, and were lodged in the house of an effendi (scholar, lawyer, and priest) with whom she talked every day, thus learning more about Mohammedan doctrine and ways of life, she declared, than any Christian had done before. Her curiosity led her to visit a monastery of dervishes, to attend their service and observe their solemn dance as they "whirled round with an amazing swiftness for above an hour without any of them showing the least appearance of giddiness". She thought the Armenians "perhaps the devoutest Christians in the whole

world", apparently because they observed several Lents, amounting to at least seven months in every year. They were very strict about these fasts; eating only herbs or roots (without oil) and plain dry bread. One of Mr. Wortley's interpreters who held this faith nearly starved to death, yet the doctor who was called in could not prevail on him to take some spoonfuls of broth to save his life.

The finding of the body of a young woman with knife wounds in the breast not far from her house led to this comment on Turkish law:

> Very little enquiry was made about the murderer . . . Murder is never pursued by the King's officers as with us . . . 'Tis the business of the next relations to revenge the dead person; and if they like better to compound the matter for money (as they generally do), there is no more said about it.

In some respects, however, she thought Turkish law superior to English. For instance, convicted liars being proved the authors of any notorious falsehood were burned in the forehead with a hot iron:

> How many white foreheads should we see disfigured, how many fine gentlemen would be forced to wear their wigs as low as their eyebrows, were this law in practice with us!

The fact most widely known about Lady Mary's residence in Constantinople is that there she observed inoculation against small-pox, became convinced of its efficacy, and introduced the practice into England. It was in April, 1717, that she first mentioned this preventive of a disease that for centuries had been a terrible scourge in England and all through Europe. This is what she learned, as she told it in a letter:

> The small-pox, so fatal and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless by the invention of *ingrafting*, which is the term they give it. There is a set of old women who make it a business to perform the operation every autumn . . . People send to one another to know if any of their family has a mind to have the small-pox; they make parties for this purpose, and when they are met . . . the old woman comes with a nut-shell full of the matter of the best sort of small-pox and asks what veins you please to have opened. She immediately rips open that you offer to her with a large needle (which gives you no more pain than a common scratch), and puts into the vein as much venom as can lie upon the head of her needle, and after binds up the little wound with a hollow bit of shell; and in this manner opens

four or five veins . . . The children or young patients play together all the rest of the day, and are in perfect health to the eighth. Then the fever begins to seize them, and they keep their beds two days, very seldom three. They have very rarely above twenty or thirty pocks in their faces, which never mark; and in eight days time they are as well as before their illness . . . There is no example of anyone that has died in it; and you may believe I am very well satisfied of the safety of this experiment, since I intend to try it on my dear little son.

A crude operation by present-day standards, it yet foreshadowed one of the most important steps in the history of modern medicine. Nearly a year after the date of this letter she reported to her husband, "The boy was engrafted last Tuesday, and is at this time singing and playing, and very impatient for his supper. I pray God my next may give as good an account of him". A few years after her return to England, in a letter to her sister in Paris, she remarked on the "growth and spreading of the inoculation of the small-pox, which is become almost a general practice"; and a little later she added, "I know nobody that has hitherto repented the operation: though it has been very troublesome to some fools, who would rather be sick by the doctor's prescriptions than in health in rebellion to the college". How inoculation was superseded by vaccination due to the researches of Jenner is another story. Her scepticism about orthodox medical practice of the day found expression in a number of letters: for instance when tar water was a popular remedy, she wrote:

I find tar water succeeded to Ward's drop. 'Tis possible by this time that some other quackery has taken place of that; the English are easier than any other nation infatuated by the prospect of universal medicines, nor is there any country in the world where the doctors raise such immense fortunes. I attribute it to the fund of credulity which is in all mankind. We no longer have faith in miracles and relics, and therefore with the same fury run after recsipe and physicians.

(*To be continued in April issue of the* REVIEW)