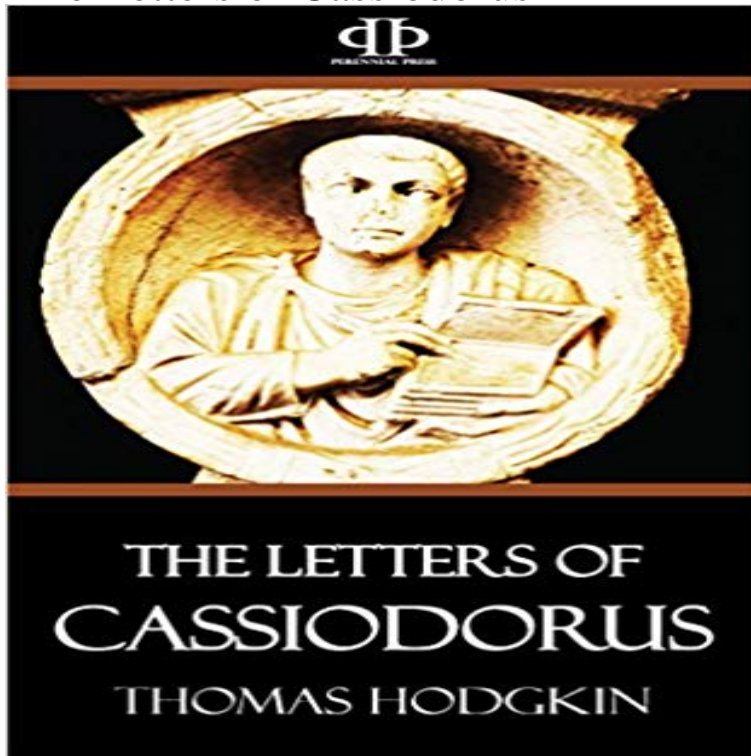


The Letters of Cassiodorus



Learnedmen, who had become my friends through conversations which we had had together, or benefits which I had bestowed upon them, sought to persuade me to draw together into one work the various utterances which it had been my duty to make, during my tenure of office, for the explanation of different affairs. They desired me to do this, in order that future generations might recognise the painful labours which I had undergone for the public good, and the workings of my own unbribed conscience. I then replied that their very kindness for me might turn out to my disadvantage, since the letters which their good-will found acceptable might to future readers seem insipid. I reminded them also of the words of Horace, warning us of the dangers of hasty publication. You see, said I, that all require from me a speedy reply to their petitions; and do you think that I couch those replies in words which leave me nothing to regret hereafter? Our diction must be somewhat rude when there is no sufficient delay to enable the speaker to choose words which shall rightly express the precise shade of his meaning. Speech is the common gift of all mankind: it is embellishment (ornatus) alone which distinguishes between the learned and unlearned. The author is told to keep his writings by him for nine years for reflection; but I have not as many hours, hardly as many moments. As soon as I begin the petitioner worries me with his clamours, and hurries me too much to prevent my finishing cautiously, even if I have so begun my task. One vexes me past endurance by his interruptions and innuendoes; another torments me with the doleful tale of his miseries; others surround me with the mad shouts of their seditious contentions. In such circumstances how can you expect elegance of language, when we have scarcely opportunity to put words together in any fashion? Even at night indescribable cares are flitting round our

couch, while we are harassed with fear lest the cities should lack their supplies of foodfood which the common people insist upon more than anything else, caring more for their bellies than for the gratification of their ears by eloquence. This thought obliges us to wander in imagination through all the Provinces, and ever to enquire after the execution of our orders, since it is not enough to tell our staff what has to be done, but the diligent administrator must see that it is done. Therefore, I pray you, spare us your harmful love. I must decline this persuasion of yours, which will bring me more of danger than of glory.

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