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FOOTE GEORGE WILLIAM

VOLTAIRE: A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS

George Foote

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

My share in this little book on Voltaire is a very minor one. My old friend and colleague, Mr. J. M. Wheeler, had written the greater part of the following pages before he brought the enterprise to my attention. I went through his copy with him, and assisted him in making some alterations and additions. I also read the printer's proofs, and suggested some further improvements – if I may call them so without egotism. This is all I have done. The credit for all the rest belongs to him. My name is placed on the title-page for two reasons. The first is, that I may now, as on other occasions, be associated with a dear friend and colleague in this tribute to Voltaire. The second is, that whatever influence I possess may be used in helping this volume to the circulation it deserves.

W. FOOTE.

November, 1891

PREFACE

He would be a bold person who should attempt to say something entirely new on Voltaire. His life has often been written, and many are the disquisitions on his character and influence. This little book, which at the bicentenary of his birth I offer as a Freethinker's tribute to the memory of the great liberator, has no other pretension than that of being a compilation seeking to display in brief compass something of the man's work and influence. But it has its own point of view. It is as a Freethinker, a reformer, and an apostle of reason and universal toleration that I esteem Voltaire, and I have considered him mainly under this aspect. For the sketch of the salient points of his career I am indebted to many sources, including Condorcet, Duvernet, Desnoisterres, Parton, Espinasse, Collins, and Saintsbury, to whom the reader, desirous of fuller information, is referred. Mr. John Morley's able work and Col. Hamley's sketch may also be recommended.

That we are this year celebrating the bicentenary of Voltaire's birth should remind us of how far our age has advanced from his, and also of how much we owe to our predecessors. The spread of democracy and the advance of science which distinguish our time both owe very-much to the brilliant iconoclasts of the last century, of whom Voltaire was the chief. In judging the work of the laughing sage of France we must remember that in his day the feudal laws still obtained in France, and a man might be clapped in prison for life without any trial. The poor were held to be born into the world for the service of the rich, and it was their duty to be subject to their masters, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. Justice was as easily bought as jewels. The Church was omnipotent and freethought a crime. If Voltaire's influence is no longer what it was, it is because he has altered that. We can no longer keenly feel the evils against which he contended. His work is, however, by no means fully accomplished. While any remnant of superstition, intolerance, and oppression remains, his unremitting warfare against *l'infâme* should be an inspiration to all who are fighting for the liberation and progress of humanity.

Nov. 1894. J. M. WHEELER.

EARLY LIFE

Two hundred years ago, on November 21st, 1604, a child emerged on the world at Paris. The baptismal register on the following day gave the name François Marie Arouet, and the youth afterwards christened himself Voltaire.[1] The flesh was so weakly that the babe was *ondovc* (the term employed for informal sprinkling with water at home), lest there might be no time for the ecclesiastical rite.

Something may have been wrong with the performance of the sacred ceremony, since the child certainly grew up to think more of "the world, the flesh, and the devil" than of the other trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. His father was a respectable attorney, and his mother came of noble family. His godfather and early preceptor was the Abbé de Chateauneuf, who made no pietist of him, but introduced him to his friend, the famous Ninon l'Enclos, the antiquated Aspasia who is said to have inspired a passion in the l'Abbé Gedouin at the age of eighty, and who was sufficiently struck with young Voltaire to leave him a legacy of two thousand francs, wherewith to provide himself a library.

Voltaire showed when quite a child an unsurpassed facility for verse-making. He was educated at a Jesuit college, and the followers of Jesus have ever since reproached him with Jesuitism. Possibly he did imbibe some of their "policy" in the propaganda of his ideas. Certainly he saw sufficient of the hypocrisy and immorality of religious professors to disgust him with the black business, and he said in after-life that the Jesuits had taught him nothing worth learning.

He learnt a certain amount of Latin and a parcel of stupidities. But, indifferent as this education was, it served to encourage his already marked literary tendency. Voltaire is said to have told his father when he left college, at the age of fifteen, "I wish to be a man of letters, and nothing else." "That," M. Arouet is reported to have replied, "is the profession of a man who wishes to be a burden to his family and to die of starvation." He would have no such nonsense. Francois must study law; and to Paris he went with that intent. For three years he was supposed to do so, but he bestowed more attention on the gay society of the Temple, to which his godfather introduced him, "the most amusing fellow in the world," and which was presided over by the Abbé de Chaulieu. The time which he was compelled to spend in law studies, and at the desk of a *procureur*, was by no means lost to his future fortunes, whether in the pursuit of fame or wealth. During that hated apprenticeship he doubtless caught up some knowledge of law and business, which stood him in good stead in after years. He tells us that his father thought him lost, because he mixed with good society and wrote verses. For these he got sufficient reputation to be first exiled to Tulle, then to Sully, and finally thrown into the Bastille on suspicion of having written lampoons on the government. The current story tells how the Regent, walking one day in the Palais Royal, met Voltaire, and accosted him by offering to bet that he would show him what he had never seen before. "What is that?" asked Voltaire. "The Bastille." "Ah, monseigneur! I will take the Bastille as seen." On the next morning, in May, 1717, Voltaire was arrested in his bedroom and lodged in the Bastille.

After nearly a year's imprisonment, during which he gave the finishing touches to his tragedy of *Œdipus*, and sketched the epic *Henriade*, in which he depicts the massacre of Bartholomew, the horrors of religious bigotry, and the triumph of toleration under Henry IV., he was released and conducted to the Regent. While Voltaire awaited audience there was a thunderstorm. "Things could not go on worse," he said aloud, "if there was a Regency above." His conductor, introducing him to the

[1] He was a younger son. The name Voltaire is, perhaps, an anagram of the Arouet 1. j. (le jeune) the u being converted into r, and the j into r. In like manner, an old college- tutor of his, Père Thoulié, transformed himself, by a similar anagrammatic process, into the Abbé Olivet – omitting the unnecessary h from his original name. This method of reforming a plebeian name into one more distinguished-looking seems not to have been uncommon in those times, as Jean Baptiste Pocquelin took the name of Molière, and Charles Secondât that of Montesquieu.

Regent, said, repeating the remark, “I bring you a young man whom your Highness has just released from the Bastille, and whom you should send back again.” The Regent laughed, and promised, if he behaved well, to provide for him. “I thank your Highness for taking charge of my board,” returned Voltaire, “but I beseech you not to trouble yourself any more about my lodging.”

In his first play, *Œdipe*, appeared the celebrated couplet:

> “Nos prêtres ne sont pas ce qu’un vain peuple pense!
> Notre crédulité fait toute leur science.” [2]

These lines were afterwards noted by Condorcet as “the first signal of a war, which not even the death of Voltaire could extinguish.” It was at this period that he first took the name of Arouet de Voltaire. He produced two more tragedies, *Artemire* and *Mariamne*; a comedy, *The Babbler*; and prepared his world-famous *Henriade.* A portrait, painted by Largillière at about this period, has often been engraved. It exhibits a handsome young gentleman, full of grace and spirit, with a smiling mouth, animated eyes, intellectual forehead, and a fine hand in a fine ruffle.

[2] “Our priests are not what foolish people suppose; all their science is derived from our credulity.”

HEGIRA TO ENGLAND

The story of how Voltaire came to England is worth the telling, as it illustrates the condition of things in France in the early part of last century. Voltaire left France for England, which his acquaintance with Lord Bolingbroke induced him to desire to visit. It was his Hegira, whence he returned a full-fledged Prophet of the French. He went a poet, he returned a philosopher. Dining at the Duke of Sully's table he presumed to differ from the Chevalier de Rohan – Chabot, a relative of Cardinal Rohan. The aristocrat asked, "Who is that young fellow who talks so loudly?" "Monsieur le Chevalier," replied Voltaire, "it is a man who does not bear a great name but who knows how to honor the name he does bear."[3] It was insufferable that the son of a bourgeois should thus speak his mind to a Rohan. A few days afterwards, when again dining with the Duke, he was called out by a false message, and seized and caned by ruffians until a voice cried "Enough." That word was a fresh blow, for the young poet recognised the voice of the Chevalier. He returned to the Duke and asked him to assist in obtaining redress. His grace shrugged his shoulders and took no further notice of this insult to his guest. Voltaire never visited the Duke again, and, it is said, erased his ancestor's name from the *Henriade*. He was equally unsuccessful in seeking redress from the Regent. "You are a poet, and you have had a good thrashing; what can be more natural?" He retired, to study English and fencing; and reappeared with a challenge to the Chevalier, who accepted it, but informed his relations. It was against the law for a commoner to challenge a nobleman. Next morning, instead of meeting de Rohan, he met officers armed with a *lettre de cachet*consigning him to the Bastille. After nearly a month's incarceration he was liberated on condition that he left the country. Having no wish to spend a second year in prison, he had himself applied for permission to visit England. Voltaire felt keenly the indignity to which he had been subjected. In a letter of instruction written from England to his agent he says: "If my debtors profit by my misfortune and absence to refuse payment, you must not trouble to bring them to reason: 'tis but a trifle." Yet a book has been written on Voltaire's avarice.

Voltaire was conducted to Calais and arrived in England on Whit-Monday, 1726. He landed near Greenwich and witnessed the Fair. All seemed bright. The park and river were full of animation. Here there was no Bastille, no fear of the persecution of the great or the spies of the police. He had excellent introductions. Bolingbroke he had met in exile at La Source in 1721, and he had learnt to regard the illustrious Englishman who possessed "all the learning of his country and all the politeness of ours." Voltaire, like Pope, may be said to have been, at any rate for a time, an eager disciple of the exiled English statesman. Now Voltaire was the exile; Bolingbroke, for a while, the host, at Dawley, near Uxbridge. But he had other English friends, notably Mr. (afterwards Sir Everard) Falkener, an English merchant trading in the Levant, from whose house at Wandsworth most of his letters are dated. For Sir Everard, Voltaire always retained the warmest feelings of friendship, and forty years later returned hospitality to his sons.

Voltaire spent two years and eight months in England, living during part of the time in Maiden Lane, Covent Garden, and during another part at Wandsworth. This visit was probably the most important event in his life. It was here he lit the torch of Freethought with which he fired the continent. Here he mastered the arguments of the English deists, Bolingbroke, Toland, Tindal, Shaftesbury, Chubb, Collins, and Woolston, which he afterwards used with such effect. Here he saw the benefits of parliamentary government. Here he imbibed the philosophy of Locke and the science of Newton. Indeed it may be said there is hardly one of Voltaire's important works but bears traces of his visit to our country. Yet of this momentous epoch of his life the records are scanty. When he grew famous every letter and anecdote was preserved, but in 1727 Voltaire was but a young man of promise. Carlyle, in the tenth book of his *Frederick the Great*, says: "But mere inanity and darkness visible

[3] Some of the accounts say that Voltaire said, "You, my lord, are the last of your house; I am the first of mine."

reign in all his Biographies over this period of his life, which was above all others worth investigating." Messrs. J. C. Collins and A. Ballantyne have since done much to elucidate this noteworthy period.

Pope was one of the persons Voltaire desired to see. He had already described him as "the most elegant, most correct, and most harmonious poet they ever had in England." Pope could only speak French with difficulty, and Voltaire could not make himself understood. The result being unsatisfactory, Voltaire did not seek further company until he had acquired the language. An anecdote in Chetworth's *History of the Stage* relates that he was in the habit of attending the theatre with the play in his hand. By this method he obtained more proficiency in the language in a week than he could otherwise have obtained in a month. Madame de Genlis had the audacity to assert that Voltaire never knew English, yet it is certain he could, before he was many months in this country, both speak and write it with facility. By Nov. 16, 1726, he wrote to Pope, after that poet's accident while driving near Bolingbroke's estate at Dawley. In writing to his friend Thieriot, in France, he sometimes used English, for the same reason, he said, that Boileau wrote in Latin – not to be understood by too curious people. Voltaire is said to have once found his knowledge of English of practical use. The French were unpopular, and in one of his rambles he was menaced by a mob. He said: "Brave Englishmen, am I not already unhappy enough in not having been born among you?" His eloquence had such success that, according to Longchamp and Wagnière, the people wished to carry him on their shoulders to his house.

While in this country he wrote in English a portion of his tragedy *Brutus*, inspired by and dedicated to Bolingbroke, and two essays, one on the Civil Wars of France, and one on Epic Poetry. In the introduction to the essays he expresses his conception of his own position as a man of letters in a foreign country. As these essays, although popular at the time, are now rare, I transcribe a paragraph or two from them:

"The true aim of a relation is to instruct men, not to gratify their malice. We should be busied chiefly in giving a faithful account of all the useful things and extraordinary persons, whom to know, and to imitate, would be a benefit to our country. A traveller who writes in that spirit is a merchant of a nobler kind, who imports into his native country the arts and virtues of other nations."

In his *Essay on Epic Poetry* Voltaire shows he had made a study of Milton, though his criticism can scarcely, be considered an advance upon that of Addison. He displays constant admiration for Tasso, to whom he was perhaps attracted by his sufferings at the hands of an ignoble nobility. He says:

"The taste of the English and of the French, though averse to any machinery grounded upon enchantment, must forgive, nay commend, that of Armida, since it is the source of so many beauties. Besides, she is a Mahometan, and the Christian religion allows us to believe that those infidels are under the immediate influence of the devil." In this essay appears the first mention of the story of Newton and the apple tree.

Voltaire closely studied all branches of English literature. He read Shakespeare, and admired his "genius" while censuring his "irregularity." He was the first to introduce him to his countrymen, though he subsequently sought to lessen what he considered their exorbitantly high opinion. The works of Dryden, Waller, Prior, Congreve, Wycherley, Vanbrugh, Rochester and Addison were all devoured, and he took an especial interest in Butler's witty *Hudibras*. He was acquainted with the popular sermons of Archbishop Tillotson and the speculations of Berkeley. He had read the works of Shaftesbury, Tindal, Chubb, Garth, Mandeville and Woolston.

Voltaire became acquainted with most of the celebrities in England. He visited the witty Congreve, who begged his guest to consider him not as an author but as a gentleman. Voltaire answered with spirit: "If you had the misfortune to be merely a gentleman, I should never have come to see you." He knew James Thomson of *The Seasons*, and "discovered in him a great genius and a great simplicity." With didactic Young, of the *Night Thoughts*, who glorified God with his "egoism turned heavenward," he formed a friendship which remained unbroken despite their differences of opinion on religion. He pushed among his English friends the subscription list for the *Henriade*, which

proved a great success – although King George II. was not fond of "boetry" – reaching three editions in a short period. The money thus obtained formed the foundation of the fortune which Voltaire accumulated, not by his writings, but by his ability in finance. At that time, in France, as our author remarked, "to make the smallest fortune it was better to say four words to the mistress of a king than to write a hundred volumes." His sojourn in England may be said to have secured him both independence of mind and independence of fortune.

What pleased him most in England was liberty of discussion. In the year in which he came over, Elwall was acquitted on a charge of blasphemy, the collected works of Toland were published, and also Collins's *Scheme of Literal Prophecy*, and the First Discourse of Woolston on Miracles. The success of this last work, which boldly applied wit and ridicule to the Gospel narrative, struck him with admiration. In the very month, however, when Voltaire left England (March 1729) Woolston was tried and sentenced to a year's imprisonment and a fine of £100. Voltaire volunteered a third of the sum, but the brave prisoner refused to give an assurance that he would not offend again, and died in prison in 1733. Voltaire always spoke of Woolston with the greatest respect.

Voltaire retained his esteem for England and the English to the last. Oliver Goldsmith relates that he was in his company one evening when one of the party undertook to revile the English language and literature. Diderot defended them, but not brilliantly. Voltaire listened awhile in silence, which was, as Goldsmith remarks, surprising, for it was one of his favorite topics. However, about midnight, "Voltaire appeared at last roused from his reverie. His whole frame seemed animated. He began his defence with the utmost elegance mixed with spirit, and now and then he let fall his finest strokes of raillery upon his antagonist; and his harangue lasted until three in the morning. I must confess that, whether from national partiality or from the elegant sensibility of his manner, I never was more charmed, nor did I ever remember so absolute a victory as he gained in this dispute."

Voltaire corresponded with English friends to the latest period of his life. Among his correspondents were Lord and Lady Bolingbroke, Sir E. Falkener, Swift, Hume, Robertson, Horace Walpole, George Colman and Lord Chatham. We find him asking Falkener to send him the *London Magazine*for the past three years. To the same friend he wrote from Potsdam in 1752, hoping that his *Vindication of Bolingbroke* was translated, as it would annoy the priests, "whom I have hated, hate, and shall hate till doomsday." In the next year, writing from Berlin, he says: "I hope to come over myself, in order to print my true works, and to be buried in the land of freedom. I require no subscription, I desire no benefit. If my works are neatly printed, and cheaply sold, I am satisfied."

To Thieriot he said: "Had I not been obliged to look after my affairs in France, depend upon it I would have spent the rest of my days in London." Long afterwards he wrote to his friend Keate: "Had I not fixed the seat of my retreat in the free corner of Geneva, I would certainly live in the free corner of England; I have been for thirty years the disciple of your ways of thinking." At the age of seventy he translated Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*. Mr. Collins says: "The kindness and hospitality which he received he never forgot, and he took every opportunity of repaying it. To be an Englishman was always a certain passport to his courteous consideration." He compared the English to their own beer, "the froth atop, dregs at bottom, but the bulk excellent." When Martin Sherlock visited him at Ferney in 1776, he found the old man, then in his eighty-third year, still full of his visit to England. His gardens were laid out in English fashion, his favorite books were the English classics, the subject to which he persistently directed conversation was the English nation.

The memory of Voltaire has been but scurvily treated in the land he loved so well. For over a century, calumny and obloquy were poured upon him. Johnson said of Rousseau: "I would sooner sign a sentence for his transportation than that of any felon who has gone from the Old Bailey these many years." *Boswell*: "Sir, do you think him as bad a man as Voltaire?" *Johnson*: "Why, sir, it is difficult to settle the proportion of iniquity between them." And this represents an opinion which long endured among the religious classes. But it is at length being recognised that, with all his imperfections, which were after all those of the age in which he lived, he devoted his brilliant genius to the cause of truth

and the progress of humanity. He made his exile in England an occasion for accumulating those stores of intelligence with which he so successfully combated the prejudices of the past and promulgated the principles of freedom, and justified his being ranked foremost among the liberators of the human mind.

EXAMPLES FROM ENGLAND

Several incidents combined to direct Voltaire's attention to clericalism as the enemy of progress and humanity. Soon after his return to France, the famous actress, Adrienne Lecouvreur, for whom he had a high esteem, and who had represented the heroines of his plays, died. The clergy of Paris refused her Christian burial because of her profession, and her corpse was put in a ditch in a cattle-field on the banks of the Seine. Voltaire, who regarded the theatre as one of the most potent instruments of culture and civilisation, at once avenged and consecrated her memory in a fine ode, burning with the fire of a deep pathos, in which he takes occasion to contrast the treatment in England of Mrs. Oldfield, the actress, who was buried in Westminster Abbey. Mr. Lecky says: "The man who did more than any other to remove the stigma that rested upon actors was unquestionably Voltaire. There is, indeed, something singularly noble in the untiring zeal with which he directs poetry and eloquence, the keenest wit, and the closest reasoning to the defence of those who had so long been friendless and despised."

When Voltaire published his *Letters on the English Nation* the copies were seized by the Government and the publisher was thrown into the Bastille. The author would have again tasted the discomforts of that abode if he had not had timely warning from his friend D'Argental, and taken refuge in Lorraine, and afterwards on the Rhine, while his book was torn to pieces and burned in Paris by the public executioner, as offensive to religion, good morals, and respect for authority. Voltaire had apparently good reason to apprehend treatment of unusual rigor if he had obeyed the summons to give himself up into custody, as he took good care not to do. "I have a mortal aversion to prison," he wrote to D'Argental. "I am ill; a confined air would have killed me, and I should probably have been thrust into a dungeon."

Voltaire's *Letters on the English* reads at the present day as so mild a production that it is hard to understand its suppression. Yet it was a true instinct which detected that the work was directed against the principle of authority. The introduction of English thought was destined to become an explosive element shattering the feudalism of Europe. There were, moreover, some hard hits at the state of things in France. "The English nation," says Voltaire, "is the only one which has succeeded in restricting the power of kings by resisting it." Again: "How I love the English boldness, how I love men who say what they think!"

Voltaire gives a peculiar reason for the non-appreciation by the English of Molière's *Tartuffe*, the original of Mawworm if not of Uriah Heep. He says they are not pleased with the portrayal of characters they do not know. "One there hardly knows the name of devotee, but they know well that of honest man. One does not see there imbeciles who put their souls into others' hands, nor those petty ambitious men who establish a despotic sway over women formerly wanton and always weak, and over men yet more weak and contemptible." We fancy Voltaire must have seen society mainly as found among the Freethinkers. Could he give so favorable a verdict did he visit us now? The same remark applies to his statement that there was "no privilege of hunting in the grounds of a citizen, who, at the same time, is not permitted to fire a gun in his own field." But this, as well as the more important passage that "no one is exempted from taxation for being a nobleman or priest," was probably intended exclusively for the benefit of his compatriots. He was, however, not without a little touch of ridicule at the incongruities he detected in our countrymen. Thus he notes in one of his letters: "They learn Vanini and translate Lucretius for Monsieur le Dauphin to get by heart, and then, while they deride the polytheism of the ancients, they worship the Congregation of the Saints."

Those educated in the current delusion that Voltaire was a mere mocker will be surprised to find the temperate way in which he speaks of the Quakers. Here, where there was such excellent opportunity for raillery, Voltaire shows he had a genuine admiration for their simplicity of life, the courage of their convictions, their freedom from priestcraft, and their distaste for warfare. In these

Letters, as in all his writings, he proves how far he was the embodiment of the new era by his boldly expressed preference for industrial over military pursuits.

In his remarks on the Church of England, Voltaire, however, gives an unmistakable touch of his quality: “One cannot have public employment in England or Ireland, without being of the number of faithful Anglicans. This reason, which is an excellent proof, has converted so many Nonconformists that not a twentieth part of the nation is out of the pale of the dominant church.”

After alluding to the “holy zeal” of ministers against dissenters, and of the lower House of Convocation, who “from time to time burnt impious books, that is, books against themselves,” he says: “When they learn that, in France, young fellows noted only for debauchery and raised to the prelacy by female intrigue, openly pursue their amours, compose love-songs, give every day elaborate delicate suppers, then go to implore the illumination of the Holy Spirit, boldly calling themselves the successors of the Apostles – they thank God they are Protestants. But they are abominable heretics, to be burnt by all the devils, as Master François Rabelais says; and that is why I do not meddle with their affairs.”

The Presbyterians fare little better, for Voltaire relates that, when King Charles surrendered to the Scots, they made that unfortunate monarch undergo four sermons a day. To them it is owing that only genteel people play cards on Sunday: “the rest of the nation go either to church, to the tavern, or to see their mistresses.”

His admiration for English philosophy was startling to the French mind. Locke’s Essay became his philosophical gospel. “For thirty years,” he writes in 1768, “I have been persecuted by a crowd of fanatics because I said that Locke is the Hercules of Metaphysics, who has fixed the boundaries of the human mind.”

AT CIREY

A common admiration for Locke and Newton cemented his attachment to the Marquise du Châtelet, a lady distinguished from others of her age by her love of the sciences. With her Voltaire lived for over fifteen years at the Chateau of Cirey, in Campagne, "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife," and, as Voltaire phrased it, "nine miles from a lemon." Voltaire was at the outset forty and Madame twenty-seven, neither handsome nor well-formed, yet pleasing. She united learning with a zest for pleasure, and with the handsome fortune which Voltaire brought to the establishment was enabled to satisfy both tastes. Life at Cirey was varied by jaunts to Paris, Brussels and Sceaux, at which last place he wrote *Zadig*, one of his lightest and most characteristic burlesque stories.

Madame du Châtelet has been much laughed at; but in the days when ladies take prizes in mathematics, that should be a thing of the past. Hard intellectual labor rather than the pursuit of pleasure characterised life at Cirey, or rather its inmates found their pleasure in their work. Madame would be translating Newton or studying Leibnitz. Her mathematical tutor worked at physical science in a gallery which had been built expressly for him. Voltaire would be aiding each in turn, or, ever faithful to his first love the drama, occupied with the writing or production of a tragedy or comedy for the theatre also attached to the premises. His production was as ever incessant. At the time of his first settlement there, Pope's *Essay on Man* had been published. It suggested a *Discourse on Man*, in which he sought not to justify the ways of God to man, but to make man contented with his lot, not vainly inquiring into the why and wherefore of things. With Madame he wrote *Elements of the Newtonian Philosophy*, a work highly praised by Lord Brougham, who says: "The power of explaining an abstract subject in easy and accurate language, language not in any way beneath the dignity of science, though quite suited to the comprehension of uninformed persons, is unquestionably shown in a manner which only makes it a matter of regret that the singularly gifted author did not carry his torch into all the recesses of natural philosophy." The French Government, despite the influence of aristocratic friends, refused to print a work opposed to the system of Descartes, and the volume had to be printed in Holland. For Madame, who despised the "old almanack" histories then current, in place of which Voltaire aimed at producing something more profitable to the readers, he wrote his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, in which for the first time in modern literature he applied philosophy to the teaching of history. He dissipated the dull dreams and deceits of the monks, and fixed attention on the real condition of things. With Voltaire, the commonest invention which improves the human lot is of more importance than battles and sieges. He gives importance to the physical and intellectual improvement of man. Brougham remarks that Voltaire's Philosophy of History was written as a prelude to the Essay on the Spirit of Nations, but the whole work deserves that title. Buckle classes him with Bolingbroke and Montesquieu, the fathers of modern history, and all sceptics; and even now, says Lecky, no historian can read him without profit. Other contributions to history were the *History of Charles XII.*, a masterpiece of vivid and vigorous narrative, and *The Age of Louis XIV*. It was here he wrote his too famous *Pucelle*, which he afterwards described as "piggery," as well as some of the most famous of his plays, including. *Ilzire, Zuline, L'Enfant Prodigue, Mahomet and Mérope*, the best of his tragedies. With that impish spirit in which he ever delighted, he induced the Pope to accept the dedication of his play of *Mahomet*, and then laughed at his infallible Holiness for being unable to see that the shafts supposed to be directed at the impostor of Arabia were really aimed at fanaticism in another quarter.

To his first and last love, the French theatre, Voltaire contributed nearly sixty pieces, the majority of which are tragedies. *Zaire* and *Mérope* suffice to show the excellence he obtained in the classic drama. The first-named was written in three weeks, a wonderful *tour de force. Olympic*– written in old age – occupied but six days, though in this we must agree with the friend who told the author that he should not have rested on the seventh day. Voltaire's plays indeed contain

occasional fine passages, but they have not the rich delineation of character necessary for works of the first rank. It has been well remarked that in his dramas, as in history, he sought to portray not so much individuals as epochs. In *Mahomet* his subject is a great fanaticism; in *Alzire*, the conquest of America; in *Brutus*, the formation of the Roman power; in the *Death of Cœsar*, the rise of the empire or the ruin of that power. It is noteworthy that, despite his excess of comic talent, Voltaire preferred to devote his mind to tragedy rather than to comedy, in which one might have fancied he would have excelled. In truth, his desire to support the dignity of the stage stood in the way of his shining in comedy. Voltaire also at this period wrote a *Life of Molière*, in which he mingled criticism with biography.

Madame de Grafigny, who visited at Cirey, says he was so greedy of his time, so intent upon his work, that it was sometimes necessary to tear him from his desk for supper. “But when at table, he always has something to tell, very facetious, very odd, very droll, which would often not sound well except in his mouth, and which shows him still as he has painted himself for us —

Toujours un pied dans le cercueil,
De l’autre faisant des gambades.”[4]

“To be seated beside him at supper, how delightful!” she adds. Voltaire at Cirey was out of harm’s way, and could and did devote himself to his natural bent in literary work. Madame du Châtelet was sometimes “gey ill to live with.” but she preserved him from many annoyances and helped him somewhat at Court. Thanks to the Duc de Richelieu, his patron and debtor, he was appointed historiographer-royal in 1745, with a salary of two thousand livres attached, and in the following year was elected one of the Forty of the French Academy.

His life with Madame du Châtelet had shown him the possibility of woman being man’s intellectual companion. With what scorn does he make a lady, who claims equal rights in the matter of divorce with her husband, say:

“My husband replies that he is my head and my superior, that he is taller than me by more than an inch, that he is hairy as a bear, and that, consequently, I owe him everything and that he owes me nothing.” This was long before woman’s rights were thought of.

Voltaire and Frederick the Great.

While still at Cirey, Voltaire received many a flattering invitation from the Prince Royal of Prussia. Their correspondence, in the words of Carlyle, “sparkles notably with epistolary grace and vivacity,” though now mainly interesting as an illustration of two memorable characters and of their century. Voltaire helped him with his *Anti-Machiavelli*, remarking afterwards that had Machiavelli had a prince for a pupil, the very first thing he would have advised him to do would have been so to write. Frederick was bent on having the personal acquaintance and attendance of the renowned poet and philosopher. Much incense and mutual admiration passed, and at length, when he ascended the throne, Voltaire paid him several visits. On one occasion it was a diplomatic one, to cement a union between France and Prussia. Macaulay sneers at this “childish craving for political distinction,” and Frederick remarks that he brought no credentials with him. The correspondence and mutual admiration continued. Carlyle characteristically says: “Admiration sincere on both sides, most so on the Prince's, and extravagantly expressed on both sides, most so on Voltaire’s.” In one of his letters, Frederick says “there can be in nature but one God and one Voltaire.” If Voltaire was more extravagant than this, at least the paint was laid on more delicately. Frederick’s flattery, indeed, was not very carefully done. Thus, in writing to Voltaire he says: “You are like the white elephant for which the King of Persia and the Great Mogul make war; and the possession of which forms one of their titles. If you come here you will see at the head of mine, ‘Frederick by the Grace of God, King

[4] Ever one foot in the grave,And gambolling with the other.

of Prussia, Elector of Brandenburg, Possessor of Voltaire, &c., &c.'" But the Marquise du Châtelet considered that no King should displace a lady. She loved him; *"jamais pour deux"* she says; and perhaps, at the bottom of her heart, regretted the reputation which must have been ever a rival. At her death, Frederick renewed his invitation, expressing himself as now "one of your oldest friends," and Voltaire, cut loose from his moorings, submitted to be tempted to the atmosphere of a court which he had before found little suited to a lover of truth, justice, and liberty.

The first of these visits, in September 1740, is thus satirically described by Voltaire: "I was conducted into his majesty's apartment, in which I found nothing but four bare walls. By the light of a wax candle I perceived a small truckle bed, two feet and a half wide, in a closet, upon which lay a little man, wrapped up in a morning gown of blue cloth. It was his majesty, who lay sweating and shaking, beneath a beggarly coverlet, in a violent ague fit. I made my bow, and began my acquaintance by feeling his pulse, as if I had been his first physician. The fit left him, and he rose, dressed himself, and sat down to table with Algarotti, Keizerling, Maupertuis, the ambassador to the states-general, and myself; where, at supper, we treated most profoundly on the immortality of the soul, natural liberty, and the *Androgynes* of Plato." Frederick says, in a letter to Jordan, dated September 24th: "I have at length seen Voltaire, whom I was so anxious to become acquainted with; but, alas! I saw him when I was under the influence of my fever, and when my mind and my body were equally languid. Now, with persons like him, one must not be ill; on the contrary, one must be very well, and even, if possible, in better health than usual. He has the eloquence of Cicero, the mildness of Pliny, and the wisdom of Agrippa: he unites, in a word, all that is desirable of the virtues and talents of three of the greatest men of antiquity. His intellect is always at work; and every drop of ink that falls from his pen, is transformed at once into wit. He declaimed to us *Mahomet*, an admirable tragedy he has composed, which transported us with delight: for myself, I could only admire in silence."

The intercourse and disruption of the friendship between Voltaire and Frederick – "the two original men of their century," as Carlyle calls them – has been inimitably told by that great writer whose temperament and training enabled him to do so much justice to the one and so little to the other. Voltaire must be excused for wishing to lead the King in the path of reason and enlightened toleration to peace. But the Court of Potsdam was in truth no place for him, and the Frenchmen not unnaturally regarded him as a deserter. Macaulay says: "We have no hesitation in saying that the poorest author of that time in London, sleeping in a hulk, dining in a cellar with a cravat of paper and a skewer for a shirt-pin, was a happier man than any of the literary inmates of Frederick's Court." Voltaire's position was sure to excite jealousy, and his scathing wit was bound to get him in trouble. He could touch up the King's French verses for a consideration, but could not be kept from laughing at his poetry. "I have here a bundle of the King's dirty linen to bleach," he said once, pointing to the MSS. sent to him for correction; and the bearers of course conveyed the sarcasm to his Majesty. On the other side Voltaire heard from Julien Offray de la Mettrie, author of *Man a Machine*, whom Voltaire called the most frank atheist in Europe, that the King had said: "I still want Voltaire for another year – one sucks the orange before throwing away the skin." That orange-skin stuck in Voltaire's throat, and when atheist La Mettrie died 11th November,

1751, from eating a pie supposed to be of pheasant but in reality of eagle and pork, Voltaire observes: "I should have liked to put to La Mettrie, in the article of death, fresh inquiries about the orange-skin. That fine soul, on the point of quitting the world, would not have dared to-lie. There is much reason to suppose that he spoke the truth." Voltaire could neither submit to the domination of the Court coterie nor to that of their master. He offended Frederick, not so much by writing as by publishing his merciless ridicule of Maupertuis, the President of the Berlin Academy of Sciences – an institution suggested by Voltaire, who had indeed recommended Maupertuis as President – in his inimitable *Diatribe of Doctor Akakia, Physician to the Pope*, which Macaulay says, even at this time of day, it is not easy for any person who has the least perception of the ridiculous to read without laughing till he cries. But a public insult to the President of his Academy was an insult to the King, and the

work was publicly burnt and Voltaire placed under arrest. But the matter blew over, though Voltaire sent back his cross and key of office, which the King returned. Voltaire wisely tried to rid himself of the intolerable constraint, and made ill-health the pretext of flight, going first to Plombières to take the waters. But he could not resist sending another shot at poor Maupertuis; and the King, perhaps considering he had forfeited claim to consideration, resolved to punish him. At Frankfort, nominally a free city but really dominated by a Prussian resident, he was arrested, together with his niece Madame Denis, and detained in an inn, even after he had given up his gold key as chamberlain, his cross and ribbon of the Order of Merit, and his copy of a privately printed volume of the royal rhymester's poetry, for which he was ordered to be arrested. The volume was evidently the most important article in such mischievous hands, especially as it was said to contain satires on reigning potentates. Voltaire had left it at Leipsic, and had to wait, guarded by soldiers, till it arrived, and also till the King's permission was accorded him to pass on to France. Voltaire relieved his rage by composing what he called *Memoirs of the Life of M. de Voltaire*, in which all the king's faults and foibles, real and imaginary, as well as his literary pretensions, were unsparingly ridiculed. Frederick forgave Voltaire for having been ill-used by him, and some time after took the first step in reconciliation by sending him back the volume of poems. An amicable correspondence was renewed, though probably each felt they were better at a distance. Voltaire, even while he kept in his desk this libellous *Life*

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