

# JUVENILE ENTERTAINER.

"Torquet ab obscenis jam nunc sermonibus aurem."

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## THE JUVENILE ENTERTAINER

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## BIOGRAPHY.

### VOLNEY BECKNER.

Volney Beckner was born at Londonderry, in Ireland, in 1748, and was devoured by a shark at the age of twelve years.

The child whom we here commemorate had all the advantage of springing from a wealthy and distinguished family: but of what importance is birth? what is the effect of riches? They often corrupt the morals. He who is worthy, honest, and wise, has no need of great or rich ancestors. Volney Beckner was the son of a poor Irish sailor; he received no instruction but what related to his father's profession: yet nature had endowed his body with singular address and agility, and his mind with unusual intelligence and penetration. He had a soul of no common temper; and from his earliest years he discovered sentiments of valour, which would have led him to great enterprises, had he enjoyed a longer life.

One art essentially necessary to a sailor, and serviceable to most others, is that of swimming. Besides that this exercise is very favourable to the health, and that it gives suppleness to the limbs, it is indispensable in a shipwreck; there is no medium in such a case; a person must either know how to swim or be drowned.

As soon as little Beckner was weaned, his father, by example, shewed him how to guide himself in the middle of the waves, even when they were most agitated. He threw him down into the sea from the stern of the ship: then suddenly plunging into this delusive element, which swallows so many men and so much riches, he sought for him again.

He afterwards supported him with one hand, taught him to extend his little arms and legs, and thus accustomed him from his cradle to brave dangers in their very bosom.

The pupil became so bold, able, and vigorous, that from his fourth year he would follow the ship in which he had been brought up, swimming the distance of one or two leagues. When he was exhausted by fatigue, his father who watched him with an attentive eye, flew to catch him, and brought him to the ship on his back. Sometimes,

when the little lad was not extremely fatigued, he would cling dexterously round a rope which was thrown out to him, and creep up like a rat into the vessel.

When he grew a little bigger, he soon rendered himself useful to the crew. In tempestuous weather, when the wind blew with violence, when it tore the sails, and the rain fell in torrents, he was one of the most active on board. The squirrel does not clamber with more agility up the trees in Lapland, than Volney did up the rigging and along the yards of the ship. When he was at the top of the mast, even in the fiercest of the storm, he appeared as little agitated as a passenger stretched in his hammock.

Such is the force of habit and example! Happy are those who see none but good examples! Cradled in the offeminacy of cities, abandoned to ignorant nurses, most children tremble like a leaf at the cracking of the door, and are ready to faint at the sight of a mouse. It is not so with those who are brought up in the midst of labour, and who contemplate brave men. To be fed with biscuit broken with a hatchet, sparingly moistened with muddy water full of worms, to be half covered with a garment of coarse cloth, to take some hours of repose on a plank, and be suddenly awakened at the moment when his sleep was the soundest, was the lot of a Volney, and yet he enjoyed a robust constitution. He never caught cold, he never knew fevers, or any of those diseases which arise from gluttony and idleness. A hardy education is always the best, and alone forms superior men: of this fact history furnishes us with numerous examples. Such was the aptitude and industry of Beckner in his twelfth year, that at this age he was judged worthy of a higher station, and double pay. The captain of his ship often mentioned him as a model to the other boys; and said once in the presence of the whole crew, "if this little fellow continues to conduct himself with so much valour and prudence, I have no doubt of him obtaining a place much above that which I occupy." Little Volney was very sensible to the praises that he had so well deserved. Though deprived of the study of letters, which cultivates the mind, extends our knowledge, and gives us just ideas of things, he loved glory by instinct, and made great efforts to acquire it. From several instances of intrepid daring, which he manifested in many dangerous emergencies, we shall only select the following, since this alone will confer eternal honour on his memory.

A little girl, daughter of a rich American, who was going to Port au-Prince, in France, had slipped away from her nurse, who was sick in the cabin, and ran upon deck. There, whilst she fixed her eyes with curiosity on the immense expanse of water, a sudden heaving of the ship caused her head to turn, and she fell into the sea. The father of Volney darted after her, and in five or six strokes caught her by her frock. Whilst he swam with one hand to regain the vessel, and with the other held the child to his breast, Beckner perceived at a distance

a shark advancing towards him. The danger was pressing. Every one ran on deck, but no one dared to go farther, they contented themselves with firing off several muskets; but the animal, lashing the sea with his tail, and opening his frightful jaws, was about to seize his prey. In this terrible extremity, what strong men would not venture to attempt, filial piety excited a child to execute. Little Volney armed himself with a sabre; he threw himself into the sea; then plunging with the velocity of a fish; he slipped under the belly of the animal, and thrust the sword into him up to the hilt. Thus suddenly assailed, and deeply wounded, the shark quitted the sailor and child, but turned, exasperated, against the aggressor, who attacked him with repeated blows. What a heart rending sight! How worthy of admiration! On one side the American, trembling for his little girl, who seemed devoted to destruction; on the other, a generous mariner exposing his life for a child not his own; and here the whole crew raising their hands to heaven on seeing young Volney contending with an enemy so greatly superior, and encountering inevitable death to divert it from his father! Who can view a scene like this without dissolving into tears of tenderness?

The combat was two unequal, and no refuge remained but in a speedy retreat. Several ropes were quickly thrown out to the father and the son, and they each succeeded in seizing one. They were hastily drawn up; already they were more than fifteen feet above the surface of the water; already cries of joy were heard: "Here they are! here they are!—they are saved!" Alas! no—they were not saved! At least one victim was to be sacrificed. Enraged at seeing his prey about to escape him, the shark plunged with a vigorous spring, and darting forward like lightning, with his sharp teeth he tore asunder the body of the intrepid and unfortunate youth while suspending in the air. A part of his palpitating and lifeless body was drawn up to the ship, with his father and the little girl.

Thus died, at the age of twelve years, this hopeful young sailor, who deserved a better fate. When we reflect on the generous action which he performed, and the sacred motive by which he was animated to the enterprise, we are penetrated with sorrow to see him sink under it. Yet these great examples cannot be lost. The memory of them does not perish with the individual who gave them. A faithful relation of them cannot but animate with a generous zeal the tender minds of youth, and to produce from age to age the repetition of actions not less praiseworthy.

## LITERATURE.

### A CURIOUS PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEMPLATION ON THE CHANGES OF MATTER.

Perhaps it may not be amiss to follow a track of pleasing amusement, which by a very easy and natural inference arises from the subject in hand, and which was very happily represented