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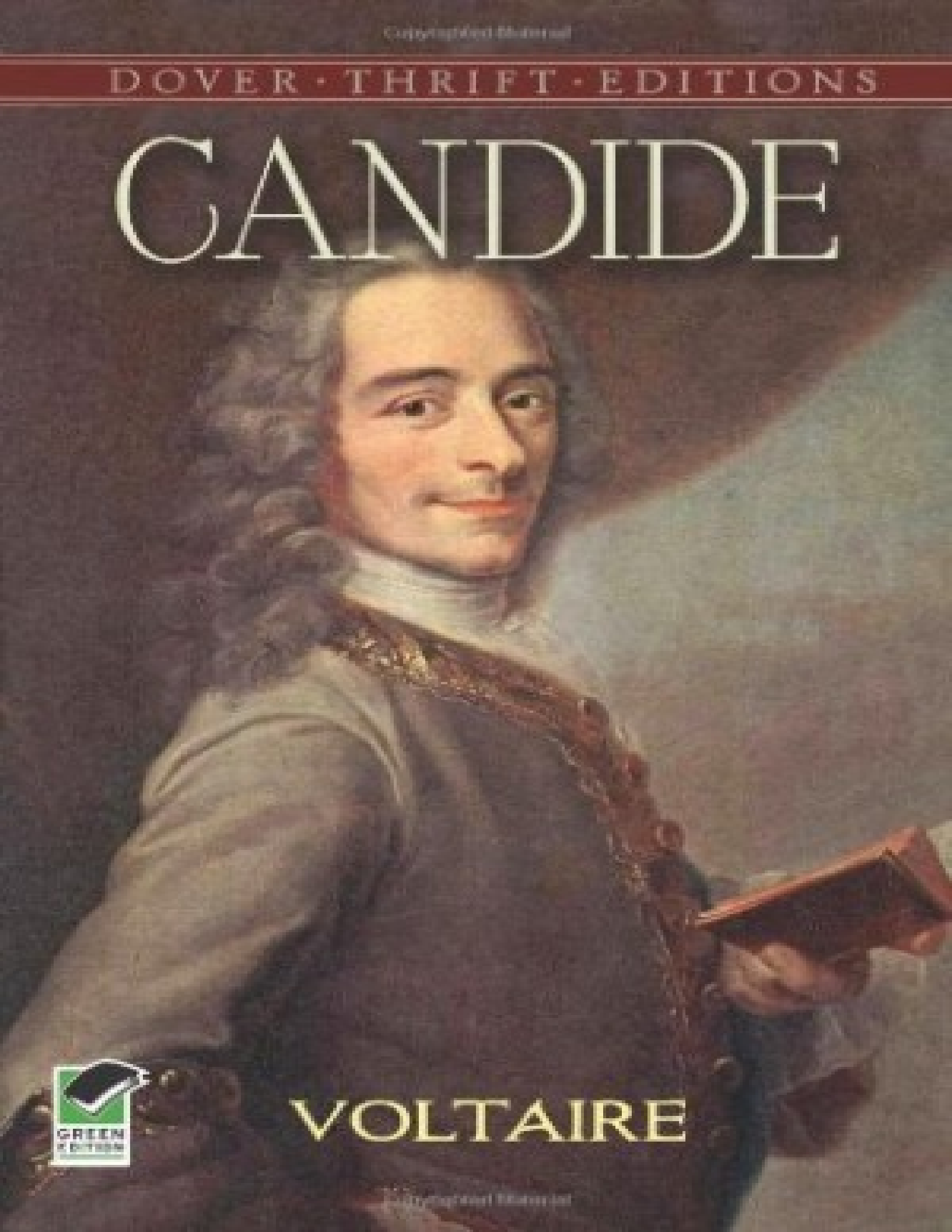

VOLTAIRE

GREEN EDITION

CANDIDE

VOLTAIRE

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B A N T A M
C L A S S I C

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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 unavailing.

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