Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

After eloping with Mr. Wortley Montagu, Lady Mary landed flat in the disappointment of an arid marriage. But she accompanied her husband to Turkey where he was ambassador and began to write letters about her travels in her inimitable clear voice. She also started the journal whose fifty years of details her chillingly conventional daughter Lady Bate burned in 1794. Hers was not the conviction her mother expressed at the age of twenty: “I believe more follies are committed out of complaisance to the world than in following our own inclinations. I am amazed to see that people of good sense in other things can make their happiness consist in the opinion of others.”

An essayist, dramatist, and journalist whose personal correspondence fills three volumes, Mary Montagu bore two children and lived apart from her husband near Brescia, Italy. When the 32 Embassy Letters were published a year after her death (in 1763), against the wishes of her family, they drew a hugely enthusiastic audience and had to be reprinted again and again. Voltaire praised them in Europe, rating them superior to Madame de Sévigné’s; Smollett, Dr. Johnson, and later Byron called them brilliant. Concurring, Lytton Strachey said, “Her wit has that quality which is the best of all preservatives against dullness—it goes straight to the point.” In her introduction to a new edition of the letters, world bicyclist and travel-writer Dervla Murphy (herself a free spirit), recommends Lady Mary as “above all an individual: strong-willed, warm-hearted, keen-witted, high-spirited, often unpredictable, sometimes downright eccentric”—a perfect travel companion.
FROM EMBASSY TO CONSTANTINOPLE

TO LADY MAR—GENOA, 28 AUGUST 1718

I beg your pardon (my dear sister) that I did not write to you from Tunis (the only opportunity I have had since I left Constantinople), but the heat there was so excessive and the light so bad for the sight, I was half blind by writing one letter to the Abbé Conti and durst not go on to write many others I had designed, nor indeed, could I have entertained you very well out of that barbarous country. I am now surrounded with objects of pleasure, and so much charmed with the beauties of Italy I should think it a kind of ingratitude not to offer a little praise in return for the diversion I have had here. I am in the house of Mrs. Davenant at San Pietro d'Are and should be very unjust not to allow her a share of that praise I speak of, since her good humour and good company has very much contributed to render this place agreeable to me. Genoa is situated in a very fine bay, and being built on a rising hill, intermixed with gardens and beautified with the most excellent architecture, gives a very fine prospect off at sea, though it lost much of its beauty in my eyes, having been accustomed to that of Constantinople. The Genoese were once masters of several islands in the archipelago and all that part of Constantinople which is now called Galata. Their betraying the Christian cause, by facilitating the taking of Constantinople by the Turk, deserved what has since happened to them, the loss of all their conquest on that side to those infidels. They are at present far from rich, and despised by the French since their Doge was forced by the late King to go in person to Paris to ask pardon for such a trifle as the Arms of France over the house of the envoy being spattered with dung in the night (I suppose) by some of the Spanish faction, which still makes up the majority here, though they dare not openly declare it.

The ladies affect the French habit and are more genteel than those they imitate. I do not doubt but the custom of tetis beys [tcihbetismo] has very much improved their airs. I know not whether you have ever heard of those animals. Upon my word, nothing but my own eyes could have convinced [me] there were any such upon earth. The fashion began here and is now received all over Italy, where the husbands are not such terrible creatures as we represent them. There are none among them such brutes to pretend to find fault with a custom so well established and so politically funded, since I am assured here that it was an expedient first found out by the Senate to put an end to those family hatreds which tore their state to pieces, and to find employment for those young men who were forced to cut one another's throats pour passer le temps, and it has succeeded so well that since the institution of tetis beys there has been nothing but peace and good humour amongst them. These are gentlemen that devote themselves to the service of a particular lady (I mean a married one, for the virgins are all invisible, confined to convents). They are obliged to wait on her to all public places, the plays, operas, and assemblies (which are called here conversations), where they wait behind the chair, take care of her fan and gloves if she plays, having the privilege of whispers, etc. When she goes out they serve her instead of lackeys, gravely trotting by her chair. 'Tis their business to present against any day of public appearance, not forgetting that of her name. In short, they are to spend all their time and money in her service who rewards them according to her inclination (for opportunity they want none), but the husband is not to have the impudence to suppose 'tis any other than pure plutonic friendship. 'Tis true they endeavour to give her a tetis bey of their own choosing, but when the lady happens not to be of the same taste (as that often happens) she never fails to bring it about to have one of her own fancy. In former times one beauty used to have eight or ten of these humble admirers but those days of plenty and humility are no more; men grow more scarce and saucy, and every lady is forced to content herself with one at a time. You see the glorious liberty of a republic, or more properly an aristocracy, the common people here as arrant slaves as the French but the old nobles pay little respect to the Doge, who is but two years in his office, and at that very time his wife assumes no rank above another noble lady. 'Tis true the family of Andrea Doria (that great man who restored them that liberty they enjoy) has some particular privileges; when the Senate found it necessary to put a stop to the luxury of dress, forbidding the wear of jewels and brocades, they left them at liberty to make
what expense they pleased. I looked with great pleasure on the statue of that hero which is in the court belonging to the house of Duke Doria.*

This puts me in mind of their palaces, which I can never describe as I ought. Is it not enough that I say they are most of them of the design of Palladio? The street called Strada Nova here is perhaps the most beautiful line of building in the world. I must particularly mention the vast palace of Durazzo, those of two Balli joined together by a magnificent (colonnade), that of the Imperiai at this village of San Pietro d'Arena, and another of the Doria. The perfection of architecture and the utmost profusion of rich furniture is to be seen here, disposed with most elegant taste and lavish magnificence, but I am charmed with nothing so much as the collection of pictures by the pencils of Raphael, Paolo Veronese, Titian, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Guido, and Correggio, which two I mention last as my particular favorites. I own I can find no pleasure in objects of horror, and in my opinion the more naturally a crucifix is represented the more disagreeable it is. These, my beloved painters, show nature and show it in the most charming light. I was particularly pleased with a Lucinetta in the House of Balli. The expressive beauty of that face and bosom gives all the passion of pity and admiration that could be raised in the soul by the finest poem on that subject. A Cleopatra of the same hand deserves to be mentioned, and I should say more of her if Lucinetta had not first engaged my eyes. Here are also some inimitable ancient bustos. The Church of St. Lawrence is all black and white marble, where is kept that famous plate of a single emerald,** which is not now permitted to be handled since a plot which (they say) was discovered to throw it on the pavement and break it, a childish piece of malice which they ascribe to the King of Sicily, to be revenged for their refusing to sell it to him. The Church of the Annunziata is finely

*Andrea Doria (1466-1560), of the great Genoan Doria family, was Genoa's greatest naval commander who wrote a constitution for the city which freed it from foreign rule.

**Long believed to be a present from the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, this emerald was later found to be a fake, after Napoleon appropriated it and had it analyzed in Paris.

Laid with marble, the pillars of red and white marble, that of St. Ambrose very much adored by the Jesuits; but I confess all those churches appeared so mean to me after that of Santa Sofia, I can hardly do them the honour of writing down their names; but I hope you'll own I have made good use of my time in seeing so much, since 'tis not many days that we have been out of the quarantine from which nobody is exempt coming from the Levant; but ours was very much shortened and very agreeably passed in Mrs. Davenport's company in the village of San Pietro d'Arena, about a mile from Genoa in a house built by Palladio, so well designed and so nobly proportioned 'twas a pleasure to walk in it. We were visited here only in the company of a noble Genoese commissioned to see we did not touch one another. I shall stay here some days longer and could almost wish it for all my life, but mine (I fear) is not destined to so much tranquillity.

For the Literary Traveler

When Lady Mary visited Genoa on her way back to England from Constantinople, she claims to have so enjoyed its tranquility she could "almost" have stayed there for the rest of her life. She wasn't the first visitor to be carried away. Petrarch called the port city on a steep mountainside overlooking the bay "La Superba." Centuries later Charles Dickens remembered it as the scene of some of his happiest days in Italy. To explore the city's steep narrow streets and stairways in search of the places Lady Mary mentions in her letter to Lady Mar is to say at the end there is nothing in Genoa not to recommend. Walking it is pure delight. Yellow signs within the historic center—the CENTRO STORICO—make the high points easy to find.

(For the traveler with a car, the drive into the central city from the Autostrada leads, along Via XX Settembre and off to the left near MARE DI DANTE, to a signposted public parking garage.)

A short walk along Via Dante, past the cloister ruins and the so-called house of Christopher Columbus, approaches through the
dramatic twelfth-century PORTA SERRANA a cluster of piazzas, palazzos, and churches, an enticing introduction to the city's rich heart. Rising with lordly magnificence over Piazza Matteotti is the PALAZZO DUCALE, a thirteenth-century building now beautifully restored as a cultural center with two spacious, light-filled interior courtyards. On the right side of the piazza is the Baroque church of SANTI AMBROGIO E ANDREA (or the GERI) with Rubens' splendid paintings of The Circumcision and St. Ignatius Healing a Possessed Woman. The Piazza de Ferrari, with a fountain and hundreds of vespas, borders both the Gesù and the Palazzo Ducale.

Further along, downhill from Piazza Matteotti, the DUOMO—the cathedral of SAN LORENZO—rises over its piazza to present a strikingly handsome façade of striped black and white marble decorated with thirteenth-century stone lions, sirens, and saints. Inside, in the south aisle, a shell still lodged in the wall since 1944 is a reminder of the heavy Allied bombing and naval bombardment the civilian population of Genoa suffered during World War II.

Continuing northeast, uphill (following the yellow signs or a Pianto Generale of Genoa, available from newsstands), in the direction of the VIA CARBONE—called LA STRADA NUOVA in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's time—the walk passes early medieval churches, workshops, houses, and piazzas where the handsome Genoese work, shop, eat, and enjoy themselves.

Having ascended through a maze of lanes from the bottom of the historic center to the jewel spread out above it, one sees at once the accuracy of Lady Mary's reference to Lo Strada Nuova as "perhaps the most beautiful line of building in the world." Closed to traffic, the gracious Renaissance thoroughfare—"one of the most handsome streets in Europe," according to another writer—invites the traveler to amble past one magnificent palazzo after another, stopping to look inside at their courtyards, fountains, and gardens. PALAZZO BIANCO (no. 11) and PALAZZO ROSSO (no. 18), both named for the color of their stone facades, are across the street from each other. Both are open to the public and house galleries of Genoa's finest paintings: the "pencils" of Raphael, Veronese, Titian, and Michelangelo that charmed Lady Mary.

"The perfection of architecture" continues to the northwest along VIA CARBONE, across Piazza Nervicita (and past the CHURCH OF THE