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The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

Scheme for raising a large Sum of Money by Message Cards and Notes

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S C H E M E

FOR RAISING A

Large Sum of Money for the Use of the Government,

By laying a TAX on

MESSAGE-CARDS and NOTES.

First printed in No II. of the Museum, April, 1746.

To the Keeper of the MUSEUM.

SIR,

AS you have opened a *Museum* for literary *Curiosities*, I think the following paper may merit a place in your repository, which I ask it for upon the genuine foot of a *rarity*. The notion I have of a *Museum*, is an hospital for every thing that is *singular*; whether the thing have acquired singularity, from having escaped the rage of Time; from any natural oddness in itself; or from being so insignificant, that nobody ever thought it worth their while to produce any more of the same sort. Intrinsic value has little or no property in the merit of *curiosities*. Misers, though the most intense of all *collectors*, are never allowed to be *virtuous*, because guineas, dollars, ducats, &c. are too common to deserve the title of *rarities*; and unless one man could attain to the possession of the whole specie, he would never be said to have a fine *collection* of money. Neither * sir Gilded Heathen, nor the late † princess of Mildenheim, were ever esteemed *virtuous*. A ‡ physician

* Sir Gilbert Heathcote.

† Duchess of Marlborough.

‡ Dr. Kennedy, who wrote on the coins of Carausius.

who

who lives in a garret, and does not get a guinea in a week, is more renowned for the possession of an illegible *Caravus*, than doctor Mithridate, who unloads his pocket every night of twenty or thirty new *Lima* guineas.

To instance in two sorts of things, which I said had pretensions to places in a *Museum*. If the learned world could be so happy as to discover a Roman's old shoe (provided that the Literati were agreed it were a shoe, and not a leathern casque, a drinking vessel, a balloting box, or an empres's head-attire), such shoe would immediately have the *entrée* into any collection in Europe; even though it appeared to be the shoe of the most vulgar artisan in Rome, and not to have belonged to any beau of classic memory. And the reason is plain; not that there is any intrinsic value in an old shoe, but because an old Roman shoe would be a *Unique*; a term which you, sir, who have erected a *Museum*, know perfectly well is a patent of *Antiquity*. Natural oddity is another kind of merit which I mentioned. Monstrous births, hermaphrodites, petrifactions, &c. are all true members of a collection. A man perfectly virtuous might be laid up in a *Museum*, not for any intrinsic worth, but for being a *rarity*; and a *dealer* might honestly demand five hundred pounds for such a man of sir Hans Sloane or doctor Meade. A third sort (and I will not run into any more descriptions) are things become *rare* from their insignificance. Of this species was that noble collection of foolish tracts in the Harleian library, puritanical sermons, party pamphlets, voyages, &c. which being too stupid to be ever re-printed, grew valuable, as they grew scarce. So modern a thing as a queen Anne's farthing has risen to the dignity of a curiosity, merely because there were but a few of them struck. Some industrious artists, who would have the greatest scruple of counterfeiting the current coin of the kingdom, have been so blinded by the love of *virtù*, as to imitate these rare farthings, looking upon them solely as *curiosities*. I just mention this for the sake of those laborious medallists; because the prefent honourable attorney-general, though a very learned man, is no *antiquarian*, and might possibly be of an opinion, that those admirable copies would come under the penalties of the statute against clipping and coining.

But to come to my point. It is under this last denomination, sir, that I apply to you for a place in your *Museum*. A scheme for raising money may (as I fear the age is too obstinate in their luxury to suffer their follies to be taxed) be admitted into a *collection*, as well as some of those pieces which I mentioned

mentioned to have filled the Harleian shelves; especially as it will have a double title to a rarity. First, from never having been thought of by any other person; and secondly, as it will give posterity some light into the customs of the present age. It is this merit that has preserved the works of the elder Pliny, an author who in his own time, I suppose, was upon a little better foot than the editors of the Daily Advertisers, the *Vade-Mecums*, and the Magazines. We are glad to know now how much a luxurious Roman laid out on a supper, a slave or a villa, a mistress or a tame carp; how much Pompey expended on a public show; or to read the order of a procession. But though this author now elbows Virgil and Horace, and equally employs the spectacles of the Gronoviuses and the Hardouins, I am persuaded his works at Rome were never advanced above being read in the steward's parlour. But hereafter I expect, that Mr. * Salmon, † Sylvanus Urban, and myself, shall be as good classics as Mr. Pope and Mr. Prior.

One of the latest and most accepted fashions is the *sending Cards and Notes*: a custom that might perhaps escape the knowledge of posterity, if you and I, sir, did not jointly transmit an account of it down to them. No business, that is no business, is now carried on in this great city, but by this expedient. How Congreve, Farquhar, and the comic writers of the last age would be chagrined, to find that half the wit of their plays is already obsolete! ‡ Foible and Archer are grown dull characters by the diffuse of verbal messages. But thank heaven! the age has made great progress in literature, and all those fatal mistakes and irreparable quarrels that formerly happened in the polite world, by ladies trusting long messages to the faithless memory of servants, are now remedied by their giving themselves the trouble to transmit their commands to cards and paper; at once improving themselves in spelling, and adjusting the whole ceremonial of engagements, without the possibility of errors. Not to mention the great encouragement given to the stationary trade, by the large demands for crow-quills, paper, wafers, &c. commodities that are all the natural produce of this country.

I know a celebrated § legislator and reformer of manners, who not being so deeply read in the fashions as he is in the vices of the age, was unhappily

* Author of *A Modern History*, *The Chronological Diary*, &c.

† The name assumed by the editor of *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

‡ Characters in *The Way of the World*, and *Beaux Stratagem*.

§ Mr. T. Carew.

drawn

drawn into a mistake by his ignorance of this custom. About two years ago, this gentleman had thoughts of enforcing and *letting out* the laws against gaming; and being very nice and exact in his method of proceeding, he was determined to lay before parliament, a calculation of the numbers of gamblers, games, and circulation of money played for in the cities of London and Westminster. In order to this, he first went to an eminent card-maker, and enquired into the ebb and flow of his business; and with great secret satisfaction was informed, that the tradesman told, upon a moderate computation, twenty dozen packs of cards in a week, more than he used to do a few years ago. The honest reformer was excessively pleased with his discovery; for a real zealot is never so happy as when he finds vice grown to so monstrous a height, that every body will allow it necessary to be regulated. But he was terribly puzzled when the card-maker told him, that at least two thirds of the number were *blank cards*, or cards without pips. To satisfy his surprise, he even ventured himself into a celebrated gaming-house at this end of the town; to find out in what game the libertines of this age had so far refined upon their ancestors, as to be able to practise with pipless cards. In short, it was not till some time after, that he discovered that these *blank cards* were on purpose to write messages. He then exclaimed against the extravagance of our women, who would not condescend to use their old cards to write upon, but were at the expence of clean ones; but it was proved to him, that a woman of moderate fashion could not possibly have cards enough used at her house to serve her for messages, and that therefore it was cheaper to purchase blank cards, because, not being stamped, they pay no duty, and are consequently half in half cheaper to the consumer. For example; supposing a lady has but one assembly a month, to which she invites four hundred persons; many disappointing her, six persons belonging to each table, two or three sets playing with the same cards, and several not playing at all, we may reckon that she never has above ten tables, to which allowing two packs, she, at that rate, can use but twenty packs a month: now I shall easily make it appear, that *that* number cannot supply her with decent materials for messages. For instance,

20 packs at 52 cards per pack

1040.

Now she must send cards to invite all these people, which will employ four hundred of the thousand and odd; and allowing her to send but twenty private messages every morning, in howd'ye's, appointments, disappointments,

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&c.

&c. and to make but ten visits every *night* before she settles for the *evening*, at each of which she must leave her name on a card, the account will stand thus :

Messages to 400 people	-	-	-	400
20 Messages a day, will be per month	-	-	-	560
10 Visits a night, will be per month	-	-	-	280
Total 1240				

Which, without including extraordinary occasions, as a quarrel, with all its train of consequences, explanations, cessation of hostilities, renewal of civilities, &c. makes her debtor to two hundred cards more than she is creditor for. I know it may be objected, that a good economist will cut one card into three names ; but if she lives in a good part of the town, and chooses to insert the place of her abode under her name, that will be impossible. Before I quit this article of leaving one's name, I must mention a story of a Frenchman, from whose nation we are said to borrow this custom, who being very devout and very well bred, went to hear mass at the church of a particular saint in Paris ; but some reparations being making to the church, which prevented the celebration of divine service, the gentleman, to show he had not been wanting in his duty, left his name on a card for the saint on his altar.

I shall now proceed to acquaint you with my scheme, which is, to lay a tax on *cards* and *notes* ; the latter of which are only a more voluminous kind of *cards*, and more sacred ; because a footman is allowed to read the former, but is depended upon for never opening the latter. Indeed, if the parti-coloured gentry's honour were not to be trusted, what fatal accidents might arise ! for there is not a young lady in London under five-and-twenty, who does not transact all her most important concerns in this way. She does not fall in love, she does not change her lover or her fan, her party or her stay-maker, but she notifies it to twenty particular friends by a *note* ; nay, she even enquires or trusts by note where the only good lavender-water in town is to be sold. I cannot help mentioning to the honour of these fair virgins, that after the fatal day of Fontenoy, they all wrote their notes on Indian paper, which being red, when inscribed with Japan ink, made a melancholy military kind of elegy on the brave youths who occasioned the fashion, and were often the honourable subject of the epistle.

I think the lowest computations make the inhabitants of this great metropolis to be eight hundred thousand. I will be so very moderate as to suppose that not above twenty thousand of these are obliged to *send cards*, because I really have not yet heard that this fashion has spread much among the lower sort of people; at least I know, that my own fishmonger's wife was extremely surprised last week at receiving an invitation to an assembly at Billingsgate, written on a very dirty queen of clubs. Therefore, as it is the indispensable duty of a legislature to impose taxes where they will fall the lightest, nobody will dispute the gentleness of this duty, which I would not have exceed one penny per *card*. I shall recur to my former computation of a lady's sending 1240 *cards* per month, or 16,120 per annum, which multiplied by 20,000, and reduced to pounds sterling, fixes the produce of the duty at £.1,343,333 6s. 8d. a year for the cities of London and Westminster only. But should this appear too enormous a sum to be thrown into the scale of ministerial influence, I beg it may be considered that for near four months in the year this tax will produce little or nothing, by the dispersion of the nobility and gentry, and the difuse of visits and assemblies; and I cannot think that what may be raised by this tax in all the rest of the kingdom, will replace the deficiency of one third which may fail in the capital.

I have not reckoned notes, because it will be time enough to consider them when the bill is brought in, as well as to what province of the great officers of the crown this duty shall belong. Whether the sum of a penny may bring it under the inspection of the tribunal in Lombard-street, or whether the business negotiated may not subject it to the lord chamberlain's office: for as to the groom-porter, the claim which I foresee he will put in under the notion of transactions with cards, I think it will be of no weight. A friend of mine, to whom I communicated my scheme, was of opinion, that wherever the duty was collected, the office would be a court of record; because, as I propose that all engagements should be registered, it would be an easy matter to compile a diary of a lady of quality's whole life. One caveat I must put in, which is, that the tax being to be laid chiefly on people of fashion, it may not be allowed to members of either house to frank their wives' *cards*, which would almost entirely annihilate this supply for the service of the government.

VOL. I.

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I propose

I propose too, that printed *cards* (a late improvement) should be liable to the stamp-duties; for though this practice has not hitherto made great progress, yet such industry is used to evade acts of parliament, that I am persuaded we should no longer hear of written cards, though the greater part of the card must necessarily be left blank to insert the name and quality of the person invited, the day appointed, and the business to be performed.

The most of a *message card* that ever I have seen printed was as follows:

“Lady M. M. or N. N’s-----to-----and-----the
-----of-----company on-----to-----.”

I shall add two other cards with these blanks filled up, to shew that the rest of the message cannot be certain enough to be left to the printer.

“Lady M. M. or N. N’s humble service to her grace the duchess of T. and begs the honour of her company on Monday five weeks to drink tea.”

“Lady M. M. or N. N’s compliments to Mrs. B. and desires the favour of her company to-morrow to play at *whisk*.”

I have a secret satisfaction in thinking how popular I shall be with the gentlemen of the upper gallery, who, by this establishment of posts for *cards* and *notes*, will get all their mornings to themselves, and have time to dress themselves for the play, or even to read the play on which they are to pass their judgment in the evening. Indeed this toil of theirs has already been somewhat abridged by the indefatigable care and generosity of that learned and exact lady, the lady *Northriding*, who introduced the use of visiting maps: every lady has now a particular map of her own visits, accurately engraved for a trifling expence, and can send her cards, or bid her coachman drive methodically to all her acquaintance, who, by this invention, are distributed into squares, parishes, hundreds, &c.

I do not know how far it may be necessary to license the *cards* of foreign ministers; but as those illustrious personages pretty steadily adhere to the dignity of their character, and do not frequently let themselves down to divert

divert the natives of the country, if my poor assistance should be required by the legislature in drawing up the bill, I should not be against granting this immunity to the representatives of so many great monarchs and princes. But I am entirely against any other exceptions, unless of some fair and noble ladies, who I hear intend to give balls on the approaching birth-day of the * *Royal Youth*, who has so gloriously delivered his country and beauteous countrywomen from their apprehensions of a race of barbarous mountaineers; and who is now extirpating rebellion in the very heart of those inhospitable mountains.

I am, Sir,

Your humble Servant,

DESCARTES.

* The duke of Cumberland.

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ADVER-

