

# FRANKLIN AND VOLTAIRE

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**W**HEN the house at Number 8 Quai Voltaire, formerly known as the palace of the Duchesse de Mazarin, was recently offered for sale, tourists and the younger generation of Parisians, perhaps, were newly reminded that all this stretch of houses, extending along the left bank of the Seine, overlooking the Louvre opposite, were once "palaces" lived in by people notable for their rank in society or for qualities more historical. Their grandeur, never exterior, is now sadly dimmed; the street up to the Institute belongs to commerce, — of a de luxe kind, it is true, — with a cheap cabaret wedged in here and there and the book-stall keepers of the quai, at watch like spiders, on the other side. Number 27, at the corner of the rue de Beaune, only a dozen steps from Louis XIV's bridge and from Madame de Staël's beloved rue du Bac, is the house where Voltaire died on May 30, 1778. It was in this house that Benjamin Franklin made the personal acquaintance of the philosopher, poet, playwright, historian at the time when "all Europe was filled with the noise of his name". From Paris especially, Franklin, envoy from "darkest" America, came in for a share of interest and adulation; but the stem of these was curiosity. Voltaire was their own, a true son of Paris who had returned to his city of birth after twenty-seven years of exile, and the welcome the people of all ranks gave him was unsurpassable.

When Voltaire set out from Ferney on this last earthly *tournée*, two floors had already been reserved for his household in Number 27. Save for the cabaret of the "zinc" variety on the corner, the house has probably changed very little. It is extremely plain with five great windows of old-fashioned panes on the floors above the *rez-de-chaussée* looking over the Seine, and as many windows (smaller) on the rue de Beaune. So lighted, some writers have said, that Voltaire found the rooms dark enough to compel him to keep candles lighted throughout the day. This must be a mistake. The truth more likely is that he kept the inside shutters, —

plain lengths of mahogany, — shut tight against the windows as they are fitted to-day; for the philosopher was known to prefer artificial light.

The entrance on the rue de Beaune has the beauty of simplicity, and as it has been carefully preserved, it remains the solitary witness to the former dignity of the house. Four pillars, slightly carved, sustain an attic where two griffins, rampant, face each other. On each of the double doors are carved the Roman fasces. Through these doors, at dusk, rolled the eighteenth century coach of Voltaire into a court twice the size of the one we see to-day; for the blank wall of a modern small hotel has intruded there. The interior has endured greater changes. Doors have been boarded up, new doors let in, and narrow dark corridors fashioned to conduct to small, modern rooms which, being let, can add something to the income. Where the great *salon* was, — which Voltaire considered to be a necessity of his sojourn, — can only be conjectured, but no doubt the entire floor space of the first *étage* was divided between *salon* and *salle à manger*. Here, at any rate, Voltaire received Benjamin Franklin.

It was a meeting of mutual admiration. Voltaire's insatiate curiosity for all human knowledge, — and especially for every branch of it that savored of philosophy, — had caused him, even before his carriage had traversed San Antoine, to inquire where Franklin was to be found. Of all the crowd of admirers flocking to his *salon* to praise and flatter, probably none was so eagerly awaited as the simple American. Franklin had no narrow prejudice to overcome before meeting the great writer whose free thought, scepticism, and "aversion to the clergy" had spread a blight in the Anglo-Saxon world over the name of Voltaire, scarcely affected even to-day by Carlyle's half-hearted attempt to rub it off. On the contrary, he hugely admired this patriarch, who after acquiring wealth by his cleverness in business, still wrought, as if his life depended on it, at story, play, and history. There was much in common between them, Franklin had been told; and while the American sage shook his head at this flattery, he wished to test its truth for himself, to meet Voltaire's "peering eyes", to draw out his famous irony, to applaud his *bons mots*. Could his wit at eighty-four be as bright as when at eighteen it won a legacy from Ninon?

Voltaire could have no privacy. As on the street people of every class pressed to touch his hand, so deputation followed deputation into his temporary home, and thither came the most illustrious men and women of the highest rank at all hours, not to be denied. This intellectual dictator was such only in letters. He could not, if he would, see Franklin alone. But the groups parted and fell back as the short, stout, kindly-faced stranger followed the announcement of his name into the presence of a man so fleshless as scarce to cast a shadow. Voltaire took two steps forward and stretched forth his hand.

So little has been left by the persons who listened eagerly to the conversation of the two philosophers that one who would treasure the lightest word each said to the other is half angered by their indifference. It is known, however, that as Franklin was taking leave, after making an appointment to bring his little grandson to the rue de Beaune next day, Voltaire gaily said that although he had forgotten the English he had learned many years before in England, he should venture to speak three English words as his message to America. These words were "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." This is the first time, it has been said, that these three words appeared in juxtaposition. Next day Franklin kept his word and brought his *petit-fils* to Voltaire to bless. And again the sage resorted to English, for laying his hand on the boy's head, he said, "God and Liberty."

The evening of this day was to be the climax of the Voltairean ovation, the representation of his *Irene*, the crowning of his bust on the stage of the Comédie Française, and the return at a late hour to the house in the rue de Beaune, made tumultuous by cheering multitudes. "You wish to smother me with roses," murmured the man of eighty-four, weak from the excitement which shook his feeble frame. Then the reaction, the fatal attack, the pertinacity of the curé of Saint Sulpice. "Never an atheist, I long ago returned to deism," answered Voltaire, turning his back as the great Lorenzo did on Savonarola, and whispering, "Let me die in peace." Franklin expressed indignation when he was told that the corpse of Voltaire had been denied Christian burial. His own death occurred a year before the National Assembly decreed state honors to the great French writer and brought back his body in triumph to the Panthéon.

# PITCAIRN ISLAND

## *A Study in the Evolution of Rascality*

LOUIS LE FEVRE

**R**UMINATING on the outrageous ideas of the younger generation, long before the time of Tut-ankh-amen, an Egyptian sage propounded the aphorism that you can't change human nature. His contemporaries welcomed the doctrine with enthusiasm, and ever since, this has been the first line of defense for the advocates of a fossilized civilization. The arguments with which it is supported have varied considerably. In the Middle Ages, the rash innovator was reminded that the existing status represented the will of God, and that any attempt to change it was sacrilege. In our scientific era, however, the ancient dogma is buttressed by the laws of biology and eugenics.

We are told that our intelligence and character are irrevocably determined by the germ plasm which we receive from our ancestors. An Edwards is foredoomed to be a clergyman or a college professor, while a Jukes automatically becomes a criminal and a half-wit. Are there slums in our cities? Proposals to abolish them are useless, for slum people inevitably create slum conditions. Is there crime? The only cure is the extermination of the criminals and all their children. Education and the improvement of the environment are helpless to wipe out such evils.

Perhaps all this is true, but there are inconvenient facts which are hard to fit into the theory. Human history displays startling changes in the behavior of men within a single generation, for which the laws of heredity fail to account. To use a minor illustration, there is the story of Pitcairn Island.

In the year 1787, the British war-ship *Bounty*, a vessel of some two hundred tons, with a crew of forty-six men commanded by Lieutenant William Bligh, was ordered to the South Seas to find varieties of the breadfruit tree suitable for planting in the West Indies. After a ten months' voyage the *Bounty* reached Tahiti. There were mutterings of discontent among the crew because of the severity of Bligh, who was a harsh disciplinarian even for those days when the seamen on all men-of-war were well ac-