

# THE ENDEAVOR TO ATTAIN PERFECTION

Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773)

to Philip Stanhope (1755–1815), his god-son

Bath, 17 November 1767

Your last letter was so good a one that had it not been for Dr. Dodd's attestation that it was all your own, I should have thought it a translation of one of Cicero's or Pliny's, those two acknowledged standards of epistolary perfection. However, go on, and strive to attain to absolute perfection in writing, as in everything else that you do; for though absolute perfection is denied to human nature, those who take the most pains to arrive at it will come the nearest to it. The famous disturber and scourge of mankind, Charles the Twelfth of Sweden, in his low camp style used to say that by resolution and perseverance a man might do everything.... I own I cannot entirely agree with his Swedish Majesty; but so much I will venture to say, that every man may be unremitting application and endeavors, do much more than at the first setting out he thought it possible that he ever could do. Learn to distinguish between difficulties and impossibilities, which many people do not. The silly and the sanguine look upon impossibilities to be only difficulties; as on the other hand the lazy and the timorous take every difficulty for an impossibility. A greater knowledge of the world will teach you the proper medium between those two extremes. I approve greatly of your father's method of shooting his game with his pen only, and heartily wish that when you have game of your own you may use no other. For my part I never in my life killed my own meat, but left it to the poulterer and butcher to do it for me. All those country sports, as they are called, are the effects of the ignorance and idleness of country esquires, who do not know what to do with their time; but people of sense and knowledge never give in to those illiberal amusements. You make me fair promises in your letter of what you will do; but remember that at the same time you give me great claims upon you, for I look upon your promises to be engagements upon the word and honor of a gentleman, which I hope you will never violate upon this or any other occasion. I have long ago and often repeated to you "qu'un homme d'honneur n'a que sa parole." God bless you..

My compliments to your whole house.