

**VOLTAIRE IN HIS LETTERS:  
BEING A SELECTION FROM  
HIS CORRESPONDENCE**

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Voltaire in His Letters: Being a Selection from His Correspondence by Voltaire & S. G. Tallentyre

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**VOLTAIRE & S. G. TALLENTYRE**

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Post genitis hic carus erit,  
nunc carus amicis.

*Per le M<sup>rs</sup> de Choiseul*

VOLTAIRE AS A YOUNG MAN

*From the portrait by de la Tour*

46259

VOLTAIRE  
IN HIS LETTERS



BEING A SELECTION  
FROM HIS CORRESPONDENCE

Lit  
V.

TRANSLATED WITH A PREFACE AND FOREWORDS  
BY S. G. TALLENTYRE  
AUTHOR OF  
"THE LIFE OF VOLTAIRE," "THE FRIENDS OF VOLTAIRE," ETC.

*"Laisser le crime en paix, c'est s'en rendre complice"*

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1919



## PREFACE

"IT seems to me," said George Eliot, "much better to read a man's own writings, than to read what others say about him, especially when the man is first-rate and the others third-rate."

In these words lie perhaps the best reason for a translation of the Letters of Voltaire.

*Traduttore traditore* is certainly truth as well as truism; but there are still thousands of highly educated people who, reading for pleasure and recreation, never read any language but their own; while there are as many more, to whom French is a second mother tongue, who would never for themselves explore the eighteen large volumes (each of five to six hundred pages of close print) which contain the correspondence of Voltaire, and discard from it those letters on which time has set his defacing hand, which deal with events which once seemed as momentous as they now seem trivial, and which even a style, matchless in irony, gaiety, wit, can quicken no more; and from among those grey ashes of old fires sift out the living embers which glow and burn for ever.

Yet they are worth the search. There are many respects in which Voltaire is the best, as he is the most voluminous, of all great letter-writers.

Good letters, in any language, will be most often found to be written by persons living quiet and uneventful lives, whose range was narrow, and who lived rather in books and dreams than in the world. Witness Cowper's "divine chit-chat" to the accompaniment of the bubble of Mrs. Unwin's tea-urn and the click of her knitting needles, or to the hum of bees over his mignonette and the song of his linnets. Witness too Mme. de Sevigné's exquisite babble of affection for her daughter; Edward Fitzgerald's delightful cultivated gossip from his country town; Mrs. Carlyle's trenchant wit on her maidservants and white-washers; and the delicate thoughtfulness of the brief correspondence of the poet Gray. Gray's friend, Horace Walpole, was indeed himself a part of history and his famous Letters are no small contribution to it, yet it is chiefly the petty spites of political cliques and the scandals of the high life of his day on which he enlightens us. Byron—one of the best, because one of the most natural, of correspondents—managed to write reams of letters through some of the most thrilling events in the history of our race without making half a



dozen allusions to them. But Voltaire was not only contemporaneous with almost the whole of one of the most remarkable centuries of history—born in 1694 he did not die until 1778—but himself from first to last played a great rôle in this century, and was palpitatingly alive to the very finger-tips to its importance and its possibilities—to everything that made it shameful and to everything that made it glorious.

He was the personal friend of one monarch, the servant and courtier of a second, the adviser and correspondent of a third; and, unlike Horace Walpole and Fanny Burney, though he flattered kings to the top of their bent, he put them, not the less, in their proper place in his scheme of things. For he knew, and appreciated at their true worth, men with a nobler title to fame: he was intimate in life or on paper with most of the great men of letters and of the social reformers of his day: had met Pope, Swift, Bolingbroke: loved Diderot, who produced the great *Encyclopædia*, and d'Alembert, who introduced it: appreciated the faithful and delicate work of Vauvenargues, and the noble efforts for oppressed humanity of Turgot and of Condorcet. Then too he was not only an observer of, but an active participator in, some of the greatest *causes célèbres* of the time: in the cases of the Calas and of the Sirvens:

of Admiral Byng and of General Lally, and of the Chevalier de la Barre.

But at this moment, paramount in interest perhaps to the rest of his correspondence is that part of it which deals with Frederick the Great, for the resemblance, often insisted on, between the present Emperor of Germany and his greater ancestor is strikingly set forth in those Letters of Voltaire which present the tragi-comedy of their ill-omened friendship. In them we have reincarnate a Prince who, like his successor, was for ever courting the limelight: who had what, for want of a better phrase, may be called the religious pose—only, while Frederick sat for the portrait of the daring Freethinker, William “has God for ever on his tongue.” In the great Frederick of Voltaire’s correspondence may be seen clearly that strain of madness inherited from his madder sire and bequeathed, together with an exceeding cleverness, to the present representative of the house. The Frederick Voltaire portrays had, like his descendant, “omniscience as his foible”: “fiddled and fought as well as any man in Christendom”: posed as flute-player, French poet and *littérateur* as well as king and conqueror: and, where William “dropped the pilot” in politics, Voltaire’s correspondence unfolds the cynic story of William’s forbear who, in literature and

friendship, made use of guest and friend till he was weary of him and having "squeezed the orange, threw away the peel."

The Letters further draw attention to that delusion of infallibility which had sunk deep into the soul of Frederick as into the soul of William: and show that that "place in the sun" equally coveted by both became to one as to the other "le commencement et l'image de l'usurpation de toute la terre."

It was Frederick who staunchly advocated peace—until he was perfectly ready for war, when he tore up the scraps of paper called treaties, broke faith with Maria Theresa, invaded Silesia and plunged Europe into one of the bloodiest conflicts in history.

"No man ever wore better than Frederick the Great the fine coat called Culture. He fitted it so well that even a shrewd Voltaire thought it his skin, not his covering," until "he flung it on the ground and trampled on it." The writer may be forgiven for quoting these words from a *Life of Voltaire*, written fifteen years ago, as showing that the points of likeness between Frederick and the present representative of his house, far from being fanciful or far-fetched, literally *sautent aux yeux*.

It is not a little satisfactory to gather from