

The Ruins

by

C. F. Volney

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Life Of Volney

By Count Daru

Constantine Francis Chassebeuf De Volney was born in 1757 at Craon, in that intermediate condition of life, which is of all the happiest, since it is deprived only of fortune's too dangerous favors, and can aspire to the social and intellectual advantages reserved for a laudable ambition.

From his earliest youth, he devoted himself to the search after truth, without being disheartened by the serious studies which alone can initiate us into her secrets. After having become acquainted with the ancient languages, the natural sciences and history, and being admitted into the society of the most eminent literary characters, he submitted, at the age of twenty, to an illustrious academy, the solution of one of the most difficult problems that the history of antiquity has left open for discussion. This attempt received no encouragement from the learned men who were appointed his judges; and the author's only appeal from their sentence was to his courage and his efforts.

Soon after, a small inheritance having fallen to his lot, the difficulty was how to spend it (these are his own words.) He resolved to employ it in acquiring, by a long voyage, a new fund of information, and determined to visit Egypt and Syria. But these countries could not be explored to advantage without a knowledge of the language. Our young traveller was not to be discouraged by this difficulty. Instead of learning Arabic in Europe, he withdrew to a convent of Copts, until he had made himself master of an idiom that is spoken by so many nations of the East. This resolution showed one of those undaunted spirits that remain unshaken amid the trials of life.

Although, like other travellers, he might have amused us with an account of his hardships and the perils surmounted by his courage, he overcame the temptation of interrupting his narrative by personal adventures. He disdained the beaten track. He does not tell us the road he took, the accidents he met with, or the impressions he received. He carefully avoids appearing upon the stage; he is an inhabitant of the country, who has long and well observed it, and who describes its physical, political, and moral state. The allusion would be entire if an old Arab could be supposed to possess all the erudition, all the European philosophy, which are found united and in their maturity in a traveller of twenty-five.

But though a master in all those artifices by which a narration is rendered interesting, the young man is not to be discerned in the pomp of labored descriptions. Although possessed of a lively and brilliant imagination, he is never found unwarily explaining by conjectural systems the physical or moral phenomena he describes. In his observations he unites prudence with science. With these two guides he judges with circumspection, and sometimes confesses himself unable to account for the effects he has made known to us.

Thus his account has all the qualities that persuade--accuracy and candor. And when, ten years later, a vast military enterprise transported forty thousand travellers to the classic ground, which he had trod unattended, unarmed and unprotected, they all recognized a sure guide and an enlightened observer in the writer who had, as it seemed, only preceded them to remove or point out a part of the difficulties of the way.

The unanimous testimony of all parties proved the accuracy of his account and the justness of his observations; and his Travels in Egypt and Syria were, by universal suffrage, recommended to the gratitude and the confidence of the public.

Before the work had undergone this trial it had obtained in the learned world such a rapid and general success, that it found its way into Russia. The empress, then (in 1787) upon the throne, sent the author a medal, which he received with respect, as a mark of esteem for his talents, and with gratitude, as a proof of the approbation given to his principles. But when the empress declared against France, Volney sent back the honorable present, saying: "If I obtained it from her esteem, I can only preserve her esteem by returning it."

The revolution of 1789, which had drawn upon France the menaces of Catharine, had opened to Volney a political career. As deputy in the assembly of the states-general, the first words he uttered there were in favor of the publicity of their deliberations. He also supported the organization of the national guards, and that of the communes and departments.

At the period when the question of the sale of the domain lands was agitated (in 1790), he published an essay in which he lays down the following principles: "The force of a State is in proportion to its population; population is in proportion to plenty; plenty is in proportion to tillage; and tillage, to personal and immediate interest, that is to the spirit of property. Whence it follows, that the nearer the cultivator approaches the passive condition of a mercenary, the less industry and activity are to be expected from him; and, on the other hand, the nearer he is to the condition of a free and entire proprietor, the more extension he gives to his own forces, to the produce of his lands, and the general prosperity of the State."

The author draws this conclusion, that a State is so much the more powerful as it includes a greater number of proprietors,--that is, a greater division of property.

Conducted into Corsica by that spirit of observation which belongs only to men whose information is varied and extensive, he perceived at the first glance all that could be done for the improvement of agriculture in that country: but he knew that, for a people firmly attached to ancient customs, there can exist no other demonstration or means of persuasion than example. He purchased a considerable estate, and made experiments on those kinds of tillage that he hoped to naturalize in that climate. The sugar-cane, cotton, indigo and coffee soon demonstrated the success of his efforts. This success drew upon him the notice of the government. He was appointed director of agriculture and commerce in that island, where, through ignorance, all new methods are introduced with such difficulty.

It is impossible to calculate all the good that might have resulted from this peaceable magistracy; and we know that neither instruction, zeal, nor a persevering courage was wanting to him who had undertaken it. Of this he had given convincing proofs. It was in obedience to another sentiment, no less respectable, that he voluntarily interrupted the course of his labors. When his fellow citizens of Angers appointed him their deputy in the constituent assembly, he resigned the employment he held under government, upon the principle that no man can represent the nation and be dependent for a salary upon those by whom it is administered.

Through respect for the independence of his legislative functions, he had ceased to occupy the place he possessed in Corsica before his election, but he had not ceased to be a benefactor of that country. He returned thither after the session of the constituent assembly. Invited into that island by the principal inhabitants, who were anxious to put into practice his lessons, he spent there a part of the years 1792 and 1793.

On his return he published a work entitled: An Account of the Present State of Corsica. This was an act of courage; for it was not a physical description, but a political review of the condition of a population divided into several factions and distracted by violent animosities. Volney unreservedly revealed the abuses, solicited the interest of France in favor of the Corsicans, without flattering them, and boldly denounced their defects and vices; so that the philosopher obtained the only recompense he could expect from his sincerity--he was accused by the Corsicans of heresy.

To prove that he had not merited this reproach, he published soon after a short treatise entitled: The Law of Nature, or Physical Principles of Morality.

He was soon exposed to a much more dangerous charge, and this, it must be confessed, he did merit. This philosopher, this worthy citizen, who in our first National assembly had seconded with his wishes and his talents the establishment of an order of things which he considered favorable to the happiness of his country, was accused of not being sincerely attached to that liberty for which he had contended; that is to say, of being averse to anarchy. An imprisonment of ten months, which only ended after the 9th of Thermidor, was a new trial reserved for his courage.

The moment at which he recovered his liberty, was when the horror inspired by criminal excesses had recalled men to those noble sentiments which fortunately are one of the first necessities of civilized life. They sought for consolations in study and literature after so many misfortunes, and organized a plan of public instruction.

It was in the first place necessary to insure the aptitude of those to whom education should be confided; but as the systems were various, the best methods and a unity of doctrine were to be determined. It was not enough to interrogate the masters, they were to be formed, new ones were to be created, and for that purpose a school was opened in 1794, wherein the celebrity of the professors promised new instruction even to the best informed. This was not, as was objected, beginning the edifice at the roof, but creating architects, who were to superintend all the arts requisite for constructing the building.

The more difficult their functions were, the greater care was to be taken in the choice of the professors; but France, though then accused of being plunged in barbarism, possessed men of transcendent talents, already enjoying the esteem of all Europe, and we may be bold to say, that by their labors, our literary glory had likewise extended its conquests. Their names were proclaimed by the public voice, and Volney's was associated with those of the men most illustrious in science and in literature.*

* Lagrange, Laplace, Berthollet, Garat, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Daubenton, Haüy, Volney, Sicard, Monge, Thouin, La Harpe, Buache Mentelle.

This institution, however, did not answer the expectations that had been formed of it, because the two thousand students that assembled from all parts of France were not equally prepared to receive these transcendent lessons, and because it had not been sufficiently ascertained how far the theory of education should be kept distinct from education itself.

Volney's Lectures on History, which were attended by an immense concourse of auditors, became one of his chief claims to literary glory. When forced to interrupt them, by the suppression of the Normal school, he might have reasonably expected to enjoy in his retirement that consideration which his recent functions had added to his name. But, disgusted with the scenes he had witnessed in his native land, he felt that passion revive within him which, in his youth, had led him to visit Africa and Asia. America, civilized within a century, and free only within a few years, fixed his attention. There every thing was new,—the inhabitants, the constitution, the earth itself. These were objects worthy of his observation. When embarking for this voyage, however, he felt emotions very different from those which formerly accompanied him into Turkey. Then in the prime of life, he joyfully bid adieu to a land where peace and plenty reigned, to travel amongst barbarians; now, mature in years, but dismayed at the spectacle and experience of injustice and persecution, it was with diffidence, as we learn from himself, that he went to implore from a free people an asylum for a sincere friend of that liberty that had been so profaned.

Our traveller had gone to seek for repose beyond the seas. He there found himself exposed to aggression from a celebrated philosopher, Dr. Priestley. Although the subject of this discussion was confined to the investigation of some speculative opinions, published by the French writer in his work entitled *The Ruins*, the naturalist in this attack employed a degree of violence which added nothing to the force of his arguments, and an acrimony of expression not to be expected from a philosopher. M. Volney, though accused of Hottentotism and ignorance, preserved in his defence, all the advantages that the scurrility of his adversary gave over him. He replied in English, and Priestley's countrymen could only recognize the Frenchman in the refinement and politeness of his answer.

Whilst M. Volney was travelling in America, there had been formed in France a literary body which, under the name of Institute, had attained in a very few years a distinguished rank amongst the learned societies of Europe. The name of the illustrious traveller was

inscribed in it at its formation, and he acquired new rights to the academical honors conferred on him during his absence, by the publication of his observations On the Climate and Soil of the United States.

These rights were further augmented by the historical and physiological labors of the Academician. An examination and justification of The Chronology of Herodotus, with numerous and profound researches on The History of the most Ancient Nations, occupied for a long time him who had observed their monuments and traces in the countries they inhabited. The trial he had made of the utility of the Oriental languages inspired him with an ardent desire to propagate the knowledge of them; and to be propagated, he felt how necessary it was to render it less difficult. In this view he conceived the project of applying to the study of the idioms of Asia, a part of the grammatical notions we possess concerning the languages of Europe. It only appertains to those conversant with their relations of dissimilitude or conformity to appreciate the possibility of realizing this system. The author has, however, already received the most flattering encouragement and the most unequivocal appreciation, by the inscription of his name amongst the members of the learned and illustrious society founded by English commerce in the Indian peninsula.

M. Volney developed his system in three works,* which prove that this idea of uniting nations separated by immense distances and such various idioms, had never ceased to occupy him for twenty-five years. Lest those essays, of the utility of which he was persuaded, should be interrupted by his death, with the clay-cold hand that corrected his last work, he drew up a will which institutes a premium for the prosecution of his labors. Thus he prolonged, beyond the term of a life entirely devoted to letters, the glorious services he had rendered to them.

* On the Simplification of Oriental Languages, 1795. The European Alphabet Applied to the Languages of Asia, 1819. Hebrew Simplified, 1820.

This is not the place, nor does it belong to me to appreciate the merit of the writings which render Volney's name illustrious. His name had been inscribed in the list of the Senate, and afterwards of the House of Peers. The philosopher who had travelled in the four quarters of the world, and observed their social state, had other titles to his admission into this body, than his literary glory. His public life, his conduct in the constituent assembly, his independent principles, the nobleness of his sentiments, the wisdom and fixity of his opinions, had gained him the esteem of those who can be depended upon, and with whom it is so agreeable to discuss political interests.

Although no man had a better right to have an opinion, no one was more tolerant for the opinions of others. In State assemblies as well as in Academical meetings, the man whose counsels were so wise, voted according to his conscience, which nothing could bias; but the philosopher forgot his superiority to hear, to oppose with moderation, and sometimes to doubt. The extent and variety of his information, the force of his reason, the austerity of his manners, and the noble simplicity of his character, had procured him illustrious friends in both hemispheres; and now that this erudition is extinct in the tomb,* we may

be allowed at least to predict that he was one of the very few whose memory shall never die.

* He died in Paris on the 20th of April, 1820.

A list of the Works Published by Count Volney.

TRAVELS IN EGYPT AND SYRIA during the years 1783, 1784, and 1785: 2 vols. 8vo.--1787.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE TWELVE CENTURIES that preceded the entrance of Xerxes into Greece.

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE TURKISH WAR, in 1788.

THE RUINS, or Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires--1791.

ACCOUNT OF THE PRESENT STATE OF CORSICA--1793.

THE LAW OF NATURE, or Physical Principles of Morality--1793.

ON THE SIMPLIFICATION OF ORIENTAL LANGUAGES--1795.

A LETTER TO DR. PRIESTLEY--1797.

LECTURES ON HISTORY, delivered at the Normal School in the year 3-- 1800.

ON THE CLIMATE AND SOIL OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, to which is added an account of Florida, of the French colony of Scioto, of some Canadian Colonies, and of the Savages--1803.

REPORT MADE TO THE CELTIC ACADEMY ON THE RUSSIAN WORK OF PROFESSOR PALLAS, entitled "A Comparative Vocabulary of all the Languages in the World."

THE CHRONOLOGY OF HERODOTUS conformable with his Text--1808 and 1809.

NEW RESEARCHES ON ANCIENT HISTORY, 3 vols. 8vo.--1814

THE EUROPEAN ALPHABET Applied to the Languages of Asia--1819.

A HISTORY OF SAMUEL--1819.

HEBREW SIMPLIFIED--1820.

Invocation

Hail solitary ruins, holy sepulchres and silent walls! you I invoke; to you I address my prayer. While your aspect averts, with secret terror, the vulgar regard, it excites in my heart the charm of delicious sentiments--sublime contemplations. What useful lessons, what affecting and profound reflections you suggest to him who knows how to consult you! When the whole earth, in chains and silence bowed the neck before its tyrants, you had already proclaimed the truths which they abhor; and confounding the dust of the king with that of the meanest slave, had announced to man the sacred dogma of Equality. Within your pale, in solitary adoration of Liberty, I saw her Genius arise from the mansions of the dead; not such as she is painted by the impassioned multitude, armed with fire and sword, but under the august aspect of Justice, poising in her hand the sacred balance wherein are weighed the actions of men at the gates of eternity!

O Tombs! what virtues are yours! You appal the tyrant's heart, and poison with secret alarm his impious joys. He flies, with coward step, your incorruptible aspect, and erects afar his throne of insolence.* You punish the powerful oppressor; you wrest from avarice and extortion their ill-gotten gold, and you avenge the feeble whom they have despoiled; you compensate the miseries of the poor by the anxieties of the rich; you console the wretched, by opening to him a last asylum from distress; and you give to the soul that just equipoise of strength and sensibility which constitutes wisdom--the true science of life. Aware that all must return to you, the wise man loadeth not himself with the burdens of grandeur and of useless wealth: he restrains his desires within the limits of justice; yet, knowing that he must run his destined course of life, he fills with employment all its hours, and enjoys the comforts that fortune has allotted him. You thus impose on the impetuous sallies of cupidity a salutary rein! you calm the feverish ardor of enjoyments which disturb the senses; you free the soul from the fatiguing conflict of the passions; elevate it above the paltry interests which torment the crowd; and surveying, from your commanding position, the expanse of ages and nations, the mind is only accessible to the great affections--to the solid ideas of virtue and of glory.

* The cathedral of St. Denis is the tomb of the kings of France; and it was because the towers of that edifice are seen from the Castle of St. Germain, that Louis XIV. quitted that admirable residence, and established a new one in the savage forests of Versailles.

(This note, like many others, has been omitted from the American editions. It seems pertinent to the subject, and is explanatory of the text.--Pub.)

Ah! when the dream of life is over, what will then avail all its agitations, if not one trace of utility remains behind?

O Ruins! to your school I will return! I will seek again the calm of your solitudes; and there, far from the afflicting spectacle of the passions, I will cherish in remembrance the love of man, I will employ myself on the means of effecting good for him, and build my own happiness on the promotion of his.

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