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THE LIFE AND WRITINGS
OF
TURGOT

COMPTROLLER-GENERAL OF FRANCE 1774-6

EDITED FOR ENGLISH READERS

BY

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LONDON
LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
AND NEW YORK : 15 EAST 16th STREET
1895

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ON SOME SOCIAL QUESTIONS, INCLUDING THE EDUCATION OF THE YOUNG

*Addressed to Madame de Graffigny*¹ (1751)

. . . I HAVE again read the *Lettres péruviennes*. Zilia is a quite worthy sister of Cénie. I am like Henri Quatre, for the last one I have heard. I would indeed prefer the constantly discovering new beauties (which I am always astonished not to have already admired) to amusing myself by making poor criticisms. But you do not wish praise, and I must renounce gratifying myself.

In obedience to the request you have honoured me by making, I begin by suggesting the additions which I imagine might be made to the work. You seem to me to approve of the principal of these, which would be to show Zilia as Frenchwoman, after having shown her as Peruvian; to show Zilia judging no longer according to her prejudices, but comparing her prejudices with our own, making her regard objects from a new point of view, making her remark how far she has been wrong in being astonished at so many

¹ See *supra*, p. 15. Graffigny (Françoise). Born 1695. Belonged to a noble family fallen in fortune. Made when very young an unhappy marriage; after many years of suffering obtained a judicial separation. Spent with Voltaire and Madame du Châtelet at Cirey six months, 1738-39, of which she has left a narrative. Admitted to the closest literary intimacy, Voltaire's poem 'La Pucelle' was read to her; suspected of having spoken to others of this work, desired to be kept secret, she was unceremoniously expelled from Cirey by Madame du Châtelet in Voltaire's absence. He, more lenient, gave her the best introduction to Paris society. She published between 1745 and 1758, the year of her death, several romances and plays. The *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, of 1747, was her greatest success, and went through many editions. It has been translated into English (1805).

things, and making her search out the causes of those arrangements, derived from the ancient constitution of government, bearing upon the distribution of social conditions as well as on the progress of knowledge.

The distribution of conditions is a very important feature in the social state, and one very easy to justify by showing its necessity and its utility. Its necessity, because men are not born equal, because their strength, their mind, their passions, would constantly disturb the equilibrium which laws might attempt to set, because all men are born in a state of feebleness, which renders them dependent on their parents, and which forms between them indissoluble ties. Families unequal in capacity and in strength redoubled the causes of inequality; the wars of savages required a chief. What would society have been without this inequality of conditions? Each would have been reduced to a life concerning itself merely with necessities, and there would be many to whom even these would not be assured. One cannot labour at the soil without having utensils and the means of sustenance until the harvest. Those who have not had the intelligence or the opportunity to acquire these means have not the right to deprive of them him who has earned and won them by his work. If the idle and the ignorant robbed the laborious and the skilful, all work would be discouraged, misery would become general. It is more just and more useful for all that those who are deficient in mind or in good fortune should lend their strength to others who can employ them, who can, in advance, give them wages, and thus guarantee them a share of the future products. Their subsistence then is assured, but so is their dependence. It is not unjust that he who has invented a productive work, and who has supplied to his co-operators the sustenance and the instruments necessary to execute it, who has made with them, in that, only a free contract, should reserve for himself the better part, and, for the price of his advances, should have less hard work and more leisure. This leisure enables him to reflect more, and still

further to increase his mental resources. What he can save from the portion, equitably greater, which he will have of the products, increases his capital and his power to undertake new enterprises. Thus inequality will arise, and will increase, even among the most capable and most moral peoples. . . . It is not an evil, it is a blessing for mankind: where would society be if every man laboured only at his own little field? It would be necessary for him also to build his own house, to make his own clothes. The work of each would be limited to himself and to the productions of the little piece of ground surrounding him. How would the inhabitant of the land which did not produce wheat manage to live? Who would transport the products of one country to another? The humblest peasant now enjoys many commodities gathered often from distant countries. A thousand hands, perhaps a hundred thousand hands, have worked for him. The distribution of employments necessarily leads to the inequality of conditions. Without it who would perfect the useful arts? Who would succour the infirm? Who would spread the light of the mind? Who would give to men and to nations that education, particular as well as general, which forms their manners? Who would decide peacefully men's quarrels? Who would check the ferocity of some men, or support the feebleness of others? Liberty! I say it in a sigh, men are perhaps not worthy of thee! Equality! they desire thee, but they cannot attain to thee!

Let your Zilia weigh again the relative advantages of the savage and of the civilised man. To prefer the condition of the savage is a ridiculous declamation. Let her refute it, let her show that the vices which we regard as produced by civilisation are the appanage of the human heart; that he who has no gold may be as avaricious as he who has it, because, in all circumstances, men have the hunger for property, the right to preserve it, the avidity which actuates them to accumulate its products. But let not Zilia be unjust; let her, at the same time, unfold the

compensations, unequal indeed but still real, belonging to the condition of uncivilised people. Let her show that our arbitrary institutions too often lead us away from Nature; that we have been the dupes of our own progress, that the savage, without knowing how to consult Nature, knows often how to follow her.

Let Zilia criticise, above all, the method of our education; let her criticise our pedantry, for it is in that to-day that our education consists. Our teaching is applied quite against the grain of Nature. See the 'Rudiments.' We begin by wishing to cram into the heads of children a perfect crowd of the most abstract ideas. We deluge them with words which can offer to them no meaning, because the meaning of words can only be presented along with ideas, and these ideas can come only by degrees, by proceeding from sensible objects. Then we suppress their imagination, we keep from their view the objects by which Nature gives to the savage the first notion of all things, of all the sciences, even of astronomy, of geometry, of natural history. A man, after a very long education, is still ignorant of the cause of the seasons, cannot fix the cardinal points, does not know the most common animals and the most common plants. We have not an eye for Nature. It is the same with us in morals; general ideas again spoil everything. We take enough care to say to a child that he must be just, temperate, virtuous, but has he the least idea of virtue? Do not say to your son, *Be virtuous*, but make him find pleasure in being so. Develope in his heart the germ of the sentiments which Nature has put there. We often need more barriers against our education than against Nature. Place the child in the opportunities to be true, liberal, compassionate, rely upon the heart of man, let the precious seeds of virtue expand in the air that surrounds them. Do not smother them under a load of straw-mattings and wooden frames.

Another point in our education which seems to me to be bad and ridiculous is our severity in respect to these poor

children. They have done some mere foolishness, and we reprehend them as if it were a most important fault. There are many of these childish follies which age itself will correct, but we do not think of that. We wish our son to be 'well brought up,' and we overwhelm him with petty rules of civility, often frivolous, which cannot but annoy him, for he does not see the reasons for them. It would be quite sufficient to prevent him from being troublesome to those he meets. The rest will follow by degrees. Inspire in him the desire to please, he will soon know more in that respect than all that masters could teach him. We wish our child to be serious, we make it a virtue in him not to run about; we fear every instant that he is going to fall. What happens? We weary and vex him, and we enfeeble him. We have forgotten that above all it is a part of education to form the body.¹ We can trace the cause of this to our ancient manners and our old government. Our ignorant nobility indeed knew nothing but the body; it was men of the people who studied, and that only in order to become priests or monks. Latin was then the whole education, because it was not men who were to be formed, but priests, capable of passing an examination required of them. And again, to-day we study philosophy, not to be a philosopher, but to pass Master of Arts. What has followed from this? When the nobility have desired to study they have studied according to the forms of colleges established for ecclesiastical objects, and this has often had the effect of disgusting them with study altogether.

I know that you wish to take the conceit out of men by placing woman's constancy above man's. This reminds me of the lion in the fable, who, seeing a picture in which a man had overcome a lion, observed, 'If lions could paint, they would show another story.' You, who can paint, wish to abase them too. But, candidly, I advise you

¹ 'This was the education of the time. Let us bless Rousseau, who delivered youth from it; but let us also admire Turgot, who wrote this several years before the publication of *Émile*.' (Dupont.) It is not improbable that Turgot in these observations affords us a glimpse of his own early home life. See *supra*, p. 4.

not to blemish your romance for the glory of women—you have no need to do so.

I have long thought that our nation has need to have marriage preached to her—good marriage. We make our marriages with sordidness, from views of ambition or self-interest, and for this reason many of them are unhappy. We see becoming stronger day by day a fashion of thinking which is hurtful to the State, to manners, to the duration of families, to happiness and the domestic virtues. We dread the ties of marriage, we dread the care and the expense of children.¹ There are many causes of this mode of thinking, but this is not the place to detail them. It will be useful to the State and to manners that we set ourselves in this to reform our opinions less by reasoning than by sentiment. Assuredly there is no lack of matter to be urged; it is Nature that brings about marriage, it is she who adds to the attraction of pleasure the still more delightful attraction of love, because, man having a longer need of help than other young beings, it is necessary for the father and the mother to be united by a durable tie in order to guide the education of their children. It is this same Nature which, by the wise providence of the Supreme Being, endows animals with a maternal tenderness, which endures precisely to the time when the little ones cease to need it. It is Nature that renders the caresses of the little ones so agreeable to their parents. You might introduce this topic by making Zilia dilate upon the happiness she promises herself with Aza. She might see Céline playing with her young children, might envy the sweetness of those pleasures so little tasted by people of the world; she could—and this is still a point in the comparison between man civilised and man uncivilised—she could reprehend this blot on our manners. We blush at our children, we regard them as an embarrass-

¹ 'Looseness of opinion as to the family and the conditions of its well-being and stability was a flaw that ran through the whole period of revolutionary thought. . . . It is a proof of the solidity of Turgot's understanding that he should from the first have detected the mischievousness of this side of the great social attack.' (John Morley, *Crit. Misc.* ii. 71.)

ment, we keep them away from us, we send them to some college or convent, in order to be troubled with them as little as possible. It is a true reflection that the ties of the natural society of the family have lost their strength proportionally as society in general has expanded. General society has jostled out Nature; we have taken away society from the family to give it to the public. It is true that this general society is advantageous in many respects, and will some day destroy the prejudices it has established; for although the first effect of society is to render individuals slaves to public opinion, the second, but more distant effect is to embolden everyone to judge for himself. . . . The most courageous venture to say aloud what others think only in secret, and, in the long run, the voice of the public becomes the voice of Nature and of truth, because in the long run it becomes the judgment of the greatest number.

Returning to the question of marriage, I would that Zilia should dwell a little on the abuse of which I have already spoken—the manner in which we make marriages without the two parties we join together for life being known to each other, merely by the authority of the parents who determine their own choice only by the fortune of rank or of money, or of rank which it is hoped will one day be translated into money, and who give point to their ideas by the saying we hear every day, ‘He has done a foolish thing—*married for love*. . . .’ I believe it will take a long time to correct society on this matter. I know that even marriages of inclination are not always happy; but because in choosing we are sometimes deceived, it is concluded that we must never choose. The consequence drawn is amusing.

And this leads me to another matter very important for our happiness, of which I would like your Zilia to speak. I would examine closely into the causes of the inconstancies, and even occasional dislikes, that occur between those who at heart love each other. I believe that as we live longer in the world we see that the bothers, the teasings, and the

bad temper, brought about by trifles, place more trouble and divisions between people than serious things do. It is deplorable to see so many quarrels, and so many people made unhappy actually on account of mere nothings. How much acrimony rises on the foundation of a word, or on some presumed forgetfulness of respect! If we only put ourselves in the place of others, if we were only to think of the many times we ourselves have had movements of temper, how often we ourselves have forgotten things! A word spoken in depreciation of our judgment is enough to render us irreconcilable, and yet how many times *we* have found ourselves wrong in forming opinions!—how many men of mind we have sometimes taken for fools!—and why should not others have the same right to err as we? But *their* self-love, it is said, makes them find pleasure in preferring themselves to us. Honestly, without our own self-love being concerned, should *we* be thus shocked? Pride is the greatest enemy of pride: they are two inflated balloons which mutually repel each other. Let us pardon the pride of others and let us fear our own. Nature, by forming men so subject to error, has given them but so many claims to tolerance. Why should we refuse it because it is ourselves who are concerned? It is here the evil is; because it is so rare for us to judge fairly, because almost no one weighs truly himself with others. . . . How much tact is needed in those living together to be compliant without lowering one's self, to blame another without harshness, to correct without dominating, to complain without ill-temper! Women, above all, whom we train up to believe that every deference is due to them, are not able to bear contradiction. This is of all the dispositions the most liable to render them unhappy and all those surrounding them. Nothing is more miserable for us than to be ever dwelling on the respect we think due to us; it is the sure way to our becoming insufferable, it is to make for others a burden of that respect we desire. Respect is tendered with pleasure only where it is not exacted. The

best advice that can be given to persons living together is to be quite frank with each other in dealing with any serious difference as soon as it appears ; this arrests at their source many of the annoyances often proceeding from mere prejudiced dislikes. But this must be done with full sincerity ; we must habituate ourselves to criticise, to examine, and to judge others with a perfect impartiality. I do not speak of tempering our criticisms by giving to them some agreeable turns, and of seasoning them with some mixture of praise and tenderness. How difficult this art is ! . . . It is true that, even with the best tact used by us to soften reproaches, there are persons who do not know how to receive them ; advice they mistake for scolding, they imagine always to see in him who gives it them an assumption of superiority and authority which repels them. It must be admitted that this is a defect belonging to many givers of advice. I have often met with persons who say in self-defence : ‘ I am so made, and I cannot help it.’ These are persons whose self-love embraces even their defects. This bad disposition proceeds, perhaps, from the manner in which we have had advice given us in childhood, always under the form of reproach, of correction, with the tone of authority, often of threatening. Hence a youth when once free from the hands of his masters or his parents places all his happiness in having no longer to give account of his conduct to anyone, and the most friendly advice appears to him an act of domination, a yoke, a continuance of childhood. Ah ! why not accustom children to listen to advice with sweetness by our giving it to them without bitterness ? Why exercise authority ? I would that children really felt that it is from our affection for them that we reprehend them ; but how can we make them feel this if we do not express it in our own softness with them ? I have no sympathy with Montaigne when he censures the caresses given by mothers to their children. Who can know better than mothers themselves ? It is the instinct that Providence has given them. It is the seasoning which reason teaches

should be added to instruction in order to give it genial growth. We forget that it is the caresses of a courageous mother that inspire courage, that they are the most powerful medium of opening the young soul to the inlet of all fine and pure feelings.

I complain above all that our system of educating the young is, for the most part, a mass of most frivolous rules for the teaching of most frivolous things. Why should not children be taught, instead, the art to know themselves, to acquire that fairness of mind which would in time banish from society, if not ill temper, at least the quarrels which ill-temper occasions? How many men would have been happier had they but learnt earlier that tact in giving advice, that docility to receive it and to follow it, of which I have spoken! It is supposed that such quiet impartiality as this is only a gift of Nature, the result of a fortunate temperament, and that education is powerless to effect this constant attention to oneself. We little know the power of education. I will mention one of the reasons of its failure; it is that we content ourselves with giving *rules* where it is necessary to create *habits*. . . . I believe that Nature has sown in all hearts the seeds of all the virtues, that they require only to be developed; that education (but indeed only a skilful education) can render virtuous the most of men. I know that human progress cannot be rapid; man slowly trails himself along step by step. We must commence by teaching parents to feel the necessity of this true education and to know how to impart it. Each generation will learn a little from the preceding one, and books will thus become the preceptors of nations. And you, Madame, who are so zealous for the good of humanity, who can work better than yourself to spread these principles? They are not quite unrecognised. We have already begun in our time to have a glimpse of them, to render justice to them, even to favour them. But we do not yet know how to instil them. What slovenliness there is in home education, and how easy it would be to penetrate the hearts of children with the senti-

ments of compassion and of good-will ! I have seen parents who taught their children that 'nothing is so beautiful as to make people happy.' And I have seen the same rebuff their children when they wish to invite some young friends. These, perhaps, might not be quite suitable, but the parents should be careful not to intimidate the rising sensibility of their children, they should rather encourage it, and should make evident the pain they feel in refusing their children's request and the necessity there is for refusing it. But only the present moment is thought of. Again, we reproach children for having been foolish in making some generous gift, as if they would not be corrected of that soon enough !

. . . . Thus we contract the heart and mind of a child. I wish, too, that we could avoid exciting in them a shyness when doing a good action, and that we did not believe in inducing them to do it by praises. These repel a timid child ; they cause him to feel that we are watching him, and they throw him back upon himself. It is the perfection of tact to bestow praise appropriately. We should teach our children to seek out and to seize occasions of being helpful to others, for this is an art which can and ought to be taught. I do not speak of the delicacy to be used with the unfortunate while we relieve them, for which natural benevolence, without some knowledge of the world, is not sufficient. But above all the great point in home education is to preach by example. Morality in the general is well enough known by men, but the particular refinements of virtue are unknown by most persons ; thus the majority of parents, without knowing it and without intending it, give very bad examples to their children. . . .

You might also have alluded in your work to the abuse in the capital absorbing the provinces, &c.¹

¹ *Œuvres de Turgot*, ii. 785-94.