LIFE OF

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH, R.A.

CHAPTER I.

Birthplace & Parentage.

Thomas Gainsborough was born in the parish of St. Gregory, Sepulchre Street, Sudbury, Suffolk, in the year 1727—the day or the month is not recorded—and baptised at the Independent Meeting-house, May 14th, in the same year. His father, Mr. John Gainsborough, was a dissenter, but the family of his mother were members of the Church of England, and her brother was a clergyman of that church. The house in which he was born, was originally an Inn, and known by
the sign of “The Black Horse.” It was, as shown in the engraving, one of the many old-fashioned buildings which formerly existed in the ancient town of Southburgh,* with their high gables and overhanging walls, the upper stories projecting some two or three feet over the basements. When a local act was passed in 1825, for the improvement of the town, a clause was inserted, requiring that the houses which were to be thereafter built, “should be made to rise perpendicular from the foundations thereof.” The late Sir Robert Peel, in a debate upon the disfranchisement of the borough, having occasion to refer to this local act, designated it as “a most extraordinary piece of legislation to compel people to build their houses upright.” The great statesman’s thoughts running more upon the bribery and corruption of the place than its overhanging stories, he appeared almost to doubt whether the political deviations from the upright had not extended even to the construction of the freemen’s dwellings, and to imagine that they had been either built or warped, after the manner of the leaning tower at Pisa.

The Grammar School at Sudbury, founded in 1491 and still standing, was in Gains-

* Sudbury was so called in opposition to Norwich—the Northburgh.
borough’s boyhood kept by his uncle, the Rev. Humphry Burroughs, curate of the Church of St. Gregory. It was here that the embryo Painter received his education:

> The bench on which he sat, while deep employed,
> Though mangled, hacked, and hewed, not yet destroyed,
> The wall on which he tried his graving skill,
> The very name he carved existing still.

Near his initials is a deep cut figure in the mouldering wall, an evident caricature of the schoolmaster, which it requires no very great stretch of imagination to attribute to the penknife of Master Gainsborough.

Sudbury being one of the first towns in which Edward III settled the Flemish weavers who taught the English their art, a number of ancient buildings, denominated wool-halls, existed within living memory. The chief manufactures were “says” and “crapes,” both made of yarn spun from combed wool, and differing from each other principally in quality and substance. Gainsborough’s father was engaged in this trade. In the deed of conveyance of the house in which the Painter was born, dated May 1722, Mr. Gainsborough is described as a milliner; in a mortgage deed about three years later, he is mentioned as a clothier; and in 1735 when there were further dealings with the property,
he is designated a crape-maker. In person, Mr. Gainsborough is represented by his descendants as “a fine old man, who wore his hair carefully parted, and was remarkable for the whiteness and regularity of his teeth.” According to the custom of the last century, when in full dress, he always wore a sword, and was an adroit fencer, possessing the fatal facility of using his weapon in either hand. He introduced into Sudbury the shroud trade from Coventry, which he managed to keep in his own connexion for some time, by the mystery in which he enveloped it. This monopoly he found extremely profitable, and not only travelled himself into distant counties to take orders, but employed a young man named Burr (whose sister the Painter married) as a travelling agent to assist him in his mercantile pursuits. On one occasion, when in his untaxed cart which contained, besides samples of the dresses for the dead, a keg of smuggled brandy for the comfort of the living, some vague information of his supposed delinquencies was given to a revenue officer, who, on a bright moonlight night, took occasion to enquire what he had in his cart? “I’ll show you,” was the ready answer, and catching up a shroud he enveloped his tall
figure in the ghostly dress, to the astonishment and speedy departure of his weak-nerved nocturnal visitor.

Mr. Gainsborough occasionally extended his travels into France and Holland. His business at that period was very extensive, but he lost much by bad debts, owing to that kindness of heart which would not allow him to press for payment when his debtors were in difficulties. He also resolutely refused to avail himself of a practice common in the trade, of taking what is termed “toll” from the spinners’ earnings, which amounted to nearly one third of their small weekly wages. The old gentleman brought up a large, and, with the single exception of his youngest son Thomas who supported himself after he was eighteen, a very expensive family, consisting of nine children, five sons and four daughters. The latter were all married: Mary, to a dissenting minister of Bath, named Gibbon; Susannah, to Mr. Gardiner of the same gay city; Sarah married Mr. Dupont, and Elizabeth, Mr. Bird, both of Sudbury, where they lived and died. In the next chapter we purpose giving a few particulars of the Painter’s brothers, John, Humphry, Matthias, and Robert. Some of the family portraits by Gainsborough,
are still in the possession of his relative, Mr. Dupont of Sudbury. Gainsborough’s father died Oct. 29th, 1748, aged sixty-five, and was buried in the churchyard of St. Gregory, Sudbury, where a stone is erected to his memory.

The Painter’s mother, whose maiden name was Burroughs, was a woman of a well cultivated mind, and, amongst other accomplishments, excelled in flower painting. Did her painter boy imbibe his love of the art from his mother’s beautiful copies? She affectionately encouraged him in his juvenile attempts at drawing, and lived to see her fondest wishes realized in her son’s acknowledged eminence in that pursuit which she had probably been the means of first awakening. Gainsborough was high in fame at Bath when his mother died; she was buried in the cemetery of the Independent Meeting-house, Sudbury, on the 24th of May, 1769.

The dilapidated and antique buildings, which, as we have said, in Gainsborough’s boyhood encumbered and disfigured the streets of his native town, were in the eyes of the Painter positive beauties, from the same artistic feeling which made him say to a Lutanist, who objected to sit to him on account of his week’s redundant beard, “do you
think if Vandyke were going to paint you, he would have you shaved?” Its then unpaved thoroughfares were at irregular intervals encroached upon by uncouth porches, ornamented with carvings still more uncouth, antediluvian monsters and zoological-defying griffins, whose antiquity was their only recommendation. Doubtless these curious figures often attracted the notice of the young Painter on his way to school, and probably employed his earliest pencil. He told Thickenesse,* his first patron, that “there was not a picturesque clump of trees, nor even a single tree of any beauty, no, nor hedge-row, stem, or post” in or around his native town, which was not from his earliest years, treasured in his memory.

The house in which Gainsborough was born had a spacious and well-plant ed orchard annexed to it, and several of the trees are still standing that were there in the Painter's boyhood. Amongst them is the Pear-tree, the robbery of which, as will be hereafter related, furnished his first attempt at portrait painting.

* Sketch of the Life and Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, Esq., by Philip Thickenesse. London: Fores, 1788. The style of this curious publication is so defiant of all the rules of composition that alterations for grammar’s sake have been occasionally made in the quotations. The Author desires to acknowledge the courtesy of an unknown friend who sent him a M.S. copy from the British Museum.
Some twelve years ago, drawings of this house, that in which he died, and the Church at Kew, where he was interred, were sent by the Author to his old and valued friend Bernard Barton, an ardent admirer of the paintings of Gainsborough. They suggested to the Bard of Woodbridge the following poem:

GAINSBOROUGH'S HAUNTS.

"Call it not vain; they do not err
Who say that when the Poet dies,
Mute nature mourns her worshipper,
And celebrates his obsequies;"

Nor should we less the memory prize
Of him, whose initiatory art,
Transcripts of nature still supplies,
To charm the eye, and touch the heart.

And, tried by this unsparing test,
Thine, Gainsbro' is no transient thrall;
Secures by thy magic pencil great,
From many an else blank, lifeless wall,
Yet plead for thee; and at their call,
Love, admiration, fondly wake,
In lowly Cot, or lordly Hall,
To honour thee, for nature's sake.

Most wisely has thy genius plan'n'd
Works that have shed around thy name,
Throughout thy lov'd and native land,
A Painter's—and a Patriot's fame!
For well he plays a Patriot's part,
And every Patriot's thanks hath won,
Who honours, by his noble art,
His country's worth—as thou hast done!

And for this cause we would enshrine,
With grateful homage, justly due,
Each haunt a memory priz'd as thine,
Has made no common vulgar view:
BIRTHPLACE AND PARENTAGE.

Giving, in pictured semblance true,
The House antique where thou wast born—
The Orchard, where thy boyhood drew
" Tom Puartree " in life's early morn.

To these we add—what could we more?
The Pile which saw thy mortal close,
The Churchyard where, time's conflicts o'er,
Thy reliques quietly repose:
There, till the grave with terming throes,
Hear the last trumpet's echoing breath,
Shalt thou partake the lot of those
Whose memories triumph over death?

Painter, farewell! 'mid scenes that mure
Thy genius, where thy youthful eye
First studied nature, and where first
Thy hand aspired its skill to try—
Fain would a Suffolk Poet vie
In praise of merit like thine own;
And gratefully, in passing by,
Thus throw upon thy cairn a stone.

Not far from Gainsborough's garden stood the ruins of the palace of Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1375, who was beheaded by the rabble in Wat Tyler's rebellion. In Gainsborough's childhood it was occupied as the parish Poor-house—"to what vile uses may we come, Horatio." Many a time must the embryo Painter have sketched its gothic arches, nodding to their fall, the elaborate tracery of its ruined windows, entwined with the ivy green; and many a time must he have stood in boyish wonder before the grim head of the Archbishop, which is enclosed in a niche in the wall of the adjacent Church of St. Gregory.
Whilst there was so much that was picturesque in the town of Sudbury, the surrounding country was not deficient in grace or beauty. The woodman’s axe had not then thinned the old ancestral trees, nor had the railway broken in upon its rustic retirement. Constable, nurtured amid the same scenery, dwells with lingering fondness on “its gentle declivities, its luxuriant meadow-flats sprinkled with flocks and herds, its well cultivated uplands, its woods and rivers, with numerous scattered villages and churches, farms and picturesque cottages.” These scenes of his boyhood, he was wont to say, made him a painter; and they were not without their influence on the warm heart of Gainsborough. His pencil has often portrayed the most striking features of his native landscapes, as in *A View near Sudbury*, and *A View of Henny Church*; the former exhibited at the British Institution in 1814, the latter in 1831. The river Stour, which, in its course to the ocean, follows Hogarth’s line of beauty in all its graceful variety, was ever dear to him; and fifty years intercourse with the world, and long acquaintance with far nobler streams, enriched with far grander scenery, could not alienate his affections from the river of his boyhood.