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Candide by Voltaire





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Candide by Voltaire

Translated by Lowell Bair

With an appreciation by André Maurois
Illustrations by Sheilah Beckett



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The original edition of 1759 did not appear under Voltaire's name, and he denied being its author. It bore this title: *"Candide, or Optimism. Translated from the German of Dr. Ralph."* In 1761 an edition appeared in which Voltaire had made a long addition to Chapter XXII (included in the present translation). The title of this edition was: *"Candide, or Optimism. Translated from the German of Dr. Ralph. With the additions found in the Doctor's pocket when he died at Minden, in the Year of Grace 1759."*

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CANDIDE

A Bantam Book December 1959

An appreciation extracted from Voltaire by Andre Maurois
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The Sage of Ferney

AN APPRECIATION

by André Maurois

IN the eyes of posterity, nearly every great man is stabilized at one age of life. The Byron of legend is the handsome youth of 1812, not the full-grown man, prematurely ageing, with thinning hair, whom Lady Blessington knew. Tolstoy is the shaggy old peasant with a broad girdle circling his rustic blouse. The Voltaire of legend is the thin, mischievous old man of Ferney, as Houdon carved him, sneering, his skeleton form bent under its white marble dressing-gown, but bent as a spring is bent, ready to leap. For twenty years Voltaire, at Ferney, was a dying man: he had been one all his life. "But in his health, about which he was for ever complaining, he had a valuable prop which he used to wonderful advantage: for Voltaire's constitution was robust enough to withstand the most extreme mental activity, yet frail enough to make any other excess difficult to sustain."

His Ferney retreat was populous. Voltaire said that sages retire into solitude and become sapless with ennui. At Ferney he knew neither ennui nor solitude. His circle there included, first, his two nieces: Mme. Denis was "a round, plump little woman of about fifty, a rather impossible creature, plain and good-

natured, an unintentional and harmless liar; devoid of wit and with no semblance of having any; shouting, deciding things, talking politics, versifying, talking reason, talking nonsense; in everything quite unpretentious and certainly shocking nobody." Voltaire had purchased Ferney in her name, conditionally on her signing a private reservation for his usufruct; but on completion of the purchase she refused to sign this document, not to expel her uncle, but to hold him in her power, a circumstance which was the root of a great quarrel. Mme. de Fontaine, the other niece, was more appealing and manageable; she was particularly fond of painting, and filled the house with beautiful nudes after Natoire and Boucher, "to quicken her uncle's ageing blood." He relished these. "One should have some copying done at the Palais Royal," he wrote to her, "of whatever is most beautiful and most immodest there."

The two nieces came and went; the permanent guests were a secretary, the faithful Wagnière, and a Jesuit, Father Adam. It may seem surprising to find a Jesuit in Voltaire's old age, but in his heart of hearts he retained a certain fondness for the Reverend Fathers "who had reared him nicely enough." Father Adam was a great chess player and had a daily game with Voltaire. "This good Father," said the latter, "may not be one of the world's great men, but he understands very well the way this game goes." When the priest was winning Voltaire would overturn the board. "Imagine spending two hours in moving little bits of wood to and fro!" he exclaimed. "One could have written an act of a tragedy in the time." When he himself was winning, he would play the game out.

It was the Father who said his Mass, for one of Voltaire's first acts at Ferney was to build a church there. Over its porch was put the proud inscription: *Deo Erexit Voltaire*. "Two great names," remarked the visitors. Voltaire had also had constructed a tomb for himself, half inside the church and half in the graveyard. "The rascals," he explained, "will say that I'm neither in nor out." He had also built a room for

stage performances. "If you meet any of the devout, tell them I've built a church; if you meet pleasant people, tell them I've finished a theatre."

The village of Ferney was transformed under his hands to a thriving little town. He cleared land. He built houses for the workers on the land and let them have homes on very easy terms. "I have left abundance where there was want before. True—only by ruining myself. But a man could not ruin himself in a more decent cause."

To people his town he took advantage of certain persecutions then proceeding in Geneva. He set up workshops to make silk stockings. He established a lace-making industry. Above all, he attracted to his seat excellent watchmakers, and took as much trouble to market the watches of his subjects as to administer an empire. He recommended the Ferney watches to all his friends in Paris: "They make them much better here than at Geneva. . . For eighteen *louis* you will get an excellent repeater here which would cost you forty in Paris. Send your orders and they will be fulfilled. . . You shall have splendid watches and very bad verses, whenever you fancy."

In fine, he had made Ferney into a small paradise, active and cheerful, and all the happier because its religious toleration was perfect: "In my hamlet, where I have made more than a hundred Genevese and their families at home, nobody notices that there are two religions."

Age only augmented his craving for activity and his zest in work: "The further I advance along the path of life," he wrote, "the more do I find work a necessity. In the long run it becomes the greatest of pleasures, and it replaces all one's lost illusions." And again: "Neither my old age nor my illnesses dishearten me. Had I cleared but one field and made but twenty trees to flourish, that would still be an imperishable boon." The philosophy of *Candide* is drawing near.

Legend is not wrong in seeing the Voltaire of Ferney as the true Voltaire. Before Ferney, what was he? A

very famous poet and playwright, a much-discussed historian, a popularizer of science: France regarded him as a brilliant writer, not as an intellectual force. It was Ferney that freed him, and so made him great. The battle for freedom of thought which his friends the Encyclopedists had engaged upon, and could not carry on in Paris without danger, was to be directed by him from his retreat. To that struggle he contributed wit and fancy, an infinite variety in forms, a deliberate uniformity in ideas.

For twenty years Ferney discharged over Europe a hail of pamphlets printed under scores of names, forbidden, confiscated, disowned, denied, but hawked, read, admired, and digested by all the thinking heads of that time. Voltaire at Ferney was no longer the "fashionable man"; he was a Benedictine of rationalism. He believed in his apostolic mission: "I have done more in my own time," he said, "than Luther and Calvin." And further: "I am tired of hearing it declared that twelve men sufficed to establish Christianity, and I want to prove to them that it only needs one to destroy it." Nearly all his letters ended with the famous formula: "*Ecrasons l'infâme*"—"We must crush the vile thing"—or, as he wrote it with ingenuous caution, "*Ecr. l'inf.*" What was the vile thing? Religion? The Church? To be more exact, it was Superstition. He hounded it down because he had suffered from it, and because he believed that bigotry makes men more unhappy than they need be.

A great part of Voltaire's work at Ferney, then, was destructive. He wanted to show: (a) that it is absurd to suppose that an omnipotent God, creator of Heaven and Earth, had chosen the Jews, a small tribe of Bedouin nomads, as His chosen people; (b) that the chronicle of that race (the Bible) was packed with incredible facts, obscenities, and contradictions (he took the trouble to publish, under the title of *La Bible Expliquée*, a survey of the biblical text with countless notes); (c) that the Gospels, although more moral than the Old Testament, were nevertheless full of the gossipings of illiterate nobodies; and finally (d) that the

disputes which set the sects at each other's throats throughout eighteen centuries were foolish and un-availing.

The Voltairean criticism has been itself criticized. It has been said that Voltaire lacks sympathy and proportion, and that in any case his own historical science was often at fault. But we must be fair. Voltaire often made particular effort to be so himself. "It cannot be too often repeated," he said, "that we must not judge these centuries by the measure of our own, nor the Jews by that of Frenchmen or Englishmen." If we are prepared to view the Bible as a collection of legends compiled by barbarian tribes, then he is prepared to admit that it is "as captivating as Homer." If we claim to find therein a divine utterance and super-human thoughts, then he claims the right to quote the prophets, and show their cruel savagery.

What is Voltaire's positive philosophy? It is an agnosticism tempered by a deism. "It is natural to admit the existence of a God as soon as one opens one's eyes. . . The creation betokens the Creator. It is by virtue of an admirable art that all the planets dance round the sun. Animals, vegetables, minerals—everything is ordered with proportion, number, movement. Nobody can doubt that a painted landscape or drawn animals are works of skilled artists. Could copies possibly spring from an intelligence and the originals not?"

Regarding the nature of God he has little to teach us. "Fanatics tell us: God came at such-and-such a time; in a certain small town God preached, and He hardened the hearts of His listeners so that they might have no faith in Him; He spoke to them and they stopped their ears. Now, the whole world should laugh at these fanatics. I shall say as much of all the gods that have been invented. I shall be no more merciful to the monsters of the Indies than to the monsters of Egypt. I shall blame every nation that has abandoned the universal God for all these phantoms of private gods."

What, then, is to be believed? That is rather vague.

"The great name of theist is the only one that should be borne; the only book that should be read is the great book of nature. The sole religion is to worship God and to be an honorable man. This pure and everlasting religion cannot possibly produce harm." And certainly it would seem difficult for this theism to produce harm; but is it capable of producing much good? It is incomprehensible how so hollow and abstract a belief will maintain the weight of a moral system, and the moral system of Voltaire is not actually based on his theism. It is a purely human morality.

A theist in name, a humanist in fact—that is Voltaire. When he wishes seriously to justify a moral precept, he does so through the idea of society. Moreover, as God is everywhere, morality is in nature itself. "There is something of divinity in a flea." At all times and in all places man has found a single morality in his own heart. Socrates, Jesus, and Confucius have differing metaphysics, but more or less the same moral system. Replying to Pascal—who found it "pleasing" that men such as robbers, who have renounced all the laws of God, should contrive other laws which they scrupulously obey—Voltaire wrote: "That is more useful than pleasing to consider, for it proves that no society can live for a single day without laws. In this, all societies are like games: without rules, they do not exist." Here the historian has seen aright, and with a penetrating phrase has pointed out what modern observers of primitive societies have since described.

Stern judgment has been passed on this Voltairean philosophy. Faguet defined it as "a chaos of clear ideas"; Taine remarked that "he dwarfed great things by dint of bringing them within reach"; and a woman once said: "What I cannot forgive him, is having made me understand so many things which I shall never understand." It is certain that a system imbued with perfect clarity has few chances of being a truthful image of an obscure and mysterious world. But still, it remains probable that this world is in part intelligible, for otherwise there would be neither physics or mechanics.

Voltaire himself indicated better than anyone the limitations of clarity, and how much madness and confusion there are in human destinies. Let doubters turn back to the second part of the article on "Ignorance" in the *Philosophical Dictionary*: "I am ignorant of how I was formed and how I was born. Through a quarter of my lifetime I was absolutely ignorant of the reasons for everything I saw and heard and felt, and was merely a parrot prompted by other parrots. . . . When I sought to advance along that infinite course, I could neither find one single footpath nor fully discover one single object, and from the upward leap I made to contemplate eternity I fell back into the abyss of my ignorance." Here Voltaire touched hands with Pascal, but only half-way; and this troubled Voltaire is the best Voltaire, for he is the Voltaire of *Candide*.

The author of *Zarîre* and the *Henriade* would doubtless have been prodigiously surprised had he been assured that the only book (or nearly the only book) of his which would continue to be read, and held as a masterpiece of man's wit, would be a short novel written at the age of sixty-five, and bearing the title of *Candide*.

He wrote it to ridicule the optimism of Leibniz. "Everything is for the best in the best of worlds. . . ." said the optimists. Voltaire had observed men's lives; he had lived, battled, suffered, and seen suffering. No, emphatically: this world of stakes and scaffolds, battles and disease, was not the best of possible worlds. Some historians—Michelet especially—have attributed the pessimism of *Candide* to particular occurrences: the dreadful earthquake of Lisbon (on which Voltaire wrote a poem), or the Seven Years' War and its victims, or the greed of Mme. Denis. These petty reasons seem useless. Voltaire denied the perfection of the world because, to an intelligent old man, it did not look perfect.

His theme was simple. It was a novel of apprenticeship, that is, the shaping of an adolescent's ideas by

rude contact with the universe. Candide learned to know armies and the Jesuits of Paraguay: murder, theft, and rape; France, England, and the Grand Turk. Everywhere his observations showed him that man was rather a wicked animal. Optimist philosophy was personified in Pangloss; pessimism, in Martin, who thinks that man "is born to live either in the convulsions of distress or the lethargy of boredom." But the author accepted neither Martin's pessimism nor Pangloss's optimism at their face values. The last words of the book were: "We must cultivate our garden"; that is to say: the world is mad and cruel; the earth trembles and the sky hurls thunderbolts; kings fight and Churches rend each other. Let us limit our activity and try to do as well as we can the small task that seems to be within our powers.

It is, as René Berthelot remarks, an eminently scientific and bourgeois conclusion. Action is necessary. All is not well, but all things can be bettered. Man "cannot obliterate the cruelty of the universe, but by prudence he can shield certain small confines from that cruelty." What Voltaire sets up against Martin's pessimism and Pangloss's optimism, what he opposes to Christian theology and to the stoic optimism resumed by Leibniz, is Newtonian science, the science that limits itself to nature, that makes us grasp only certain connections, but at least assures us thereby of our power over certain natural phenomena.

No work shows better than *Candide* how fully Voltaire remains a great classic and a man of the eighteenth century, while Rousseau is already a romantic and a man of the nineteenth. Nothing would have been easier than to make *Candide* into a *Childe Harold*. Let Candide take on the semblance of a projection of Voltaire's own personality, let him accuse the Universe of having robbed him of Mlle. Cunegonde, let him conceive of a personal struggle between himself and Destiny—and he would be a romantic hero. But Candide is universal as a character of Molière's is universal; and it was the reading of *Candide* that shaped the second Byron, the anti-romantic, the Byron

of *Don Juan*. That is why all romantics are anti-Voltairean, even Michelet, whose political fervor ought to have made him stand aligned with Voltaire; and that is why, on the other hand, all the minds which accept the world and recognize its irony and indifference are Voltairean. It is reported that the eminent journalist, Charles Maurras, re-reads his *Candide* once a year, and as he closes it, says to himself: "The road is clear"—that is to say, that Voltaire sweeps earthly illusions boldly aside, drives away the clouds and all that is interposed between reality and understanding.

One reason for the enduring success of *Candide* is that it represents one of the attitudes of the human mind, and perhaps the bravest. But above all, it is admirable as a work of art. It has been justly observed that the style of *Candide* resembles that of the *Arabian Nights* in Galland's translation. The union of classic French—proving and deducing consequences with such clarity—and the fantastic image of life formed by the fatalist Orient, was bound to produce a novel dissonance. For the poetry of a text is largely produced by the fact that the wild chaos of the universe is therein, at one and the same time, expressed and controlled by a rhythm. In *Candide* both characteristics exist. Over every page stream unforeseeable cascades of facts, and yet the swift movement, the regular recurrence of the optimist themes of Pangloss, the pessimist themes of Martin, the narratives of the old woman and the refrains of *Candide*, afford the mind that troubled, tragic repose which is only given by great poetry.

Alongside the Galland influence, that of Swift should be noted. Voltaire had read much of Swift, and was fond of him; and from the Dean he had learned how to tell an absurd story in the most natural manner. Of all the classic French texts, *Candide* is certainly the most closely akin to the English humorists. But Swift's rather fierce humor, sometimes too emphatic, is here tempered by the desire to please. In the body of every writer's creation there are things of

sheer delight: *Candide* was the best of such in Voltaire's.

During the next twenty years Voltaire worked hard at Ferney, producing there the most important part of his work. It was there that he completed the great labors started at Cirey and at Potsdam: the *Essay on Morals*, the history of *Russia under Peter the Great*, and the *Philosophical Dictionary*. The *Dictionary* is a collection of notes arranged alphabetically, unified only by its underlying doctrine. The idea had been suggested to Voltaire during a supper-party with Frederick the Great; it was bound to attract a man who enjoyed talking of everything and had no love for "composing" in the formal seventeenth-century sense.

There is in existence a history of French clarity; it would be instructive to sketch a history of the French vagary and of uncomposed works, which would bring together Montaigne's *Essays*, the *Characters* of La Bruyère, Voltaire's *Dictionary*, and the *Analecta* of Paul Valéry. The *Essay on Morals* itself is only a kind of encyclopedia with articles ranged in chronological order. The dictionary form suited Voltaire so well that he fell back upon it several times. In 1764 a first volume appeared, which was seized and publicly burnt. Then came the *Questions Touching the Encyclopedia*, and lastly the *Alphabetic Opinion*. After Voltaire's death the whole was merged into the *Philosophical Dictionary* of the Kehl edition, containing anecdotes, theology, science, history, music, verse, and dialogues.

At Ferney, too, Voltaire wrote numerous philosophic tales, and several of these, although falling short of the perfection of *Candide*, are amusing and penetrating. *Jeannot and Colin* should be read, a pleasing and ingenuous satire on the wealthy; *The Man with Forty Crowns*, too, an economic pamphlet rather than a novel; the *History of Jenni*, which has an opening chapter in the best Voltaire vein; and then *The Simpleton*, the *Princess of Babylon*, *The*

White Bull, and lastly, *White and Black*, which has something of the poetry of *Candide* without its full power.

But the greater part of this mass of work is composed of pamphlets, small books and dialogues, which made Voltaire (along with Addison) the greatest journalist whom men have known. To set forth his ideas and make game of the ideas of his opponents, he created a whole race of puppets: there were the letters of a Hindu victim of the Inquisitors (the *Letters of Amabed*), the theological inquiries of a Spanish licentiate (the *Questions of Zapata*), the advice of the guardian of the Ragusa Capuchins to Brother Pediculoso on his setting forth for the Holy Land—"the first thing you will do, Brother Pediculoso, is to go and see the earthly paradise where God created Adam and Eve, so familiar to the ancient Greeks and early Romans, to the Persians, Egyptians, and Syrians, that none of them ever mentioned it. . . . You need only ask the way of the Capuchins in Jerusalem; you can't get lost." There is the canonization of Saint Cucufin, brother of Ascoli, by Pope Clement XIII, and his miraculous appearance to Monsieur Avelin, citizen of Troyes. There is the sermon of Rabbi Akib, and a rescript of the Emperor of China, and the journey of Brother Garassise, poisoned by the journal of the Jesuits and saved by fragments of the *Encyclopedia*, which dissolve for him in a little white wine.

Wit sometimes fails this polemical literature. The *Canonization of Saint Cucufin* is a clumsy and humorless joke. But the contemporary reader was certain to be delighted by the movement and the intoxicating rhythm of most of these fantasies, their gaiety, their glittering style, and above all by their topical quality. And the contemporary could appreciate more than we can the courage of the polemicist. For all his stature and his strongholds, he was still menaced from time to time. Queen Maria Leeczinska, on her deathbed, asked that his impiety be punished. "What can I do, madame?" answered the King. "If he were in Paris I should exile him to Ferney." Less reasonable than

the sovereign, the Parliament ordered the burning of the *Man with Forty Crowns*, and pilloried a luckless bookseller who had sold a copy. When the case was called, one of the magistrates exclaimed in the criminal court: "Is it only his books we shall burn?" Notwithstanding the proximity of the Swiss frontier, Voltaire was often seized by panic, but he could not resist his demon.

Candide, the tales, and the *Century of Louis XIV* are beyond doubt Voltaire's masterpieces, but in order to understand why and how he exercised so wide an influence over the France of his time, it is necessary to skim his numerous topical writings, ephemeral in subject but not in form, and to imagine what power over opinion was yielded by this journalist of genius, who, tirelessly handling the same themes, was able to astound, excite, and dominate France for over twenty years.

Lives which have made a great stir on earth do not sink at once into the silent sleep of the tomb. The brilliant, dancing *allegretto* of Voltaire's life could not pass abruptly into an *andante maestoso*. For some time longer his royal friends continued to bestir themselves. Frederick II ordered a bust by Houdon. Catherine was anxious to buy his library, asking this in a letter addressed to Mme. Denis, "the niece of a great man who loved me a little."

In France, a Revolution of which he would not have approved (for he was a conservative and monarchist), but for which he had paved the way, treated him as a prophet. In 1791 the Constituent Assembly ordered the transference of Voltaire's ashes to the Pantheon. It was a fine procession, at the head of which went "Belle et Bonne" weeping, in a Greek robe. In 1814 at the time of the Restoration, the sarcophagus was profaned in circumstances which have remained mysterious. Nobody knows what has become of the frail skeleton and "the fleshless bones" which for over eighty years supported with their flimsy framework the noble genius of M. de Voltaire.