

On Character

by Voltaire

FROM the Greek word impression, engraving.

It is what nature has graved in us.

Can one change one's character? Yes, if one changes one's body. It is possible for a man born blunderer, unbending and violent, being stricken with apoplexy in his old age, to become a foolish, tearful child, timid and peaceable. His body is no longer the same. But as long as his nerves, his blood and his marrow are in the same state, his nature will not change any more than a wolf's and a marten's instinct.

The character is composed of our ideas and our feelings: well, it is substantiated that we give ourselves neither feelings nor ideas; therefore our character does not depend on us.

If it depended on us, there is nobody who would not be perfect.

We cannot give ourselves tastes, talents; why should we give ourselves qualities?

If one does not reflect, one thinks oneself master of everything; when one reflects thereon, one sees that one is master of nothing.

Should you wish to change a man's character completely, purge him with diluents every day until you have killed him. Charles XII., in his suppurative fever on the road to Bender, was no longer the same man. One prevailed upon him as upon a child.

If I have a crooked nose and two cat's eyes, I can hide them with a mask. Can I do more with the character which nature has given me?

A man born violent, hasty, presented himself before Francois I., King of France, to complain of an injustice; the prince's countenance, the respectful bearing of the courtiers, the very place where he is, make a powerful impression on this man; mechanically he lowers his eyes, his rough voice softens, he presents his petition humbly, one would believe him born as gentle as are (at that moment at least) the courtiers, amongst whom he is even disconcerted; but Francois I. understands physiognomy, he easily discovers in the lowered eyes, burning nevertheless with sombre fire, in the strained facial muscles, in the compressed lips, that this man is not so gentle as he is forced to appear. This man follows him to Pavia, is taken with him, led to the same prison in Madrid: Francois I.'s majesty no longer makes the same impression on him; he grows familiar with the object of his respect. One day when pulling off the king's boots, and pulling them off badly, the king, embittered by his misfortune, gets angry; my man sends the king about his business, and throws his boots out of the window.

Sixtus V. was born petulant, stubborn, haughty, impetuous, vindictive, arrogant; this character seemed softened during the trials of his novitiate. He begins to enjoy a certain

credit in his order; he flies into a passion with a guard, and batters him with his fist: he is inquisitor at Venice; he performs his duties with insolence: behold him cardinal, he is possessed dalla rabbia papale: this fury triumphs over his nature; he buries his person and his character in obscurity; he apes the humble and the dying man; he is elected Pope; this moment gives back to the spring, which politics have bent, all its long curbed elasticity; he is the haughtiest and most despotic of sovereigns.

Drive away nature, it returns at the gallop.
(DESTOUCHES, Glorieux, Act 3, Sc. 5.)

Religion, morality put a brake on a nature's strength; they cannot destroy it. The drunkard in a cloister, reduced to a half-setier of cider at each meal, will no longer get drunk, but he will always like wine.

Age enfeebles character; it is a tree that produces only degenerate fruit, but the fruit is always of the same nature; it is knotted and covered with moss, it becomes worm-eaten, but it is always oak or pear tree. If one could change one's character, one would give oneself one, one would be master of nature. Can one give oneself anything? do we not receive everything? Try to animate an indolent man with a continued activity; to freeze with apathy the boiling soul of an impetuous fellow, to inspire someone who has neither ear nor taste with a taste for music and poetry, you will no more succeed than if you undertook to give sight to a man born blind. We perfect, we soften, we conceal what nature has put in us, but we do not put in ourselves anything at all.

One says to a farmer: "You have too many fish in this pond, they will not prosper; there are too many cattle in your meadows, grass lacks, they will grow thin." It happens after this exhortation that the pikes eat half my man's carp, and the wolves the half of his sheep; the rest grow fat. Will he congratulate himself on his economy? This countryman, it is you; one of your passions has devoured the others, and you think you have triumphed over yourself. Do not nearly all of us resemble that old general of ninety who, having met some young officers who were debauching themselves with some girls, says to them angrily: "Gentlemen, is that the example I give you?"