Early Years

ALYRE RAFFENEAU DELILE.

Vice-consul dans la Caroline du Nord, professeur de botanique à la Faculté de Médecine de Montpellier, membre de l'Institut d'Egypte, correspondant de l'Institut de France, chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, etc.

In 1802, when First Consul of France, Napoleon honored the town of Wilmington by sending to this port as vice-consul the gifted young scientist Raffeneau Delile, whose scientific work, although he was at that time but twenty-four years old, had won for him the grateful recognition of France.

"Quoi qu'il arrive il faut que je sois regretté, si j'ai eu quelque valeur; c'est à l'oeuvre que l'on connaît l'ouvrier: 'A fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos,' a dit l'Evangile." (Whatever happens, I must be regretted if I have had worth; it is by the work that we know the workman: 'By their fruits you shall know them,' saith the Gospel.) Thus wrote Delile in affectionate confidence to his son five years before his death, and his distinguished contemporary, M. Joly, in an historic eulogy, quotes the scientist's own words in his estimate of the man whose work won for him an imperishable name.

Alyre Raffeneau Delile was born in Versailles in 1778. His ancestors had held positions at court from the time of Francis I., and he inherited the post held by his father, but his larger heritage was the principles of honor and strict integrity. His early boyhood was passed under the shadow of the impending Revolution, but though his father was attached to the court during that critical period, he encouraged Delile in forming independent opinions, leaving him free to espouse actively either the cause of the King or of the people. With no predilection for public affairs, however, he gave himself to the study of botany and anatomy, and when an interne in the Hospital of Versailles, learned Greek and some Latin from one of the Prussian soldiers who then filled its wards. Later, he entered a medical school in Paris which Bonaparte, then professing interest in chemistry, sometimes visited; but for Bonaparte abstract study could not shut out the call to the great arena of military activity and conquest. At that time the mysteries of Egypt beckoned with even greater persuasiveness than had the

laurels of Italy, and the African expedition was made ready. To the credit of Napoleon be it ever remembered that he desired to conquer more than lands and peoples, and to accompany him on that memorable journey to Egypt to solve its mysteries and add distinction to French culture he chose fifteen of the greatest savants of France, among them René Louiche Desfontaine, the noted botanist, who had already visited Egypt, bringing back probably the largest single collection of foreign plants then in existence. But Desfontaine declined the honor of going and requested it for Raffeneau Delile, then but twenty years old. Realizing that his youth and inexperience might embarrass him in such a company, Delile refused to go unless there should be conferred upon him the title of a superior officer. His request was granted, and he went forth with "those soldiers of letters, the new Argonauts." In Egypt his knowledge of Greek was of great value to him in deciphering inscriptions on obelisks and temples and in tombs. It was Boussard, an officer of this expedition, who found the Rosetta stone, and it is possible that Delile was one of the first to read some of the Greek inscription[1] upon that. These scientists formed themselves into the Institute of Egypt, planned after the *Institut National,* and Delile was made director of the Botanical Gardens of Cairo, which he enriched by specimens gathered in the valley of the Nile, on the borders of the Red Sea, and in the desert. He thoroughly explored the world of plants, wrote extensively, and read before the Institute of Egypt memorials that carried his name across the Mediterranean. But misfortune came, and on August 31, 1801, Alexandria capitulated to the English, leaving to the mercy of the conquerors the marvelous collections of Bonaparte's scientific expedition. It was when these were claimed that the illustrious naturalist Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, in the names of his colleagues, Delile and Savigny, made to the haughty English general the heroic response: "We will not yield. Your army will enter this place in two days. Ah, well, between now and then the sacrifice will be consummated. We will ourselves burn our treasures; you will afterwards dispose of our persons as seems good to you." It is needless to say that the collection was saved to the French.

Scarcely had Delile returned to France, when Bonaparte sent him to Wilmington as under-commissioner of commercial rela-

[1]To Champollion belongs the honor of deciphering the hieroglyphic and using it as a key to the decipherment of the monuments of Egypt.