

**REVOLT OF THE
TARTARS OR FLIGHT OF
THE KALMUCK KHAN**

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Revolt of the Tartars Or Flight of the Kalmuck Khan by Thomas De Quincey

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THOMAS DE QUINCEY

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ECLECTIC ENGLISH CLASSICS

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OR

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BY

THOMAS DE QUINCEY



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REVOLT OF THE TARTARS.
M. I.

INTRODUCTION.

THE author of the "Revolt of the Tartars," Thomas De Quincey, was born on the 15th of August, 1785, in Manchester, Eng. In his reminiscences of childhood he shows himself to have been a timid, sensitive child, endowed with a capacious memory. He remembered, he said, his terror at the death of a little sister who died when he was a year and a half old, and his grief, also, for the taking-off of a kingfisher, which happened about that time in his history.

In the several schools of his youth he did not lose any of his shyness; but he gained in studiousness, especially in an excellence in Greek and in the subtle intellectual force which is the spirit of the Greek tongue. When he was fifteen, his master remarked of him to a visiting stranger, "That boy could harangue an Athenian mob better than you or I could address an English one." At sixteen he was a runaway in Wales and London, hungry, cold, and destitute of money to buy shelter.

At last, by bartering a part of his prospects of inheritance with a broker, he gained money to go to Oxford. It was here, in 1804, in the midst of his studies, that he first experimented with the deadly drug to which, the rest of his life, he was in some degree the slave. His health had been undermined by his London

starvation and exposure, and an attack of acute neuralgia induced him to take opium.

Leaving Oxford, he sought Wordsworth at Grasmere in the Lake District; and by the kindness of the poet and of his helpful sister Dorothy he established himself in a cottage not far away. "And what am I doing amongst the mountains?" he wrote. "Taking opium. Yes; but what else? Why, reader, in 1812, the year we are now arrived at, as well as for some years previous, I have been chiefly studying German metaphysics, or the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, etc. And how and in what manner do I live? in short, what class or description of men do I belong to? I am at this period—viz., in 1812—living in a cottage, and as a scholar and a man of learned education, I may presume to class myself as an unworthy member of that indefinite body called 'gentlemen.' Partly on the ground I have assigned,—partly because, from having no visible calling or business, it is rightly judged that I must be living on my private fortune,—I am so classed by my neighbors; and by the courtesy of modern England I am usually addressed on letters, etc., 'Esquire.' . . . Am I married? Not yet. And I still take opium? On Saturday nights."

In 1816 De Quincey married the daughter of a neighboring farmer, and now must needs turn to some practical means of support. But his will had been paralyzed by opium, and he had fallen into that deadly torpor of the moral energies which always follows its use. For a time he suffered complete prostration.

The way out of his hideous condition chanced to be through the appearance in a magazine of his "Confessions of an Opium Eater, being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar." The charming imaginativeness of the piece, and its fair literary touch, joined

with its garrulous and unblushing egotism, surprised the public, and made its popularity. From this time, De Quincey helped to support his family by his literary efforts.

Later on he moved to Edinburgh. Here he continued in the city, or in the little cottage of Lasswade, seven miles away,—the cottage of Scott's early married life and first good fortune in literature,—till his death in 1859. These years were full of work. The needs of his family pressed upon him, and incited to his use the vast stores of learning acquired in earlier years. He dealt with many subjects, autobiographic, historical, biographical, speculative, and pure imaginative. The multifariousness of his matter is perhaps one of the strong expressions of his genius.

"For my own part," he said, "without breach of truth or modesty, I may affirm that my life has been, on the whole, the life of a philosopher. From my birth I was made an intellectual creature; and intellectual in the highest sense my pursuits and pleasures have been, even from my schoolboy days." At another time: "I have passed more of my life in absolute and unmitigated solitude, voluntarily and for intellectual purposes, than any person of my age whom I have ever either met with, heard of, or read of."

About the beginning of the eighteenth century, when the celebrated Kang Hi was reigning Emperor of China, there was a revolt of one of his vassal tribes. A whole people withdrew from his protection, and, going westward, of their own will came under the dominion of the Russian Czar. They settled upon the lands that lie between the Volga and the Ural, and there had years of tolerable prosperity. But memories of their old home and the milder rule of the Chinese were always with them.

It happened, therefore, that when Kang Hi had long been dead, and Kien Long, his great and sagacious grandson, had come to the Chinese throne, these Torgouths turned about in mind, and considered the exactions under which they now suffered. The noise of Kien Long's victories was passing from mouth to mouth; and when he had completed his conquest of the turbulent tribes of Central Asia it was toward the year 1770.

Now the Torgouths suffered because the Russians held them as a sort of feudal vassal. They drew away their youth to fight and perhaps to die in Russian wars, and their cattle and other belongings they took to help make the tyrannical government at St. Petersburg more and more tyrannical. Taxes, instead of lessening, increased as the years went on. It is not to be wondered at, then, that, along with the reports of Kien Long's victorious wars, there was whispered also the news of his proclamation, to the effect that the prodigal Torgouths would at any time be welcomed back; for Kien Long was amiable as well as far-sighted.

The exact cause which determined the revolt and flight from Russian authority which the Torgouths planned, historians cannot agree upon. One says that the son of Oubacha, their chief, was seized by the Russians as a hostage. Kien Long in his memoirs, which the French Jesuit missionaries at Peking have translated, says, "The Russians never ceasing to require him to furnish soldiers for incorporation into their armies; and having at last carried off his own son to serve them as a hostage, and being, besides, of a religion different from his, and paying no respect to that of the lamas, which the Torgouths profess, Oubacha and his people at last determined to shake off a yoke which was becoming daily more and more insupportable."¹ De Quincey, in the following

¹ Quoted by Professor Masson in his edition of Quincey's writings.