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VOLTAIRE

CANDIDE

and ZADIG

Introduction by
Raymond R. Canon

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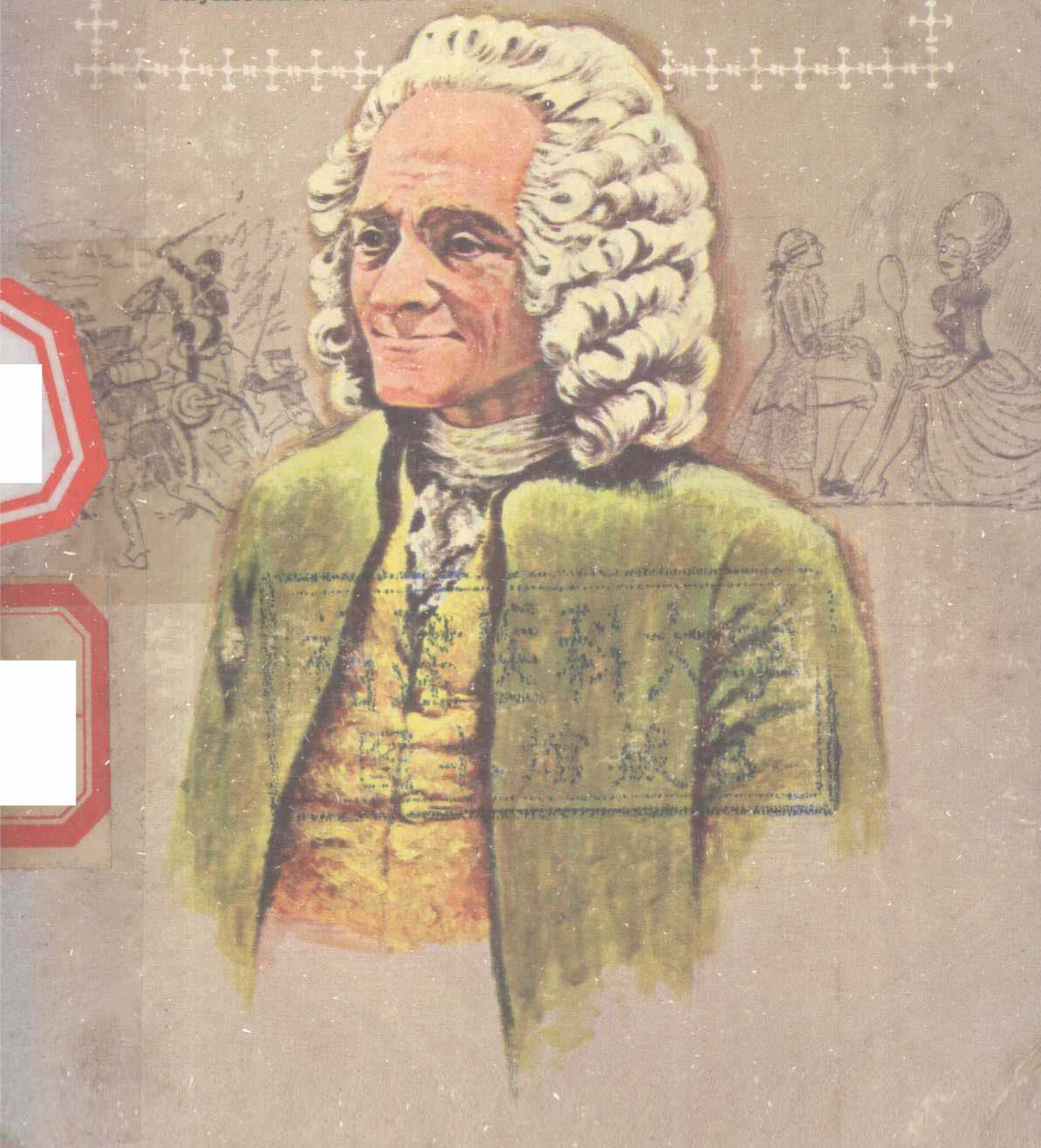

CANDIDE

AND

ZADIG

VOLTAIRE

(1694–1778)

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
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Introduction

In the British parliamentary system of the twentieth century, Voltaire would have made an admirable leader of the opposition. Few and far between would be any governmental irregularities that would escape his critical eye, and many a cabinet minister would squirm under his biting wit. But if Voltaire would be at home in our century, he is nonetheless the author who best epitomizes the eighteenth century. This century, which rightly begins with the death of Louis XIV in 1715 and terminates with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, was one of skepticism, reason, and close analysis—a definite trend away from the dogmatism of the previous hundred years.

Into this era of Louis XIV was born, in 1694, Francois-Marie Arouet. His parents were well-to-do middle-class people who saw to it that their son was given an education in one of the most fashionable schools, where, of course, his instruction was along definite classical lines. While he was still young, Francois-Marie started to turn out verses which were admired by his peers for their wit and satire. His father, being an eminent lawyer, would have preferred to see his son follow in his footsteps, but young Arouet would have none of this, and any law he studied was his father's wish and not his own. He continued with his writing, and associated to such an extent with freethinkers and other such undesirable people of the time that his father, in desperation, packed him off to Holland. In his father's eyes, he managed to disgrace himself there as well, and so the young boy was brought

back to Paris. He promptly got into trouble for allegedly writing some verses which discussed satirically the evils of the state. This led to temporary exile from the city, but no sooner was he back than he was forced to spend a year in the Bastille for writing, again satirically, against the Regent of France.

At this point, it should have been evident to everyone, and especially to the French authorities, that this young upstart was not going to be brought into line very easily. However, perhaps the authorities' senses were dulled by the fact that Arouet, on his release from the Bastille, plunged for the first time into more serious writing, and his first play—"Oedipus"—produced in 1718, was a great success. It is in the dedication of this play that he first signed his name as "Voltaire," a name which remained with him from then on.

It may be that some of the more stuffy aristocrats resented the figure Voltaire was cutting in society, but it was not long before there was trouble again. Voltaire was sentenced once more to the Bastille. Shortly after his release, he was forced to leave the country. He chose England as his land of exile, and it was during his three years there that he gained a deep admiration for the country. This admiration stayed with him for the rest of his life, but the initial result of this exile were the Philosophical Letters of 1734. In these, he expressed a pronounced preference for English laws, science, and freedom. In doing so, he exposed what he considered to be profound weaknesses in the French system. Small wonder that the book was condemned by the French Government and publicly burned by the authorities. Needless to say, Voltaire was forced to leave the city at once.

It was shortly before this departure that he made the acquaintance of Mme. du Châtelet. This well-educated woman, twelve years younger than Voltaire, took up the study of philosophy and science with him. When Voltaire was banished, she became his mistress, and invited him to come and live with her and her husband at their castle in Lorraine. This may have shocked conventional morality, but it provided Voltaire with one of the calmest periods of his life. He was able to carry out further scholarly studies, and, what was more important, avoid his penchant for controversy. It was while he was here that he was appointed Royal Historiographer in 1745, and the following year was elected to the Académie Française. Both these appointments are a good indication of the fame which had become his during the prolonged absence from Paris. It was, significantly, also during this time that he developed a special interest in the philosophy of Pope and Leibnitz; an interest, as we shall see, that played such an important role in the writing of *Candide*.

In 1749, Mme. du Châtelet died bearing the illegitimate child of a rival of Voltaire. Fortunately, he was helped through his period of grief by an invitation which came from one of his ad-

mirers—Frederick the Great of Prussia. Voltaire set out for Potsdam at once, and for a while the two men got along extremely well. Gradually, however, Voltaire discerned what he considered to be a definite misuse of power on the part of Frederick, and he aimed his biting satire at this abuse. The two men fell to quarreling, and Voltaire left Potsdam in anger. He set up an estate in Geneva, Switzerland, but the Genevese authorities proved to be just as disenchanted with Voltaire as their Parisian counterparts had been earlier. In 1759, he left the city and settled at Ferney, just across the border from Switzerland. It was about this time that he had *Candide* published.

Candide and an earlier work, *Zadig,* are two of the "Contes philosophiques" which are essentially a product of the eighteenth century—a narrative form which often utilizes an imaginary trip, or an Oriental theme. Many of these contes, which were used to criticize or satirize abuses of the time, are without merit, but in the hands of writers such as Voltaire, they became a potent weapon.

Zadig, while not enjoying the fame of *Candide,* is nevertheless the best of Voltaire's earlier efforts in this field. Zadig examines the mystery of human happiness and finds it all too ephemeral to his liking. For Zadig we can usually substitute the name of his creator, for like Voltaire, Zadig tries to live according to the precepts of rationalism, and like Voltaire, often reaps a harvest of thorns and brambles. Foremost among the banes of Zadig's existence are, of course, the theologians, and Voltaire made the most of his opportunities in lampooning them, in particular, the Bishop of Mirepoix. It is in the passages that hold these theologians up to ridicule that we see Voltaire at his cutting best, and which was to be repeated with such great success at a later date in *Candide.*

This latter work is a real masterpiece, although it seems to have been written in great haste. On the surface it appears to be a simple story, but all manner of wit, irony, and inference lurks underneath.

To understand *Candide* we have to turn to one of the main philosophical viewpoints of the eighteenth century—that of optimism. The two principal exponents of this outlook were the English writer Pope and the German philosopher Leibnitz. Voltaire had the opportunity of meeting the former during his stay in England, and studied the latter's works together with Mme. du Châtelet. Two salient features of this philosophy were Pope's statement in his "Essay on Man" that "Whatever is, is right," and Leibnitz's affirmation that God was good, and so he created the best of all possible worlds.

What perhaps contributed to Voltaire's turning against the philosophy was the great earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, which, together with the resulting tidal wave and fire, killed over

30,000 people and caused damage estimated at over one hundred million dollars. In a letter which Voltaire wrote shortly after receiving news of this disaster, he remarked that exponents of this optimistic philosophy would be hard put to explain the disaster as being part of the best of all possible worlds.

To be true, there are other factors which enter into the writing of *Candide,* but the disaster had provided the seed for the story, and anything which came along later was secondary. When we finally do meet the hero of the story, we find him to be a good-natured but exceedingly naïve person. One can readily imagine the gist of his adventures when we see that almost without exception the men he meets are rogues and cheats—outstanding pictures of what eighteenth-century con men must have been like. The optimism of Leibnitz and Pope is reflected in the personage of Dr. Pangloss—an excellent picture of Voltaire's knife-like wit. What gradually comes out in the story is that while Voltaire is definitely opposed to the philosophic implications of optimism, he is no less averse to a world where "tout est mal." Throughout the story, he seems to be treading a narrow path between the two worlds, as if to say that good is counterbalanced by evil.

But the conclusion to be drawn from all this is one that has intrigued critics ever since it was written. No less a poet than Wordsworth called the book "a dull product of a scoffer's pen," while his contemporary Hazlett called it "a masterpiece of wit." And so it goes. But perhaps man himself in his peregrinations through life is following the narrow path suggested by Voltaire. Good on one side, bad on the other, each pulling with its Lorelei-like tones. And what can man do but act on Candide's closing words that "il faut cultiver notre jardin"? All of which seems to suggest that we should accept those things we cannot change, and change those things we can. No man can do more.

Voltaire spent about twenty years at Ferney, where he developed a small community and wrote, advised, cajoled, satirized, and advocated continuously. Many of his admonitions ended with the phrase, "Écrasez l'infâme"—the infamy which encouraged intolerance, superstition, and bigotry. He was visited by a stream of famous people from all over Europe, and he went on writing, writing, writing. . . . Finally, in 1778, he made a triumphant return to Paris, where he died shortly afterward. *Le dix-huitième siècle, c'est uraiment Voltaire.*

RAYMOND R. CANON

CANDIDE

1—How Candide was brought up in a fine castle, and how he was expelled from thence

There lived in Westphalia, in the castle of my Lord the Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh, a young man, on whom nature had bestowed the most agreeable manners. His face was the index to his mind. He had an upright heart, with an easy frankness; which, I believe, was the reason he got the name of *Candide*. He was suspected, by the old servants of the family, to be the son of my Lord the Baron's sister, by a very honest gentleman of the neighborhood, whom the young lady declined to marry, because he could only produce seventy-one armorial quarterings; the rest of his genealogical tree having been destroyed through the injuries of time.

The Baron was one of the most powerful lords in Westphalia; his castle had both a gate and windows; and his great hall was even adorned with tapestry. The dogs of his outer yard composed his hunting pack upon occasion, his grooms were his huntsmen, and the vicar of the parish was his chief almoner. He was called My Lord by everybody, and everyone laughed when he told his stories.

My Lady the Baroness, who weighed about three hundred and fifty pounds, attracted, by that means, very great attention, and did the honors of the house with a dignity that rendered her still more respectable. Her daughter Cunegonde, aged about seventeen years, was of a ruddy complexion, fresh, plump, and well calculated to excite the passions. The Baron's son appeared to be in every respect worthy of his father. The preceptor, Pangloss, was the oracle of the house, and little Candide listened to