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978-1-108-06424-8 - Consolations in Travel: Or, the Last Days of a Philosopher

Humphry Davy

Excerpt

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CONSOLATIONS IN TRAVEL,

OR

THE LAST DAYS OF A PHILOSOPHER.

DIALOGUE THE FIRST.

THE VISION.

I PASSED the autumn and the early winter of the years 18— and 18— at Rome. The society was as is usual in that metropolis of the old Christian world numerous and diversified. In it there were found many intellectual foreigners and amongst them some distinguished Britons, who had a higher object in making this city their residence than mere idleness or vague curiosity. Amongst these my countrymen there were two gentlemen with whom I formed a particular intimacy and who were my frequent companions in the

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DIALOGUE I.

visits which I made to the monuments of the grandeur of the old Romans and to the master-pieces of ancient and modern art. One of them I shall call Ambrosio: he was a man of highly cultivated taste, great classical erudition and minute historical knowledge. In religion he was of the Roman Catholic persuasion; but a catholic of the most liberal school, who in another age might have been secretary to Ganganelli. His views upon the subjects of politics and religion were enlarged; but his leaning was rather to the power of a single magistrate than to the authority of a democracy or even of an oligarchy. The other friend, whom I shall call Onuphrio, was a man of a very different character. Belonging to the English aristocracy, he had some of the prejudices usually attached to birth and rank; but his manners were gentle, his temper good and his disposition amiable. Having been partly educated at a northern university in Britain, he had adopted views in religion which went even beyond toleration and which might be regarded as entering the verge of scepticism. For a patrician he was very liberal in his po-

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THE VISION.

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litical views. His imagination was poetical and discursive, his taste good and his tact extremely fine, so exquisite, indeed, that it sometimes approached to morbid sensibility and disgusted him with slight defects and made him keenly sensible of small perfections to which common minds would have been indifferent.

In the beginning of October on a very fine afternoon I drove with these two friends to the Colosæum, a monument which for the hundredth time even, I had viewed with a new admiration; my friends partook of my sentiments. I shall give the conversation which occurred there in their own words. Onuphrio said, "How impressive are those ruins!—what a character do they give us of the ancient Romans, what magnificence of design, what grandeur of execution! Had we not historical documents to inform us of the period when this structure was raised and of the purposes for which it was designed, it might be imagined the work of a race of giants, a council-chamber for those Titans fabled to have warred against the gods of the pagan mythology. The size

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of the masses of travertine of which it is composed, is in harmony with the immense magnitude of the building. It is hardly to be wondered at that a people which constructed such works for their daily sports, for their usual amusements, should have possessed strength, enduring energy and perseverance sufficient to enable them to conquer the world. They appear always to have formed their plans and made their combinations as if their power were beyond the reach of chance, independent of the influence of time, and founded for unlimited duration—for eternity!”

Ambrosio took up the discourse of Onuphrio, and said, “The aspect of this wonderful heap of ruins is so picturesque, that it is impossible to regret its decay; and at this season of the year the colours of the vegetation are in harmony with those of the falling ruins, and how perfectly the whole landscape is in tone! The remains of the palace of the Cæsars and of the golden halls of Nero appear in the distance, their gray and tottering turrets and their moss-stained arches reposing, as it were, upon the decaying vegetation: and there is nothing that

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marks the existence of life except the few pious devotees, who wander from station to station in the arena below, kneeling before the cross, and demonstrating the triumph of a religion, which received in this very spot in the early period of its existence one of its most severe persecutions, and which, nevertheless, has preserved what remains of that building, where attempts were made to stifle it almost at its birth; for, without the influence of Christianity, these majestic ruins would have been dispersed or levelled to the dust. Plundered of their lead and iron by the barbarians, Goths, and Vandals, and robbed even of their stones by Roman princes, the Barberini, they owe what remains of their relics to the sanctifying influence of that faith which has preserved for the world all that was worth preserving, not merely arts and literature but likewise that which constitutes the progressive nature of intellect and the institutions which afford to us happiness in this world and hopes of a blessed immortality in the next. And, being of the faith of Rome, I may say, that the preservation

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of this pile by the sanctifying effect of a few crosses planted round it, is almost a miraculous event. And what a contrast the present application of this building, connected with holy feelings and exalted hopes, is to that of the ancient one, when it was used for exhibiting to the Roman people the destruction of men by wild beasts, or of men, more savage than wild beasts, by each other, to gratify a horrible appetite for cruelty, founded upon a still more detestable lust, that of universal domination! And who would have supposed, in the time of Titus, that a faith, despised in its insignificant origin, and persecuted from the supposed obscurity of its founder and its principles, should have reared a dome to the memory of one of its humblest teachers, more glorious than was ever framed for Jupiter or Apollo in the ancient world, and have preserved even the ruins of the temples of the pagan deities, and have burst forth in splendor and majesty, consecrating truth amidst the shrines of error, employing the idols of the Roman superstition for the most holy purposes and rising a bright and

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constant light amidst the dark and starless night which followed the destruction of the Roman empire!"

Onuphrio now resumed the discourse: he said, "I have not the same exalted views on the subject which our friend Ambrosio has so eloquently expressed. Some little of the perfect state in which these ruins exist may have been owing to causes which he has described; but these causes have only lately begun to operate, and the mischief was done before Christianity was established at Rome. Feeling differently on these subjects, I admire this venerable ruin rather as the record of the destruction of the power of the greatest people that ever existed, than as a proof of the triumph of Christianity; and I am carried forward in melancholy anticipation, to the period when even the magnificent dome of St. Peter's will be in a similar state to that in which the Colosæum now is and when its ruins may be preserved by the sanctifying influence of some new and unknown faith; when, perhaps, the statue of Jupiter, which at present receives the kiss of the devotee, as the image of St. Peter,

may be employed for another holy use, as the personification of a future saint or divinity; and when the monuments of the papal magnificence shall be mixed with the same dust as that which now covers the tombs of the Cæsars. Such, I am sorry to say, is the general history of all the works and institutions belonging to humanity. They rise, flourish, and then decay and fall; and the period of their decline is generally proportional to that of their elevation. In ancient Thebes or Memphis the peculiar genius of the people has left us monuments from which we can judge of their arts, though we cannot understand the nature of their superstitions. Of Babylon and of Troy the remains are almost extinct; and what we know of these famous cities is almost entirely derived from literary records. Ancient Greece and Rome we view in the few remains of their monuments; and the time will arrive when modern Rome shall be what ancient Rome now is; and ancient Rome and Athens will be what Tyre or Carthage now are, known only by coloured dust in the desert, or coloured sand, containing the fragments of bricks or

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glass, washed up by the wave of a stormy sea. I might pursue these thoughts still further, and show that the wood of the cross, or the bronze of the statue, decay as quickly as if they had not been sanctified; and I think I could show that their influence is owing to the imagination, which, when infinite time is considered, or the course of ages even, is null and its effect imperceptible; and similar results occur, whether the faith be that of Osiris, of Jupiter, of Jehovah, or of Jesus."

To this Ambrosio replied, his countenance and the tones of his voice expressing some emotion: "I do not think, Onuphrio, that you consider this question with your usual sagacity or acuteness; indeed, I never hear you on the subject of religion without pain and without a feeling of regret that you have not applied your powerful understanding to a more minute and correct examination of the evidences of revealed religion. You would then, I think, have seen, in the origin, progress, elevation, decline and fall of the empires of antiquity, proofs that they were intended for a definite end in the scheme of human redemption; you

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would have found prophecies which have been amply verified ; and the foundation or the ruin of a kingdom, which appears in civil history so great an event, in the history of man, in his religious institutions, as comparatively of small moment ; you would have found the establishment of the worship of one God amongst a despised and contemned people as the most important circumstance in the history of the early world ; you would have found the Christian dispensation naturally arising out of the Jewish, and the doctrines of the pagan nations all preparatory to the triumph and final establishment of a creed fitted for the most enlightened state of the human mind and equally adapted to every climate and every people."

To this animated appeal of Ambrosio, Onuphrio replied in the most tranquil manner and with the air of an unmoved philosopher:—" You mistake me, Ambrosio, if you consider me as hostile to Christianity. I am not of the school of the French encyclopædists, or of the English infidels. I consider religion as essential to man, and belonging to the human mind in the same manner as instincts belong to the