

and their number has not increased. Lais belongs to me, but not I to Lais. I am happy in her arms, but will gladly hand her over to anyone I like, if he could make her happier than I can. And to whisper a secret in your ear, this Lais, who sells herself so dear, has never cost me a farthing.

CONVERSATION OF A PHILOSOPHER WITH THE MARÉCHALE DE —

I HAD some business or other with Maréchal de ——. I went to his house one morning. He was out. I was shown in to Madame la Maréchale. She is a charming woman, beautiful and pious as an angel: and she has a tone of voice and naïveté of speech which entirely suit her face. She was dressing. A chair is drawn up. I sit down and we talk. As a result of some observations on my part which edified and surprised her (for she holds that the man who denies the Blessed Trinity is a ruffian who will end on the gallows), she said to me:

Are you not M Crudeli ?

CRUDELI: Yes.

MARÉCHALE: The man who believes in nothing ?

CRUDELI: I am.

MARÉCHALE: But your morals are the same as a believer's.

CRUDELI: Why not, if that believer is an honest man ?

MARÉCHALE: And you put that morality into practice ?

CRUDELI: As well as I can.

MARÉCHALE: What! you do not steal, or kill, or pillage ?

CRUDELI: Very rarely.

MARÉCHALE: Then what do you get out of not believing ?

CRUDELI: Nothing; but does one believe in order to get something out of it ?

MARÉCHALE: I do not know. But a little self-interest comes in useful both for this world and the next.

CRUDEL: I am a little sorry for our poor human race, to be no better than that.

MARÉCHALE: So you do not steal at all?

CRUDEL: I promise you, not.

MARÉCHALE: But if you are neither a thief nor an assassin, you must admit you are hardly consistent.

CRUDEL: Why so?

MARÉCHALE: Because I think if I had nothing to fear or to hope, after death, I should allow myself a good many little pleasures here below. I admit I lend to God at a stiff rate of interest.

CRUDEL: So you think, perhaps.

MARÉCHALE: It is not a matter of thinking. It is a fact.

CRUDEL: But might one ask, What are those things you would allow yourself, if you did not believe?

MARÉCHALE: One might not. They are only for my confessor's ears.

CRUDEL: For my part, I never expect any return on my money.

MARÉCHALE: All beggars are in that situation.

CRUDEL: You would rather I were a usurer?

MARÉCHALE: Why, yes. One can be as usurious with God as one pleases. He cannot be ruined. It is hardly delicate, I know. But what does that matter? As the essential thing is to get into Heaven either by cunning or by force, we must use every means, and neglect no source of profit. Alas! whatever we do, we shall get but scanty recognition compared with what we had looked for. And you, you look for nothing?

CRUDEL: Nothing.

MARÉCHALE: But that is very sad. Agree then—you are either a rogue or a madman.

CRUDEL: But I cannot.

MARÉCHALE: But what motive can an unbeliever have for being good, unless he be mad?

CRUDEL: I shall tell you.

MARÉCHALE: I shall be most grateful.

CRUDEL: Do you not think a man can be born with a such happy disposition as to find real pleasure in doing good?

MARÉCHALE: I do.

CRUDEL: And that he may have received an excellent education, which will strengthen his natural leaning towards benevolence.

MARÉCHALE: Certainly.

CRUDEL: And that, in later life, experience may have convinced us that on the whole it is better for one's happiness in this world to be an honest man than a rogue.

MARÉCHALE: Why, yes. But how can he be an honest man, when evil principles united with the passions involve us in evil?

CRUDEL: By inconsistency. And is there anything commoner than inconsistency?

MARÉCHALE: Alas! Unfortunately not. We believe, yet every day we believe as though we did not.

CRUDEL: And without believing, one behaves very much as if one did.

MARÉCHALE: If you like. But what can be the harm in having one reason the more, religion, for doing good, and one reason the less, unbelief, for doing wrong?

CRUDEL: None, if religion were a motive for doing good and unbelief for doing wrong.

MARÉCHALE: But can there be any doubt about it? What is the essence of religion but to check our vile corrupted nature, and that of unbelief but to abandon it to its own wickedness by relieving it of fear?

CRUDELI: That is going to involve us in a long discussion.

MARÉCHALE: What of that? The Maréchal will not be back for a bit. And we are better employed in rational discussion than in slandering our neighbours.

CRUDELI: Then I must go back a little.

MARÉCHALE: As far as you like, provided you make yourself understood.

CRUDELI: If I do not, it will be entirely my fault.

MARÉCHALE: That is very polite of you. But you must know I have hardly read anything but my Prayer Book, and I do almost nothing but study the Gospels and breed children.

CRUDELI: Two duties you have admirably fulfilled.

MARÉCHALE: As regards the children, yes. Here are six round me and in a few days you will be able to see a seventh on my knee. But begin.

CRUDELI: Well. Is there any good in this world which has not got its drawbacks?

MARÉCHALE: None.

CRUDELI: And any evil which has not got its advantages?

MARÉCHALE: None.

CRUDELI: What then do you call a good or an evil?

MARÉCHALE: An evil is that which has more drawbacks than advantages, and a good that which has more advantages than drawbacks.

CRUDELI: I hope you will be good enough to remember your definition of good and evil?

MARÉCHALE: I will. But do you call that a definition?

CRUDELI: Yes.

MARÉCHALE: Then it is philosophy?

CRUDELI: And very good philosophy, too.

MARÉCHALE: So I have made philosophy!

CRUDELI: So you are convinced that religion has more advantages than drawbacks. Hence you call it a good?

MARÉCHALE: Yes.

CRUDELI: And for my part, I have no doubt your bailiff robs you a little less just before Easter than he does a few days afterwards, and that from time to time religion prevents a number of small evils and produces a number of small goods.

MARÉCHALE: Little by little, that tots up.

CRUDELI: But do you think that these poky little advantages make up adequately for the terrible ravages religion has caused in the past and will cause in the future? Remember it has created and now perpetuates the most violent national hatreds. No Mussulman but believes he is doing an action agreeable to God and the holy prophet in exterminating every Christian. And the Christians on their side are scarcely more tolerant. Think how it has created and still perpetuates in the same country divisions rarely suppressed without the shedding of blood. Our own history offers us examples all too recent and too tragic. Think how it has created and still perpetuates, in society between citizens, and in the family between relatives, the most violent and most lasting of hatreds. Christ said he had come to separate husband from wife, mother from children, brother from sister, friend from friend. And his prediction has been all too faithfully fulfilled.

MARÉCHALE: These are abuses, not the essentials, of the thing.

CRUDELI: It is, if abuses and essentials are inseparable.

MARÉCHALE: And how can you demonstrate that religion and its abuses are inseparable?

CRUDELI: Very easily. Suppose a misanthrope had set out to harm the human race, what could he have invented better than belief in an incomprehensible being about whom men should never agree and to whom they should attach more importance than to their own lives. Now is it possible to separate from the notion of a Divinity the most profound incomprehensibility and the greatest importance?

MARÉCHALE: No.

CRUDELI: Your conclusion, then?

MARÉCHALE: My conclusion is that it is an idea which might well be disastrous, if lunatics got hold of it.

CRUDELI: And you may add that lunatics always have been and always will be in the vast majority; and that the most dangerous lunatics are those made so by religion, and that the disturbers of society know how to make good use of them when occasion arises.

MARÉCHALE: But we must have something with which to frighten men off those actions, which escape the severity of the laws. Destroy religion, and what will you put in its place?

CRUDELI: And suppose I had nothing to put in its place, there would always be one terrible prejudice the less. Besides, in no century and with no nation have religious opinions been the basis of national morals. The gods adored by the ancient Greeks and Romans, the most virtuous of people, were the merest scum: a Jupiter who should have been burnt alive: a Venus fit for a reformatory: a Mercury who ought to be in a jail.

MARÉCHALE: So you think it does not matter at all whether we be Christians or pagans; that we should be none the worse for being pagans and are none the better for being Christians?

CRUDELI: Honestly, I am certain of it, unless we should be slightly merrier for being pagans.

MARÉCHALE: That cannot be.

CRUDELI: But are there any Christians? I have never seen one.

MARÉCHALE: And you say that to me?

CRUDELI: No, not to you, but to one of my neighbours, who is as honest and pious as you: who thinks herself a Christian in all sincerity just as you do.

MARÉCHALE: And you made her admit she was wrong?

CRUDELI: In a moment.

MARÉCHALE: And how?

CRUDELI: I opened a New Testament, which she had used a great deal, for it was very worn. I read her the Sermon on the Mount, and after each article I asked her—Do you do that? Or that? Or even that? I went one further. She is very beautiful, and although most good and pious, she is well aware of the fact. She has a very white skin, and although she does not attach any great importance to this slender merit, she does not mind it being praised. Her throat is as handsome as throat can be: and although she is very modest, she thinks it as well that this should be noticed.

MARÉCHALE: But if only herself and her husband know it?

CRUDELI: Certainly, I think her husband knows it better than anyone else. But for a woman who prides herself on being such a tremendous Christian this is not enough. I said to her: "Is it not written in the

Gospel that he who lusts after his neighbour's wife has committed adultery in his heart?"

MARÉCHALE: And she answered Yes.

CRUDELI: And I said: And is not adultery committed in the heart as surely damned as adultery of the most thoroughgoing kind?

MARÉCHALE: And she answered Yes.

CRUDELI: And I said: And if the man is damned for the adultery he has committed in his heart, what will be the fate of the woman who invites all those who come near her to commit this crime? This last question embarrassed her.

MARÉCHALE: I understand; for she did not, very carefully, cover up this throat of hers, which is handsome as throat can be.

CRUDELI: That is so. She replied it was a convention, as if anything were more conventional than to call oneself a Christian and not be one. And that also that one must not dress absurdly, as if there could be any comparison between a trifling little absurdity and one's eternal damnation, as well as the damnation of one's neighbour. And also that she was in the hands of her dressmaker, as if it were not better to change one's dressmaker than to throw over one's religion. And that it was the whim of her husband, as if a husband were sufficiently insensate to demand from his wife the forgetfulness of decency and duty, and as if a true Christian should push obedience to a preposterous husband to the point of sacrificing the will of God and despising the threats of her Redeemer.

MARÉCHALE: I knew all those childish answers before you mentioned them. And perhaps I should have employed them like your neighbour. And we should both have been insincere. But what line did she take after your protest?

CRUDELI: The day after our conversation (it was a festival of the Church), as I was going up to my room, my beautiful and pious neighbour was coming down, on the way to Mass.

MARÉCHALE: Dressed as usual.

CRUDELI: Dressed as usual. I smiled. She smiled. We passed each other without speaking. And she, an honest woman! a Christian! a pious woman! And after this sample, and one hundred thousand others exactly like it, what real influence can I allow religion to have on morals? Practically none, and so much the better.

MARÉCHALE: What! so much the better?

CRUDELI: Yes. If twenty thousand Parisians took it into their heads to base their conduct strictly on the Sermon on the Mount . . .

MARÉCHALE: Well, there would be a few handsome throats better covered.

CRUDELI: And so many lunatics that the commissioner of police would not know what to do with them: for our asylums would never hold them. There are two moralities in Inspired Books. One general and common to all nations and all religions, which is more or less observed: the other, peculiar to each nation and each religion in which people believe, which they preach in church and praise up at home, but which is not observed at all.

MARÉCHALE: And to what is this preposterous state of affairs due?

CRUDELI: To the impossibility of subjecting a nation to a rule which suits only a few melancholiacs, who have imposed it on their characters. It is with religious as with monastic institutions; they relax with time. They are lunacies which cannot hold out against the constant impulse of nature, which brings us back under her law. See to it that private good be

so closely united to public good that a citizen can hardly harm society without harming himself. Promise virtue its reward, as you have promised wickedness its punishment. Let virtue lead to high offices of state, without distinction of faith, wherever virtue is to be found. Then you need only count on a small number of wicked men, who are involved in vice by a perversity of nature which nothing can correct. No. Temptation is too near: hell too far off. Look for nothing worth the attention of a wise law-giver from a system of fantastic opinions, which imposes only on children: which encourages crime by its convenient system of penances: which sends the guilty man to ask pardon of God for harm done to man, and which degrades the order of natural and moral duties by subordinating it to an order of imaginary duties.

MARÉCHALE: I do not follow.

CRUDELI: Let me explain. But I think I hear the Maréchal's carriage coming back just in time to prevent my saying something silly.

MARÉCHALE: Say it. I shall not understand you. I am an adept at understanding only what gives me pleasure.

CRUDELI: I went up to her and said quite low in her ear: "Ask the vicar of your parish, which of the two crimes is, in his opinion, the more heinous—to piss into a sacred vessel or to blacken the reputation of an honest woman. He will shudder with horror at the first, and the civil law, which scarcely notices calumny while punishing sacrilege with fire, will complete the confusion of ideas and the corruption of the intelligence."

MARÉCHALE: I know more than one woman who would never eat meat on a Friday and who . . . I was going to make my silly contribution. Go on.

CRUDELI: But I simply must speak to the Maréchal.

MARÉCHALE: One moment more, and then we will go and see him together. I do not quite see how to answer you, but you have not made me change my opinion.

CRUDELI: I did not set out to change it. It is with religion as with marriage. Marriage, which has wrecked so many lives, has made for your happiness and for that of the Maréchal. You have both of you done well to marry. Religion, which has made, does make, and will make so many men wicked, has made you better still: you do well to keep it. It is sweet to you to imagine beside you, and above your head, a great and powerful being who sees you walk upon the earth, and this idea strengthens your steps. Continue to be happy in this august guarantor of your thoughts, in this spectator, in this sublime model for your actions.

MARÉCHALE: I see you have not got the proselytizing mania.

CRUDELI: Not in the least.

MARÉCHALE: I think the better of you for it.

CRUDELI: I allow everyone to think as he pleases, provided I am allowed to think as I please. And then those who exist in order to free themselves from these prejudices are scarcely in need of being catechized.

MARÉCHALE: Do you think man can get along without superstition?

CRUDELI: Not as long as he remains ignorant and timid.

MARÉCHALE: Well then, superstition for superstition, ours is as good as another.

CRUDELI: I do not think so.

MARÉCHALE: Now tell me sincerely. Does the idea of being nothing after death not distress you?

CRUDELI: I would rather exist, though I do not know why a Being who has been once capable of making

me wretched for no reason should not enjoy doing so twice.

MARÉCHALE: But if, despite this drawback, the hope of a life to come appear to you consoling and sweet, why tear it from us?

CRUDELI: I do not entertain this hope because desire for it has not blinded me to its hollowness; but I take it away from no one else. If anyone can believe they will see without eyes, hear without ears, think without a head, love without a heart, feel without senses, exist without being anywhere, and be something without place or size, very well.

MARÉCHALE: But who made this world?

CRUDELI: I ask you.

MARÉCHALE: God.

CRUDELI: And what is God?

MARÉCHALE: A spirit.

CRUDELI: And if a spirit makes matter, why should not matter make a spirit!

MARÉCHALE: And why should it?

CRUDELI: Because I see it do so every day. Do you believe animals have souls?

MARÉCHALE: Certainly I do.

CRUDELI: Could you tell me, for example, what happens to the soul of the Peruvian serpent, hung on the chimney and exposed to the smoke for two years together while it is drying?

MARÉCHALE: How can it matter to me what happens to it?

CRUDELI: So you do not know that this serpent, after being dried and smoked, is resuscitated and reborn?

MARÉCHALE: I do not believe it for a moment.

CRUDELI: Yet a very clever man, Bouguer,* asserts it.

* Inventor of the Heliometer. He accompanied La Condamine to Peru.

MARÉCHALE: Your clever man is a liar.

CRUDELI: But suppose he were telling the truth?

MARÉCHALE: I should get off with believing that animals are machines.

CRUDELI: And man, who is only a machine a little more perfected than any other. . . . But the Maréchal.

MARÉCHALE: One more question and it is the last. Does your unbelief leave you calm?

CRUDELI: As calm as it is possible to be.

MARÉCHALE: But suppose you were mistaken?

CRUDELI: Suppose I were?

MARÉCHALE: Suppose everything you believe false were true and you were damned. Monsieur Crudele, it is a terrible thing to be damned. To burn through eternity. It is a long time.

CRUDELI: La Fontaine thought we should be as comfortable as fishes in water.

MARÉCHALE: Yes, yes, but your La Fontaine became very serious at the end, and I expect the same of you.

CRUDELI: I can answer for nothing when my brain has softened. But if I end with one of those illnesses which leave the dying man in possession of his powers, I shall be no more distressed at the expected moment than I am now.

MARÉCHALE: Your fearlessness amazes me.

CRUDELI: I am much more amazed at the fearlessness of the dying man who believes in a severe judge, in one who weighs our most secret thoughts, and in whose balance the justest man would be lost through vanity if he did not tremble to find himself too light. If this dying man could choose between being wiped out and going before this tribunal, I should be much more amazed by his fearlessness if he hesitated to

to suit himself, which is a mere farrago of preposterous incidents over which men eat their hearts out, and tear out the whites of their eyes." As he reasoned thus, the undulating waters rocked him on his plank and he fell asleep. As he sleeps, the wind gets up, the waves carry the barque away, and behold our young reasoner started on his voyage.

MARÉCHALE: Alas! that is just like us. We are each on his plank: the wind blows and the waves carry us away.

CRUDEL: He was already far from the mainland when he awoke. And who was mighty surprised to find himself on the open sea? Why, our young Mexican. And who was more surprised still? He again, when the sea seemed to merge in the sky on every side, now that he had lost sight of the beach where he had been walking only a moment before. Then he began to suspect that he might have been mistaken, and that if the wind continued in the same quarter he might be carried on shore, amongst those inhabitants of whom his mother had talked to him so often.

MARÉCHALE: But you say nothing about his agitation.

CRUDEL: He felt none. He said to himself: "What does that matter to me, as long as I get on shore? I have argued like a fool, certainly. But I was sincere with myself, and that is all that can be expected of me. If it be not a virtue to be intelligent, it is not a crime to be a fool." Meanwhile, the wind went on blowing, the man and the plank drifted along, and the unknown shore began to appear. He touches land, and there he is!

MARÉCHALE: We shall meet again there one day, M Crudeli.

CRUDEL: I sincerely hope so. Wherever it may be, I shall always be flattered to pay you my addresses. Scarcely had he left his plank and set foot on the sand

when he perceived a venerable old man standing by his side. The Mexican asked him where he was and whom he had the honour of addressing. "I am the sovereign of the country," answered the old man. At once the young man prostrated himself. "Get up," said the old man; "you have denied my existence?" "I have." "And the existence of my empire?" "I have." "I forgive you that because you acted in good faith. But the rest of your thoughts and actions have not been equally innocent." Then the old man, who held him by the ear, recalled to him all the errors of his life. And at each article the young Mexican bowed his head and beat his breast and prayed for pardon. . . . There now. Put yourself a moment in the place of the old man and tell me what you would have done. Would you have taken this insensate young man by the hair and joyfully dragged him along the beach for ever?

MARÉCHALE: To tell you the truth, no.

CRUDEL: And if one of your six pretty children, after escaping from the paternal roof, and committing every conceivable sort of folly, came home repentant?

MARÉCHALE: I should run to meet him. I should clasp him in my arms and bathe him with my tears. But his father the Maréchal would not take the thing so lightly.

CRUDEL: The Maréchal is not a tiger.

MARÉCHALE: Far from it.

CRUDEL: He would make rather a scene about it. But he would forgive in the end.

MARÉCHALE: Certainly.

CRUDEL: Especially if he came to reflect that, before becoming the father of the child, he had known all that was going to happen to it, and that punishing him for his faults would be of no use to himself, the guilty one, or his brothers.

MARECHALE: The Maréchal and the old man are two different people.

CRUDELI: You mean to say that the Maréchal is better than the old man?

MARÉCHALE: Heaven forbid! I mean to say that if my notion of justice is not the same as the Maréchal's perhaps the notion of the Maréchal will not be the same as the old man's.

CRUDELI: But you cannot have realized the consequences of that answer. Either the general definition applies equally to you, to the Maréchal, to me, to the young Mexican and the old man, or I can no longer say what is what, or how one pleases or displeases the old man.

We had reached this point when we were told that the Maréchal expected us. As I gave his wife my hand, she said: It is enough to make one's head go round, is it not?

CRUDELI: Why, if one's head is a good one?

MARÉCHALE: After all, the simplest course is to act on the assumption that the old man exists.

CRUDELI: Even when one does not believe it?

MARÉCHALE: And when one does believe it, not to rely too much on his good nature.

CRUDELI: That is the safest way, if not the politest.

MARÉCHALE: By the way, if you had to state your principles to the magistrates, would you make a clean breast of them?

CRUDELI: I should do my best to hinder the magistrates performing a brutal act.

MARÉCHALE: Oh, you coward! And if you were at the point of death, would you submit to the ceremonies of the Church?

CRUDELI: I should not fail to do so.

MARÉCHALE: Oh, you wretched hypocrite!

ON WOMEN

I LIKE Thomas: I respect the pride of his soul and the nobility of his character. He is a very clever man and a very good man: hence not an ordinary man. To judge by his *Dissertation on Women*, he has not sufficiently experienced a passion, which I value more for the pains for which it consoles us than for the pleasures it affords us. He has thought a great deal, but he has not felt enough. His brain has been agitated, but his heart has remained calm. I should have written with less impartiality and wisdom; but I should have discoursed with more interest and warmth about the only being in nature who returns us feeling for feeling and is happy in the happiness she gives us. Five or six pages of enthusiasm scattered through his book would have broken up the continuity of his delicate observations and made a charming work. But he wanted his book to be sexless; and unfortunately he has succeeded all too well. It is an hermaphrodite without the sinews of a man or the softness of a woman. However, few present-day writers could have written a book so full of erudition, reason, delicacy, style, and harmony. But there is not sufficient variety or enough of that suppleness ever ready to be turned on to the infinite variety of a being extreme in strength and weakness who has a heart attack at the sight of a mouse or a spider, and who can sometimes brave the greatest terrors in life. It is, above all, by their passionate love, their attacks of jealousy, their transports of maternal tenderness, the manner in which they share prevalent and popular frenzies that women astonish us: for they are beautiful as the seraphim of Klopstock, terrible as the devils of Milton. I have seen love, jealousy, super-