FAMILIAR LETTERS

Henry Fielding

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NOTE.

The following five letters were given me by the Author of the preface. I should have thought this hint unnecessary, had not much nonsense and scurrility been unjustly imputed to him by the *good judgment* or *good−nature* of the age. They can know but little of his writings, who want to have them pointed out; but they know much less of him, who impute any such base and scandalous productions to his pen.

Letter cli.

A letter from a French gentleman to his friend in Paris; in imitation of Horace, Addison, and all other writers of travelling letters.

Done into English.

MONSIEUR,

AT Whitehall we took a pair of oars for Putney. These we had indeed some difficulty to procure; for many refused to go with us farther than Foxhall or Ranelagh Gardens. At last we prevailed with two fellows for three half−crowns to take us on board.

I have been told there was formerly a law regulating the fares of these people; but that is to be sure obsolete. I think it pity it was not revived.

As the weather was extremely fine, we did not regret the tide's running against us, since by that means we had more opportunity of making observations on the finest river in the world except the Seine.

After taking a survey of the New Bridge, which must be greatly admired by all who have not seen the Pontneuf, we past by a row of buildings, not very remarkable for their elegance, being chiefly built of wood, and irregular. Many of them are supported by pillars; but of what order we could not plainly discern.

We came now to Lambeth, where is a palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the metropolitan of England. This is a vast pile of building, not very beautiful indeed in its structure, but wonderfully well calculated, as well to signify, as to answer the use for which it was, I suppose, originally intended; containing a great number of little apartments for the reception of travelling and distressed Christians.

Lambeth is perhaps so called from Lamb, which is the type of meekness.

The next place of note, as we ascend the river, is Fox−Hall, or rather Fox−Hole, the first syllable of which is corrupted into Vaux by the vulgar, who tell a foolish story of one Vaux who resided here, and attempted to blow up the Thames. But the true reading is Fox−Hole, as appears by an ancient piece of painting, representing that animal whence it takes its name, and which is now to be seen on a high wooden pillar, *Anglice* a sign−post, not far from the landing−place.

A very little farther stands Marble−Hall, of which we had a full view from the water. This is a most august edifice, built all of a rich marble, which, reflecting the sun−beams, creates an object too dazzling for the sight.

Having passed this, we were entertained with a most superb piece of architecture of white, or rather yellow brick. This belongs to one of the *bourgeois*, as do indeed most of the villas which border on both sides this river, and they tend to give as magnificent an idea of the riches which flow in to these people by trade, as the shipping doth, which is to be seen below the bridge of London.

Hence a range of most delicious meadows begins to open, which, being richly enamelled with flowers of all kinds, seem to contend whether they shall convey most pleasure to your sight or to your smell. Our contemplation was however diverted from this scene by a boat, in which were two young ladies extremely handsome, who accosted us in some phrase which we, who thought ourselves pretty good masters of the English tongue, did not understand. They were answered however by our watermen, who afterwards told us, that this is called water−language; and consequently, I suppose, not to be learned on shore.

The next place which presents itself on the Surry side (for I reserve the other shore for my return) is the pleasant village of Battersea; the true reading of which we conjectured to be Bettersee; and that it was formerly a bishoprick, and had the preference to Shelsee, of which we shall speak anon. It is chiefly famous at present for affording a retreat to one of the greatest statesmen of his time, who hath here a magnificent palace.

From Bettersee, verging to the south−west, stands Wanser, as it is vulgarly called; but its true name was undoubtedly Windmill−Shore, from whence it is a very easy corruption; and several windmills are yet to be found in its neighbourhood. Here are to be seen a parish church, and some houses; but it is otherwise little worth the curiosity of travellers.

As you sail from hence, two lofty towers at once salute your eyes from opposite shores of the river, divided by a magnificent wooden bridge. That on the Surry shore is called Putney or Putnigh, a fair and beautiful town, consisting principally of one vast street, which extends from north to south, and is adorned with most beautiful buildings.

Here we went ashore, in order to regale ourselves in one of their houses of entertainment, as they are called; but in reality there is no entertainment at them. Here were no tarts nor cheesecakes, nor any sort of food but an English dish called *bread and cheese*, and some raw flesh.

But if it be difficult to find anything to allay hunger, it is still more so to quench your thirst. There is a liquor sold in this country which they call wine (most of the inhabitants indeed call it *wind*). Of what ingredients it is composed I cannot tell; but you are not to conceive, as the word seems to import, that this is a translation of our French word *vin*, a liquor made of the juice of the grape; for I am very well assured there is not a drop of any such juice in it. There must be many ingredients in this liquor, from the many different tastes; some of which are sweet, others sour, and others bitter; but though it appeared so nauseous to me and my friend, that we could not swallow it, the English relish it very well; nay, they will often drink a gallon of it at a sitting; and sometimes in their cups (for it intoxicates) will wantonly give it the names of all our best wines.

However, though we found nothing to eat or drink, we found something to pay. I send you a copy of the bill produced us on this occasion, as I think it a curiosity:

	s.	*d.*
For Bred and Bear	0	8
Eating	2	0
Wind	5	0
Watermen's Eating and Lickor	1	6
	9	2

So that, with the drawer, we were at the expence of ten shillings; though no Catholic ever kept an Ash−Wednesday better.

The drawers here may want some explanation. You must know then, that in this country, in whatever house you eat or drink, whether private or public, you are obliged to pay the servants a fee at your departure, otherwise they certainly affront you.

These fees are called vails; and they serve instead of wages: for though in private houses the master generally contracts with his servant to give him wages, yet these are seldom or never paid; and indeed the vails commonly amount to much more.

From Putnigh we crossed over to the other shore, where stands the fair and beautiful town of Fullhome, vulgarly called Fulham. It is principally remarkable for being the residence of a bishop; but a large grove of trees prevented our seeing his palace from the water.

These two towns were founded by two sisters; and they received their names from the following occasion. These ladies being on the Surry shore, called for a boat to convey them across the water. The watermen being somewhat lazy, and not coming near enough to the land, the lady who had founded the town which stands in Surry, bid them *put nigh; upon which her sister immediately cried out, A good omen; let Putnigh be the name of the place. When they came to the other side, she who had founded the other town, ordered the watermen to push the boat full home; her sister then returned the favour, and gave the name of Fullhome to the place.*

Here stands a most stately and magnificent bridge. We enquired of the watermen by whose benefaction this was built. Benefaction, do you call it? says one of them with a sneer; I heartily wish it had been by mine; there hath been a fine parcel of money got by that *job* ; a name which the English give to all works of a public nature: for so grateful are these people, that nobody ever doth anything for the public, but he is certain to make his fortune by it.

We now returned by the shore of Middlesex, and passed by several beautiful meadows, where the new−mowed hay would have wonderfully delighted our smell, had it not been for a great variety of dead dogs, cats, and other animals, which being plentifully bestrewed along this shore, a good deal abated the sweetness which must have otherwise impregnated the air.

We at length arrived at Shelsee, a corruption of Shallowsee; for the word shallow signifies empty, worthless. Thus a shallow purse and a shallow fellow are words of contempt. This, formerly, was doubtless a small bishoprick, and inferior to that on the other side of the water, which was called Bettersee.

Here are many things worthy the curiosity of travellers. This place is famous for the residence of Don Saltero, a Spanish nobleman, who hath a vast collection of all sorts of rarities; but we had no time to see them.

Here is likewise a walk called Paradise Row, from the delightful situation, and the magnificent buildings with which it is adorned. We had certainly gone on shore to admire the beauty of this walk; but here being no landing−place, we must have spoiled our stockings by stepping into the mud; and were besides informed that the road was so abominably dirty that it would be difficult to cross, the rather, as it seemed entirely stopped up by a

great number of dust−carts.

A little farther stands an hospital, or rather a palace, for the reception of old and wounded soldiers. A benefaction of so noble a kind, that it really doth honour to the English nation. Here are some very beautiful apartments, which they told us belonged to the officers; a word which led us into a mistake, as we afterwards discovered: for we imagined that these apartments were allotted to those gentlemen who had borne commissions in the army, and who had, by being disabled in the service, entitled themselves to the public favour; but on farther enquiry, we were surprized to find there was no provision at all for any such; and that these officers were a certain number of placemen, who had never borne arms, nor had any military merit whatever.

Beyond this stands Ranelagh, of which we shall say no more than that it is a very large round room, and will contain abundance of people. This is indeed a sufficient recommendation to the English, who never inquire farther into the merit of any diversion, when they hear it is very much frequented. A humour, of which we saw many instances: all their publick places being either quite empty of company, or so crouded, that we could hardly get to them.

Hence sailing by a shore where we saw little very remarkable, save only the carcases of animals, which were here in much greater quantity than we had before found them, we arrived at a place called Mill−Bank, or Mile−Bank; and soon after we passed, as we were informed, by the Senate−houses; but though we went within a few yards of them, we could not discern with any certainty which were they.

Having again shot (as they call it) the New Bridge, we saw the palace of a nobleman, who hath the honour to be a Duke of France as well as of England, and the happiness to be greatly esteemed in both countries.

Near this palace stands that of another Duke, who, among other great and good qualities, is reputed the most benevolent man in the world.

A little further we saw the palace of an Earl, of a very high character likewise among his countrymen; and who, in times of corruption, hath maintained the integrity of an old Roman.

The palaces of these three noblemen, who do a real honour to their high rank, and who are greatly beloved and respected by their country, are extremely elegant in their buildings, as well as delightful in their situation; and, to be sincere, are the only edifices that discover any true taste which we saw in all our voyage.

We now approached to Hungerford−Stairs, the place destined for our landing; where we were entertained with a sight very common, it seems, in this country: this was the ducking of a pickpocket. When we were first told this, we imagined it might be the execution of some legal sentence: but we were informed, that his executioners had been likewise his judges.

To give you some idea of this (for it is impossible for any one who doth not live in what they call a free country, to have an adequate notion of a mob) whenever a pickpocket is taken in the fact, the person who takes him calls out pickpocket. Upon which word, the mob, who are always at hand in the street, assemble; and having heard the accusation, and sometimes the defence (though they are not always very strict as to the latter, judging a good deal by appearances), if they believe the accuser, the prisoner is sentenced to be ducked; and this sentence is immediately executed with such rigour, that he hardly escapes with his life.

The mob take cognizance of all other misdemeanours which happen in the streets, and they are a court, which generally endeavours to do justice, though they sometimes err, by the hastiness of their decisions. Perhaps it is the only court in the world, where there is no partiality arising from respect of persons.

They are great enemies to the use of swords, as they are weapons with which they are not intrusted. If a gentleman draws a sword, though it be only *in terrorem* to defend himself, he is certain to be very severely treated by them; but they give great encouragement to their superiors, who will condescend to shew their courage in the way which the mob themselves use, by boxing, of which we shall presently shew you an instance.

Our boat was now with some difficulty close to the landing−place; for there was a great croud of boats, every one of which, instead of making way for us, served to endeavour to keep us out. Upon this occasion many hundred curses passed between our watermen and their fellows, and not a few affronts were cast on us, especially as we were drest after the manner of our country.

At last we arrived safe on shore, where we payed our watermen, who grumbled at our not giving them something to drink (for all the labouring people in this country apply their hire only to eatables, for which reason they expect something over and above to drink).

As we walked towards the Strand, a drayman ran his whip directly into my friend's face, perhaps with no design of doing this, but at the same time, without any design of avoiding it. My friend, who is impatient of an affront, immediately struck the carter with his fist, who attempted to return the favour with his whip; but Monsieur Bellair, who is extremely strong and active, and who hath learnt to box in this country, presently closed in with him, and tript up his heels.

The mob now assembled round us, and being pleased with my friend for not having drawn his sword, inclined visibly to his side, and commended many blows which he gave his adversary, and other feats of activity, which he displayed during the combat, that lasted some minutes; at the end of which, the drayman yielded up the victory, crying with a sneer D −n you, you have been on the stage, or I am mistaken.

The mob now gave a huzza in my friend's favour, and sufficiently upbraided his antagonist, who, they said, was well enough served for affronting a gentleman.

Monsieur Bellair had on the beginning of the scuffle, while the enemy lay on the ground, delivered his sword to one of the bystanders; which person had unluckily walked off in the croud, without remembering to restore it.

Upon this the mob raged violently, and swore vengeance against the thief, if he could be discovered; but as this could not be done, he was obliged at length to submit to the loss.

When we began to depart, several of our friends demanded of us something to drink; but as we were more out of humour with the loss, than pleased with the glory obtained, we could not be prevailed upon to open our purses.

The company were incensed with this. We were saluted with the titles of *Mounshire*, and other contemptuous appellations; several missile weapons, such as dirt, &c., began likewise to play on us, and we were both challenged to fight by several, who told my friend, though he beat the drayman, he was not above half a man.

We then made the best of our way, and soon escaped into a Hackney−coach.

Thus I have sent you a particular account of this voyage, from some parts of which you may perhaps conclude, that the meanest rank of people are in this country better provided for than their superiors; and that the gentry, at least those of the lower class of that order, fare full as well in other places: for, to say the truth, it appears to me, that an Englishman in that station is liable to be opprest by all above him, and insulted by all below him.

I am, &c.

THE END.