

VOLTAIRE ON SYPHILIS.

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VOLTAIRE on Syphilis? Yes, the man who knew everything that was known, and who wrote upon every topic about which anything had been written, added his word, also, to the literature of this disease which, by revolting pre-eminence, throughout the ages and the wide world over, constitutes at once the bane and the shame of mankind. He wrote of it as he wrote against folly and error and wrong always—in the finest, keenest satire—scathingly, trenchantly, poignantly, and yet, withal, whimsically and wittily beyond surpassing. After finishing his courses in the schools, the young François Marie Arouet was standing one day before his father in the library at home. Said the elder Arouet, “My son, have you determined upon what career you would prefer to enter?” “I should like to be a reformer, my Father,” replied François. “And have you, my son, considered the fate of reformers?” “My Father, what may that be?” For sole answer to François’ query, his father gravely pointed to a painting representing Jesus of Nazareth on the cross. Young Arouet left the room “a sadder and a wiser man.” The paternal admonition, so potently sobering and disillusioning, was ineffaceably stamped upon his memory—it swayed and tinged his life even after his patronymic had been lost in the effulgence of the *nom de plume*, Voltaire. He did not abandon his dream of reform, but he chose a path widely separated and variant from the one so nobly, so heroically trod by the pure-famed prophet of Galilee. Unlike that dauntless and self-abnegating martyr, he took and wore the impress of his world and of his age. And yet, though like the slayers of Greece’s tyrant, Hipparchus, he “wreathed his sword in myrtle bough,” he, nevertheless, wielded that sword so uncompromisingly and tellingly as to twice find himself immured in the Bastille, and for other terms of dragging years to incur banishment either from France, his love, or from Paris, his idol.

In the passages which I shall present, you will see this superb knight of the pen in his customary panoply. You will catch the flash of that irresistible rapier—so fine, so light, so graceful, so flexible; but none the less prodigiously efficient and deadly in the matchlessly adroit hand that plied it. You will discern this weapon by implication directed against the ecclesiastic abuses of Voltaire's day—and in no other field was it ever used with more sweeping or more effective execution. "*Ecrasez l'infame!*"—"Crush the wretch!"—was Voltaire's watchword to the relentless war he waged against religious despotism and hypocrisy. To wrest this battle-cry from its genuine signification, and to construe it as an avowal of hatred toward true Christianity is slanderous; to distort it into a denial of God is atrocious. The Church has grandly purged herself since the inglorious epoch of her history during which Voltaire strove to lay bare the loathsome evils festering in her bosom. In the apportionment of credit for her cleansing and her regeneration shall to Voltaire be adjudged no meed of praise?

In his masterful portraiture of the ravages of syphilis as formerly occurring, Voltaire accurately arrays the facts and conditions as they might have been observed, or had been recorded. In his enunciation of doctrine as pertaining to the disease of necessity he no more than mirrors the scientific thought of his time. The theory that the early explorers of the western continent brought the large pox back with them to Europe from those distant shores was given general credence up to a comparatively late date. Had Voltaire been aware of the antiquity and universality of the pest, as now has been conclusively demonstrated, he might have antedated the honors as related thereto, ascribed by the elder Gross to Job, dignifying still further with the name of that legendary patriarch the imposing list of priests and prelates and kings joined in a close brotherhood with the most vulgar of the race by the common bond of syphilis. And we may remark parenthetically that had to Voltaire been accorded fifteen additional years of mortal life he might have footed his column of famous names with a name celebrated for infamy—that of the human monster Marat, of whom Victor Hugo wrote in his "Ninety Three," "For six thousand years Cain has been preserved in hatred, like a toad in the rock. The rock breaks, Cain springs forth among men, and is called Marat." Charlotte Corday's dagger reached the heart of its victim while he was ad-

ministering to himself a medicated bath in the treatment of his syphilis.

But let us hasten on to the text of Voltaire. The foregoing cursory comments I have introduced with the hope that they may elucidate some of the associated situations and circumstances. I have made them prefatory rather than appendent that the last word may be our author's. At this point, laying aside the rôle of annotator, allow me to assume that of translator, which I do with every becoming apology to my audience and to the shade of Voltaire.

The first production from which I beg leave to quote is "Candide." This is a work of fiction satirizing the philosophic thesis that every thing which is, is for the best. The characters are introduced in the Westphalian castle of the Baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh. Those in whom we shall have an interest are Candide, a ward of the house, an artless and unsophisticated youth; the preceptor Pangloss who optimistically maintains in season and out of season that this is the best of worlds possible; and Paquette, *femme de chambre* of the Baroness, "very pretty and very docile." Candide has been peremptorily kicked out of the *chateau* by the irate lord thereof for too zealously making love to the buxom young heiress of Thunder-ten-tronckh. Later the estate had been devastated by marauding Bulgars, and the household partly slaughtered, partly dispersed. After various vicissitudes Candide encounters in Holland his former teacher, the philosopher Pangloss, whom he finds in sorry case. I here introduce Voltaire.

"On the morrow, while strolling, he (Candide) happened to meet a beggar all covered with pustules, his eyes death-like, the end of his nose eroded, his mouth askew, his teeth black, and speaking from the throat; tormented of a violent cough, and spitting out a tooth at each effort. Candide, still more stirred by compassion than by horror, gave to this terrifying beggar the two florins which he had received from his honest anabaptist, Jacques. The phantom regarded him fixedly, shed tears, and leaped upon his neck. Frightened, Candide recoiled. 'Alas!' said the miserable one to the other miserable one, 'do you recognize no more your dear Pangloss?' 'What do I hear?—you my dear master!—you in this horrible state! What misfortune, then, has arrived to you?' 'I am completely exhausted,' said Pangloss. Immediately Candide led him into the stable of the anabaptist, where he had him eat a little bread;

and when Pangloss was refreshed Candide made inquiry as to the cause and the effect, and as to the sufficient reason which had placed him in a condition so pitiable. 'Alas!' said the other, 'it was love; love, the consoler of the human race, the preserver of the universe, the soul of all sensible beings, tender love.' 'Alas!' said Candide, 'I have known it, this love, this sovereign of hearts, this soul of our soul; it has never been worth anything more to me than a kiss and twenty kicks in the posterior. How has this beautiful cause been able to produce in you an effect so abominable?'

"Pangloss replied in these terms: 'O my dear Candide! you have known Paquette, that pretty attendant of our august Baroness; I have tasted in her arms the delights of paradise, which have produced these torments of hell of which you see me devoured; she was infected with it; she is, perhaps, dead of it. Paquette held this present from a very wise Franciscan monk who had ascended to the fountain head; for he had had it of an old countess, who had received it from a captain of cavalry, who owed it to a marchioness, who held it of a page, who had received it from a Jesuit, who, while a novice, had had it in direct line of one of the companions of Christopher Columbus. For me, I shall not give it to anybody, because I am dying.'

"'O Pangloss!' cried Candide, 'this is a strange genealogy!— is it not the devil who was the founder of it?' 'Not at all,' replied that great man; 'this was an indispensable thing in the best of worlds; a necessary ingredient. For if Columbus had not captured in an island of America this malady which empisons the source of generation, which often even prevents generation, and which is evidently the opposite of the great end of nature, neither should we have had chocolate or cochineal. Again, it should be observed that until at present in our continent this malady is peculiar to us, as is polemics. The Turks, the Hindoos, the Persians, the Chinese, the Siamese, the Japanese are not yet acquainted with it, but there is a sufficient reason to indicate that they in their turn may make its acquaintance after some ages. In the meantime, it has made a marvelous progress among us; and above all in those great armies composed of honest, well-bred hirelings who decide the destiny of states. One can give assurance that when thirty thousand men engage in battle ranged against troops equal in number there are about twenty thousand syphilitics on each side.'

"'All that is wonderful,' said Candide. 'But it is necessary

to have you cured.' 'And how can I do it?' said Pangloss; 'I have not a penny, my friend; and in the whole extent of this globe one is not able to have himself bled, or given a lavement, except he pay, or except there may be somebody who pays for us.'

"This last speech fixed Candide's determination. He went and cast himself at the feet of his charitable anabaptist, Jacques, and drew for him such a touching picture of the condition to which his friend was reduced that the good man did not hesitate to receive Doctor Pangloss. He had him cured at his own expense. Pangloss, in the cure, lost only an eye and an ear."

So ends the episode. You may, yet, be enough interested in Paquette and her pox to desire to learn her fate. It furnishes a story with a profoundly important moral. Fortune has mercilessly tossed Candide about the world, at last landing him in Eldorado, from which remote country he has recently returned to Europe fabulously enriched. We find him now at Venice. I here take up again the thread of Voltaire's narrative.

"Candide perceived in St. Mark's Place a young Pauline monk who had upon his arm a girl. The monk appeared fresh, plump, vigorous; his eyes were brilliant, his air assured, his mien high, his step haughty. The girl was very pretty, and was singing. She amorously regarded her Pauline monk, and from time to time pinched his big cheeks."

Candide lays a wager with a friend that here surely is a happy pair. For further investigation of their case, approaching them, he invites them to dinner. Voltaire once more takes the word.

"The damsel blushed. The Pauline monk accepted the proposal; and the girl followed him, regarding Candide with eyes expressing surprise and confusion, and which were obscured by some tears. Scarcely had she entered the apartments of Candide when she said to him, 'What! Mr. Candide does not recognize Paquette any more!' At these words, Candide, who until this point had not considered her with attention, said to her, 'Alas! my poor child, it is then yourself, you who put Doctor Pangloss in the beautiful state in which I have seen him.'"

"'Alas! Sir, it is myself,' said Paquette. 'I see that you are informed of all. . . . I swear to you that my destiny has, also, been most sad. I was very innocent when you formerly saw me. A Franciscan monk, who was my confessor, easily seduced me. The consequences were frightful. I was obliged to leave the

chateau sometime after the Baron had sent you away by force of vigorous kicks posteriorly. If a famous physician had not taken pity on me, I had been dead. I was for some time, through gratitude, the mistress of this doctor. His wife, who was jealous to the degree of rage, beat me unmercifully every day; she was a fury. This doctor was the most ill-favored of all men, and I the most unfortunate of all creatures to be beaten continually on account of a man whom I did not love. You know, Sir, how dangerous it is for a shrew to be the spouse of a doctor. This one, scandalized by the proceedings of his wife, gave her one day, to cure her of a little cold, a medicine so efficacious that she died from it within two hours in horrible convulsions. The kinsfolk of the madam entered a criminal writ against the mister. He fled; and as for me, I was placed in prison. My innocence would not have saved me if I had not been somewhat pretty. The judge freed me on condition that he should succeed the doctor. I was soon supplanted by a rival, cast out without recompense, and obliged to continue that abominable trade which to you men appears so pleasant, and which is for us but an abyss of misery. I went to practice the profession at Venice. Oh! Sir, if you could imagine what it is to be obliged to caress indifferently an old merchant, an advocate, a monk, a gondolier, an abbot; to be exposed to all insults, to all outrages, to be often reduced to borrow a petticoat wherewith to allure some man, perchance repulsive, to be robbed by one of what has been gained with another, to be blackmailed by the officers of justice, and to have in prospect nothing but a shocking old age, the almshouse, and death amid squalor, you would conclude that I am one of the most evil-starred creatures on earth.'

"'But,' said Candide to Paquette, 'you had such a gay, such a contented air when I met you. You sang; you caressed the monk with a *complaisance* quite natural. You have appeared to me as happy as you pretend to be unfortunate.' 'Oh! Sir,' responded Paquette, 'that is yet another of the miseries of the trade. I was yesterday fleeced and beaten by an officer; and it is necessary to-day that I seem good-humoured in order to please a monk.'"

Abruptly taking our leave of Candide, Pangloss and Paquette, let us follow Voltaire without pause elsewhere. Another of his productions in fiction is entitled "*L'Homme aux Quarante Ecus.*" While the frame-work of this is indeed imaginative, it is based upon solid sociologic science and philosophy, and has an abundant

filling-in of facts and statistics. Of the actors presented in the piece we shall meet two. One of them is the character designated in the title-rôle—"L'Homme aux quarante écus" is his sobriquet, which may be interpreted as "The man with the forty-five-dollar income"—a type of personage numerous and conspicuous in Voltaire's day. The other is a certain regimental surgeon-major. Our prolocutors thus briefly introduced, let us plunge *in medias res*. From here on we yield the stage entirely to Voltaire. "L'Homme aux quarante écus resided in a small canton where soldiers had not been garrisoned for an hundred and fifty years. The manners in this unfrequented corner of territory were as pure as the air which environed it. People here did not know that elsewhere love could be infected of a destructive poison, that the generations might be attacked in their germ, and that nature, contradicting herself, could render the tender passion horrible, and pleasure frightful; they abandoned themselves to love with the security of innocence. Troops came, and all changed. Two lieutenants, the chaplain of the regiment, a corporal, and a recruit who came from a theological seminary sufficed to empoison a dozen villages in less than three months. Two girl cousins of *l'homme aux quarante écus* found themselves covered with indurated pustules. Their beautiful hair fell out. Their voices became raucous. Their eyes were fixed and dull, and their eyelids took on a livid color, and no longer closed to allow repose to enter dislocated limbs which a concealed caries began to gnaw, like those of the Arab, Job; although probably Job never had this malady.

"The surgeon-major of the regiment, a man of great experience, was obliged to demand, at the court, aides in order to cure all of the infected girls of the section. The Minister of War, always impelled by inclination to relieve the fair sex, sent a squad of assistant surgeons, who spoiled with one hand what they restored with the other. *L'homme aux quarante écus* was then reading the philosophic history of 'Candide,' translated from the German of Dr. Ralph, who proves conclusively that all is well; and that it was absolutely *impossible*, in the best of worlds *possible*, that the pox, the plague, stone in the bladder, gravel, scrofula, the Chamber of Valence and the Inquisition should *not* have entered into the composition of the universe; of this universe made solely for man, king of animals and image of God, whom one clearly sees that he resembles as closely as two drops of water resemble each other.

"He read in the true history of 'Candide' that the famous Doctor Pangloss had lost in treatment an eye and an ear. 'Alas!' said he, 'my two cousins, my two poor cousins!—shall *they* be one-eyed and crop-eared?' 'No,' said to him the consolatory surgeon-major; 'the Germans have a clumsy hand; but we folks, we cure girls promptly, surely and agreeably.'

"In fact, the two pretty cousins were rid of it at the price of having their head puffed up like a balloon for six weeks, losing the half of their teeth, carrying the tongue constantly protruded some inches, and dying of lung disease at the end of six months.

"During the process their cousin and the surgeon-major reasoned thus:—

L'homme aux quarante écus: 'Is it possible, Sir, that nature can have attached such terrible torments to a pleasure so necessary, so much of shame to so much of glory, and that there may be more risk in begetting an infant than in killing a man? May it not be true, at least, that this scourge is diminishing somewhat upon the earth, and that it is becoming less dangerous from day to day?'

The Surgeon-Major: 'On the contrary, it is spreading more and more through the whole of Christian Europe. It has extended as far as into Siberia. I have seen over fifty persons die of it; and, most notably, a military general and a very wise minister of state. Few weak chests resist the malady and the remedy. The two sisters, the small and the large pox, are leagued together yet more strictly than the monks to destroy the human species.'

L'homme aux quarante écus: 'A new reason for abolishing the monks, in order that, returned to the rank of men, they may repair a little the evil which the two sisters do. Tell me, I pray you, if the beasts have pox.'

The Surgeon-Major: 'Neither small pox, nor great pox, nor monks are known among them.'

L'homme aux quarante écus: 'It must be avowed, then, that they are more lucky and more prudent than we in this best of worlds.'

The Surgeon-Major: 'I have never had any doubt about it. They are subject to fewer maladies than we. Their instinct is more sure than our reason. Neither the past nor the future ever torments them.'

L'homme aux quarante écus: 'You have been a surgeon to an ambassador of France in Turkey. Are there many syphilitics at Constantinople?'

"The Surgeon-Major: 'The French have carried it into the suburb of Pera, where they dwell. I have known a Capuchin who was as badly eaten of it as Pangloss. But it has not reached the city. The French scarcely ever sleep there. There are almost no public courtesans in that immense city. Every rich man has female slaves from Circassia, always guarded, always watched, whose beauty cannot be dangerous. The Turks call the pox "the Christian disease;" and that redoubles the profound scorn which they have for our theology. But in recompense they have the plague, a malady of Egypt, concerning which they make little ado, and which they never give themselves the trouble to prevent.'

"L'homme aux quarante écus: 'At what time do you believe that this scourge began in Europe?'

"The Surgeon-Major: 'Upon the return of Christopher Columbus from his first voyage, among innocent peoples who knew neither avarice nor war; about the year 1494. These nations, simple and upright, were a prey to this evil from time immemorial, just as leprosy reigned among the Arabs and Jews, and the plague among the Egyptians. The first fruit that the Spaniards gathered from this conquest of the New World was pox. It spread itself more promptly than the money of Mexico, which did not circulate in Europe until a long time afterward. The reason of this is that, in all cities there were then fine public houses called — [Here Voltaire gives the letter "B" as the initial of the word he indicates, but which the translator has not been able to identify.] established by authority of the sovereigns for the preservation of the honor of the ladies. The Spaniards carried the venom into these privileged houses from which the princes and bishops drew the girls that were necessary for them. Some one has noted that at Constance there were seven hundred and eighteen girls for the service of the council which so devoutly caused to be burned John Huss and Jerome of Prague.'

"One can judge by this single incident with what rapidity the disease traversed all the countries. The first lord who died of it was the most illustrious and most reverend Bishop and Viceroy of Hungary, in 1499, whom Bartholomeo Montanagua, great doctor of Padua, was not able to cure. Gaultieri asserts that the Arch-Bishop of Mainz, Berthold of Heneberg, "attacked of big pox rendered his soul to God in 1504." It is known that our King Francis I died of it. Henry III caught it at Venice, but the Jacobin, Jacques Clement, forestalled the effect of the malady.

"The parliament of Paris, always zealous for the public

good, was the first that gave a decree against the pox, in 1497. It forbade all syphilitics to remain in Paris *under penalty of the halter*; but, as it was not easy to prove judicially concerning the male and female townspeople that they were in offense, this decree had no more effect than those which were afterward directed against emetics; and, in spite of the parliament, the number of culpable augmented constantly. It is certain that if they had practiced exorcism upon them, instead of causing them to be hanged, there would be to-day no more of them upon the earth; but that is something about which unfortunately no one ever thought.'

"L'homme aux quarante écus: 'Is what I have read in "Candide" indeed true, that among us when two armies of thirty thousand men each march as a whole in line abreast, one could wager that there are twenty thousand syphilitics on each side?'

"The Surgeon-Major: 'It is only too true. It is the same with the licentiates of Sorbonne. What would you have the young bachelors do, to whom nature speaks more loudly and more strongly than theology? I can swear to you that proportionately, my confrères and myself have treated more young priests than young officers.'

"L'homme aux quarante écus: 'Should there not be some method to extirpate this contagion which is desolating Europe? They have already tried to weaken the poison of one pox; shall they not be able to attempt anything upon the other?'

"The Surgeon-Major: 'There would be but one sole means; which is, that all the princes of Europe should league themselves together as in the time of Godfrey of Bouillon. Certainly a crusade against the pox would be much more reasonable than have been those which they undertook formerly so unhappily against Saladin, Malek-Sha and the Albigenses. It would be worth much more to have an understanding with each other in order to repulse the common enemy of the human race than to be continually occupied at watching for the moment favorable to devastate the earth and to cover the fields with dead for the purpose of wresting from one's neighbor two or three cities and some villages. I speak against my own interests; for war and pox make my fortune. But a man should be *man* ahead of being surgeon-major.'

And thus our Surgeon-Major bows himself off the stage. As to *L'homme aux quarante écus*, let us dismiss him with a final clause from Voltaire:—

“Madam has presented him with a very pretty little girl, whom he hopes some day to marry to a councillor of the board of excise, provided that magistrate should not have the malady which the Surgeon-Major wishes to extirpate from Christian Europe.”