

**A STUDY ON THE FAMOUS LINE  
"I SIGHED AS A LOVER, I OBEYED AS A SON"**

**from**

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD GIBBON (1737-1794)**

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The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon was published posthumously by his friend and executor Lord Sheffield and soon accepted as a classic by the reader in general. It first appeared in 1796 included in *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq. with Memoirs of His Life and Writings, composed by Himself: Illustrated from His Letters, with Occasional Notes and Narrative, by John Lord Sheffield*. Edward Gibbon, author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), is distinguished also for another literary masterpiece; the Autobiography. The captioned "I SIGHED AS A LOVER, I OBEYED AS A SON" is one of the most famous lines in this autobiography, of which the following dictionaries furnish evidence.

The Oxford Dic. of Quotations (1941):

16 quotations from Autobiography, 10 from Roman History;

The line in question is the 10th of the former.

Everyman's Dic. of Quotations and Proverbs (1951):

4 quotations from Roman History, only one from Autobiography;

The only one is the said line under the serial No. 1605.

The Kenkyusha Dic. of English Quotations (1958):

The said line is only one quoted under Edward Gibbon, but to clarify the context, accompanied by a few preceding as well as following lines. No quotation is seen from Roman History.

The sources of Autobiography are neither single nor simple as is the case with the Roman History. There are six Sketches, which might better be called drafts or manuscripts, leading to some various editions. They were composed by Gibbon himself from time to time between 1788 and 1793 in the period the historian felt relieved after finishing the laborious work of the Roman History. These Sketches were kept

in the custody of Lord Sheffield and completely up to him in respect of their use for any type of reproduction. But the time came when the literary treasure was brought to public eyes. Prof. Georges A. Bonnard explains the situation in the Preface to his *Edward Gibbon: Memoirs of My Life* (1966) as follows:

. . . . as the centenary of Gibbon's death was approaching, the Royal Historical Society decided, on the initiative of Frederic Harrison, its vice-president, that this anniversary should be commemorated by a public ceremony and an exhibition of portraits, manuscripts and other relics of the great historian. The third Earl of Sheffield then felt that the time had perhaps come to disregard his grandfather's injunction.

Thanks to his discretion, the Gibbon papers, the copy right of which was once sold to John Murray, came finally to the hand of the British Museum; partly on 31st July 1895 and partly on 13th April 1896. They were marked from A to F one by one in chronological order, under the reference No. Add. MSS 34874. Since then, several editions were published to deserve our attention.

1896. London. John Murray. The original drafts printed from the MSS.

1898. Boston. Ginn & Co. Edited by O. F. Emerson.

1900. London. Methuen. Edited by Birkbeck Hill.

1907. London. Oxford University Press. (World Classics) Ed. by J. B. Bury.

1911. London. Dent. (Everyman's Library) Ed. by O. Smeaton

The last two are popular editions and nothing more than the reprinted text of *Miscellaneous Works*, 2nd Ed. (1814) including some

additions to the first edition but being edited on the same principle as the first one with regard to Lord Sheffield's corrections and arrangements. As this writer was not able to avail himself of the first three, an accurate collation has not been effected. But the last two editions are taken into consideration when it is assumed that the collational study by the preceding three editors should have brought forth drastic changes on the original text by Lord Sheffield. Such changes, if any, are supposed to be un-welcomed by the critic as well as the general reader. The collation has been carried out with Lord Sheffield's text in its centre. However, there is a wide possibility of combining six different manuscripts with each other as differently as possible without violating the order chronologically settled. It is necessary here to focus our attention on the captioned line: I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son. The afore-mentioned edition by Prof. Georges A. Bonnard involves the collation on this line. Before going forward regarding this matter, this writer wishes to explain the background of Gibbon's standing with the hope of better understanding what the said line conveys.

On account of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Edward Gibbon was forced to leave Oxford and, by his father's order, to be banished to Lausanne, Switzerland. During his stay as an exile which continued almost five years, he had a chance to see Mlle Suzanne Curchod, the only daughter of a Calvinist pastor at Crassy near Lausanne. It was in June, 1757 that Gibbon saw her for the first time, which was described in his Journal in 1761:

June. . . . I saw Mademoiselle Curchod — *Omnia vincit amor, et nos cedamus amori.* (Love conquers all things; yield we too to love!)

He fell in love at once. She was such a beauty that people said

‘Voilà la belle Curchod’ as she passed with her escort. The Autobiography, according to the World Classics edition, includes a comparatively brief description of the affair.

I hesitate, from the apprehension of ridicule, when I approach the delicate subject of my early love. By this word I do not mean the polite attention, the gallantry, without hope or design, which has originated in the spirit of chivalry, and is interwoven with the texture of French manners. I understand by this passion the union of desire, friendship, and the tenderness, which is inflamed by a single female, which prefers her to the rest of her sex, and which seeks her possession as the supreme or the sole happiness of our being.

Edward Gibbon, having established his fame as author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, may have worried about ridicule and inclined to assume a pose of scholar. Even if his love is said to be contrary to the so-called French love or courtly love, a natural flow of impatient passion is not revealed. The well-balanced style of his expression is suited for describing historical events objectively, but not for conveying the emotional delicacy of the human heart. His description continues:

I need not blush at recollecting the object of my choice; and though my love was disappointed of success, I am rather proud that I was once capable of feeling such a pure and exalted sentiment. The personal attractions of Mademoiselle Susanne Curchod were embellished by the virtues and talents of the mind. Her fortune was humble, but her family was respectable . . . .

Taking pride in scholastic fame, he seems to have respected Reason

more than Passion. His capacity of "feeling such a pure and exalted sentiment" is never a thing to be proud of. What this writer can assert at best is that it might have developed into the faculty for writing novels, if his main interests had moved into the world of fiction. "A pure and exalted sentiment" seems to have faded away into a calm and cool mind full of reason at the time of his composing Sketches. The first person singular in the passage could be replaced by the third person. "Her fortune was humble, but her family was respectable" can never be a word of lover, but is more suitable for his parents or relatives. His description of Susanne still continues in detail:

In the solitude of sequestered village he (Susanne's father) bestowed a liberal, and even learned, education on his only daughter. She surpassed his hopes by her proficiency in the sciences and languages; and in her short visits to some relations at Lausanne, the wit, the beauty, and erudition of Mademoiselle Curchod were the theme of universal applause. The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved. I found her learned without pedantry, lively in conversation, pure in sentiment, and elegant in manners . . .

She must be a real beauty as the people of Lausanne proved in murmuring "Voilà la belle Curchod." But he dared not mention her outward attractiveness but her inward beauties only; proficiency in learning, liveliness in conversation, purity in sentiment and elegance in manners. It is unknown whether he thought it disgraceful to be enchanted with physical beauties or he could not help thinking of her age, almost 50 at the time of his composition. In the same Journal as mentioned before, there follows:

August . . . . I went to Crassy, and staid two days.

Nov. 1st . . . I went to visit M. de Watteville at Loin, and saw Mlle Curchod in my way through Rolle.

Nov. 17th. . . I went to Crassy and staid there six days.

The conditions on her side turned more favourable for their unity.

This writer wishes to quote further:

. . . . and her parents honourably encouraged the connexion. In a calm retirement the gay vanity of youth no longer fluttered in her bosom; she listened to the voice of truth and passion, and I might presume to hope that I had made some impression on a virtuous heart.

On the side of Edward Gibbon, however, there arose a problem which ended tragically to the match. He explains as follows:

At Crassy and Lausanne I indulged my dream of felicity: but on my return to England, I soon discovered that my father would not hear of this strange alliance, and that without his consent I was myself destitute and helpless. After a painful struggle I yielded to my fate: I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son;

His description has finally come to the line in question. It might be necessary to look into the remark of another commentator's. Mr. D. M. Low concludes the sixth chapter of his *Edward Gibbon* (1937) as follows:

Great heat and great pressure are said to go to the making of crystals, and such was the process through which Gibbon passed before this tale of youthful ardour and helplessness crystallised into the immortal 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son.'

Mr. Low is sympathetic to Gibbon, taking into account the particular conditions of eighteenth century England and seems to try to

be excused on behalf of Edward Gibbon himself, saying, in the preceding part of the above passage:

It will not do either to apply the modern romantic and ethical notions. We are far here from the day when young couples settle in a three-roomed flat on the hire purchase system and their expectations . . . we must admit that neither by his position, nor his upbringing, nor his physique could he hope – to put it briefly – to get a job. Mr. Low, anticipating antagonistic comments from modern readers, asserts further in another place (*ibid.*, P. 80):

More important is it to remember that the moderate and equable flow of eighteenth century expressions does not necessarily connote coldness or shallowness of feeling. They were accustomed to digest and arrange their emotions before committing them to paper. We, on the contrary, expect the signs of spontaneity and unpremediated confidences as guarantees of sincerity. There must be heat and noise and colour. Not too much logic, but sparks must be struck at all costs.

The above remarks are acceptable, but there still remains a question unsolved whether he tried to describe the affair as earnestly as he had indulged in it and whether his emotional sincerity was obscured by the artistic style of his expression, characteristic of his personal taste as well as the eighteenth century prose. It is not an easy task even at present to convey the subtlety and delicacy of a lover's heart to the general reader to the truest possible extent. Generally speaking, a letter is an intimate form of communication but retains some formalities in comparison with conversation. At that time there were of course no such means as gramophone discs and magnetic tapes to record

conversational sounds. It is certain that his emotional movements can be traced more clearly in letters than in his later writings. There fortunately survive seven letters exchanged between Gibbon and Suzanne before he went home in April, 1758. They will make any reader believe in Gibbon's genuine love and sincerity, but show how critically the timing element worked. Gibbon sailed at high tide without realizing the tide to be ebbing, while Suzanne started from home when the tide was out. His emotional movement is one thing, and his artistic style of expression is another. However terse and strong the style of Gibbon's Autobiography may be, it cannot be said proper to depict the most delicate part of affection and love, so far as it is composed artistically by the use of Reason. "I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son" is just an example representing this, even though Mr. Low praises it to be "immortal."

There are two approaches, though sometimes combined or confused with each other, to the famous line; one is from the reality of his love and the other from the style of his expression. In this connexion a side-light was cast by Dr. C. V. Wedgwood in her *Edward Gibbon* (1955), No. 66 of *Writers and Their Work*. Her comments are worth while to listen to:

...when he left Switzerland in the spring of 1758, it was on the understanding that he would return to marry her. In his Autobiography he gives a laconic and slightly disingenuous account of what next occurred. His father opposed the marriage and Gibbon, in his famous phrase, 'sighed as a lover but obeyed as a son'. He does not explain why, although he came home in May, he did not mention Suzanne to his father until August, nor does he tell of Suzanne's desperate letters, imploring him to be true to her.

Gibbon was not made for domestic life and he probably knew it. He had the egoism of the natural scholar and wrote of himself 'I was never less alone than when by myself'. This is not the temperament that makes an ardent lover or a good husband. In a moment of youthful impulse he had thought himself in love with an intelligent young woman, but it is clear that his love evaporated when he began to think about the responsibilities and commitments of marriage. The sigh that he heaved as a lover, was a sigh of relief.

Dr. Wedgwood seems to have a keener insight into the love affair, not only from the woman's standpoint but also as a distinguished historian. She pointed out "a trick of doubling words" as a characteristic feature of Gibbon's style. 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son' is nothing but a representation of this trick. Another example can be seen in the third paragraph as above extracted from his *Autobiography* (World Classics edition): "The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved." There may be not a few readers who by the last four words will be reminded of a Latin phrase: *veni, vidi, vici.* (I came, I saw, I conquered.) Dr. Wedgwood seems to blame Gibbon for his negligence in persuading his father of 'the strange alliance' from May when he returned home to August when he told her farewell for ever. Her criticism goes further of Gibbon's temperament which is not suitable for 'making an ardent lover or a good husband'. She finally condemns him, as if on behalf of Susanne, saying, 'the sigh that he heaved as a lover, was a sigh of relief.' She has a completely different opinion from Mr. Low's although she recommends Mr. Low's work as 'the standard biography, admirable in every respect.'

From Gibbon's *Autobiography* (World Classics Edition) part of his

love affair with Suzanne Curchod was quoted in five paragraphs in the order of description. At the end of the fifth paragraph there appeared the famous line. Reading through these paragraphs, one may find the line appearing too suddenly. 'He does not explain why' is what Dr. Wedgwood remarked. Here comes the necessity of collating the textual sources consisting of six autobiographical Sketches from A to F. At the beginning of this paper was briefly explained how the Autobiography had come to be published. About a hundred years since it was brought forward as part of *Miscellaneous Works* (1796), the actual resources were revealed by the third Earl of Sheffield, grandson and heir to the first Earl of Sheffield. Since then the six Sketches have been known to commentators and biographers, but no one had so laboriously developed the collational work, especially regarding the line in question before Prof. Georges A. Bonnard edited in 1966 *Edward Gibbon: Memoirs of My Life* from the manuscripts. No earlier biographers who have described the Gibbon's affair with Suzanne, have raised any doubt upon the line: 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son.' Lord Sheffield's edition relies mostly upon Sketch F with some emendations according to the other Sketches, while Prof. Bonnard's upon Sketch B, so far as the paragraph including the said sentence is concerned. Hereunder is quoted the part from Prof. Bonnard's edition.

At Crassy, and Lausanne I indulged my dream of felicity: but on my return to England I soon discovered that my father would not hear of this strange alliance, and that without his consent I was myself destitute and helpless. After a painful struggle I yielded to my fate: *the remedies of absence and time were at length effectual*: and my love subsided in friendship and esteem.

The italicized part is replaced in Lord Sheffield's edition by the following sentences: having recourse to Sketch C.

*I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son; my wound was insensibly healed by time, absence, and the habits of a new life. My cure was accelerated by a faithful report of the tranquillity and cheefulness of the lady herself, and my love subsided in friendship and esteem.*

'The remedies of absence and time were at length effectual' is well-balanced and adapted to the spot, while the substitute involves an upheaval of sentence tone, vivid but a little too dramatic. The latter is also constructed logically and so much so that it seems to carry an intentional justification of his one-sided cancellation of the engagement. For this reason, 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son' does not fit in with the preceding sentence. Aphoristic as it is, it is too conspicuous to sit well in the calm and cool flow of his narrative. On the other hand, this may be just the reason why this short sentence has come to be known widely and independently. In spite of Prof. Bonnard's collational work, the famous line will perhaps survive as long as the name of Edward Gibbon is remembered. It has by now been deep-rooted in the soil of the human mind and vocabulary.

The captioned sentence has raised largely three questions. One is whether it can help us realize the truth of his love with Suzanne. The answer is in the negative. The second is on the style of his narrative whether it can convey Gibbon's mind properly or almost actually to the general reader. The answer will perhaps be in the positive, the characteristics of his personal taste and of the trend of 18th century England being taken into account. The last is on the necessity of collational study whether any further collation will bring in new facts

on Gibbon's life and his writings. Prof. Bonnard's collation has submitted an example as shown above, regarding the captioned sentence. The six Sketches with other referential materials are kept in custody at the British Museum. This writer strongly wishes to look into these manuscripts there and to confirm the composition of Sketch C in which 'I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son' is included.

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