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John Thomas Smith

Excerpt

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## NOLLEKENS

AND

## HIS TIMES.

## CHAPTER I.

Nollekens's pedigree.—His Father frightened by the Rebels in 1745.—Nollekens placed with Scheemakers the Sculptor.—His juvenile passion for tolling bells.—He gains premiums in the Society of Arts.—Leaves England for Rome.—Patronised there by Garrick and Sterne.—He gains the Pope's gold medal.—Exposed to assassination by Barry the Painter.—Barry's rude and brutal conduct.—Nollekens a dealer in antiques.—Athenian Stuart.—Nollekens a botcher up of ancient fragments.—A lucky hit.—Successful smuggling by Nollekens.—His filthy mode of living in Rome.—He returns to London, and is chosen a Member of the Royal Academy.—He falls in love and marries.—Figure and wedding-dress of his bride.—Fan-painting.—London antiquities.

THE grandfather of Mr. Nollekens was baptized at Antwerp on the 24th of March 1665; he was a Painter, and made a long residence in

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England; but subsequently settled at Roanne in France. His son, who is recorded by the various names of Joseph Franciscus, or Cornelius Franciscus, or *Old Nollekens*, as he is called by Walpole,—the father of Joseph, the subject of these Memoirs, was born at Antwerp, in the parish of St. André, on June 10th, 1702; and came to England on May 3rd, 1733, where he married Mary Anne Le Sacq. As he had studied under Watteau, his pictures, in point of subject and scenery, were somewhat similar to those of his master, though in other respects they were far short of that tasteful artist's feeling; however, he supported his family with respectability, and was even enabled to make some provision for the future.

The following anecdote of Nollekens's father was communicated to me by James Northcote, Esq. R. A. who received it from our mutual friend the late eminent Sculptor, Thomas Banks, Esq. R. A. "Old Nollekens," observed he, "was a miserably avaricious man, and during the Rebellion in 1745 his house was marked as belonging to a Roman Catholic, and one in which the mob thought themselves sure of finding money: however, they did not visit him; but the idea had seized him so seriously, that he lingered in a state of alarm until

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his death, which took place in Dean-street, Soho. He was buried at Paddington, in 1747, under the names of *Joseph Francis* Nollekens, leaving a wife, by whom he had five children, viz. *John Joseph*, baptized January 29th, 1735; JOSEPH, the subject of the present volumes, born and baptized August 11th, 1737, at the Roman Catholic Chapel, in Duke-street, Lincoln's-Inn-fields; *Maria Joanna Sophia*, baptized May 3rd, 1739; *Jacobus*, baptized April 10th, 1741; and *Thomas Charles*, baptized May 31st, 1745.

My late father, Nathaniel Smith, and Joseph Nollekens, were playfellows, and both learned drawing together at Shipley's school, then kept in the Strand, at the eastern corner of Castle-court: the house, now No. 229, is at present occupied by Mr. Helps. What renders the building the more interesting, is, that it was not only in this house that the Society of Arts had its *first* meetings, but it was subsequently inhabited by Rawle the antiquary, and friend of Captain Grose. On the 7th of August, 1755, my father was placed with L. F. Roubiliac; and Joseph, in 1750, being then in his thirteenth year, under the care and instruction of Peter Scheemakers, an eminent Sculptor, at that time residing in Vine-street, Piccadilly, on the site

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of the present Court of Requests. Joseph's mother subsequently married a Welshman, named Williams, who, some years before her death, conducted her to his native place.

Joseph Nollekens was considered by all the neighbours of Vine-street, as a civil inoffensive lad, but not particularly bright ; however, Mrs. Scheemakers used to give this character of him, that "Joey was so honest, that she could always trust him to stone the raisins." His love for modelling was the greatest pleasure he possessed, though it is true that he had an idle propensity for bell-tolling, and in that art, for which many allowed him to have a superior talent, he would frequently indulge by running down George-court to St. James's Church, to know how funerals went on. He was well known both to the Sexton and his man, who generally accosted him with the joyous exclamation of "What, my little Joey, are you come? well, you must toll to-day!" Whenever his master missed him, and the dead-bell was tolling, he knew perfectly well what Joey was at. He had so little pride, that he himself has stated he was often met slowly and steadily creeping along to save the head of a pot of porter, which the maids had sent him for on a washing-day ; but, notwithstanding all his childish inclinations, he was, as he grew up, not

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unmindful of his art, rose early, practised carefully, and, being a true son of his father, passionately fond of money, started for the prizes offered by the Society of Arts; and it gives me infinite pleasure to state, that Joseph Nollekens and Nathaniel Smith, my father, carried off some of the first and best of its premiums, as will appear by the following extracts from the Registrar's books.

“ In 1759, to Joseph Nollekens was adjudged the sum of 15*l.* 15*s.* for a model in clay of figures. In 1760, for a model in clay, a bas-relief, 31*l.* 10*s.*; and in the same year, for a model in clay of a dancing Faun, 10*l.* 10*s.*”

As Mr. Nollekens's mother had married a Welshman, who was partial to his native air, he easily persuaded her to accompany him into Wales; and the brothers and sisters of Nollekens being all abroad, he had no motive to induce him to give up an inclination he had long entertained of travelling to see the works of Michel Angelo, and of other great men. He therefore, after having served his friendly master full ten years without the exchange of one unpleasant word, left England for Rome in the year 1760, with all the little property he had acquired. Taking Paris in his way, he called upon his uncle, who, from his questions and cool manner of half opening the street door, appeared

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to doubt the veracity of his visitor. However, upon his seeing him in possession of a gold watch, he was tempted to ask him in, and slightly pressed him to stay dinner, but this invitation Nollekens, who had felt a chill, proudly declined.

On his arrival at Rome, he found his purse reduced to twenty-one guineas; and, from a dread of want of money, he soon executed a basso-relievo in stone, which he consigned to England, and for which, in 1760, he had the honour of receiving a prize of 10*l.* 10*s.*; but his spirits were exhilarated to a much higher degree in 1762, by the vote of a prize of 52*l.* 10*s.* for a basso-relievo in marble, which is thus clumsily noticed in "The Public Advertiser," of Tuesday, May 25, 1762.

"At a meeting of the Society of Polite Arts, on Friday last, for a marble basso-relievo, the subject Timocles conducted before Alexander, the premium of fifty guineas was given to Mr. Joseph Nollekens, pupil of Mr. Scheemakers."

Whilst Mr. Nollekens was at Rome, he was recognized by Mr. Garrick with the familiar exclamation of "What! let me look at you! are you the little fellow to whom we gave the prizes at the Society of Arts?" "Yes, Sir," being the answer, Mr. Garrick invited him to breakfast the next morning, and

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kindly sat to him for his bust, for which he paid him 12*l.* 12*s.*; and I have not only often heard Mr. Nollekens affirm that the payment was made in “gold,” but that this was the first busto he ever modelled.

Sterne also sat to him when at Rome, and that bust brought him into great notice. With this performance, Nollekens continued to be pleased even to his second childhood, and often mentioned a picture which Dance had made of him leaning upon Sterne’s head. During his residence in Italy, he gained the Pope’s gold medal for a basso-relievo, which will be noticed in the second volume.

Barry, the Historical-painter, who was extremely intimate with Nollekens at Rome, took the liberty one night, when they were about to leave the English coffee-house, to exchange hats with him; Barry’s was edged with lace, and Nollekens’s was a very shabby plain one. Upon his returning the hat the next morning, he was requested by Nollekens to let him know why he left him his gold-laced hat. “Why, to tell you the truth, my dear Joey,” answered Barry, “I fully expected assassination last night, and I was to have been known by my laced hat.” This villainous transaction, which might have proved fatal to Nollekens, I have often heard him relate; and he gene-

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rally added, "It's what the Old Bailey people would call a true bill against Jem." Although Barry was of an irritable and vindictive spirit, yet, after ridiculing Nollekens upon almost every subject, he would not scruple to accept little acts of kindness at his hand, and then with the greatest brutality insult him. I remember an instance of this kind of conduct, which took place soon after Barry had completed the etchings from his pictures in the Adelphi. Nollekens, who was quite delighted in procuring him subscribers, once called out to him as he entered the studio, "Well, Jem, I have been very successful for you this week: do you know, I have procured you three more subscribers to your prints from the 'Delphi pictures?" Barry, instead of even returning a smile for his kindness, or thanking him by a nod, flew into a most violent passion; and uttering the coarsest imprecations, of which he possessed a boundless variety, bade him to attend in future to his own business, and not to solicit subscriptions to his works, adding, after the utterance of a most wretched oath, that if the nobility wanted his works, they knew where he was to be found, and they might come to him—he wanted no little jack-a-napes to go between him and those who ought to

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apply at once to the principal." And all this bombast was because Nollekens had declared his success in the presence of his workmen in the studio. Had he received the information in his parlour, all would have been well, and he would have pocketed the money as he had done frequently before; for to my own knowledge Mr. Nollekens procured him several names of personages of the highest rank.

Mr. T. Thornton, of Kennington, has favoured me with the following anecdote. Mr. Young, a particular friend of his, considering Barry's intended prints from his pictures in the Adelphi to be a national series which ought to be encouraged by the public, went to his house in Castle-street, Oxford-market, and paid half the subscription-money to ensure a set. When they were pronounced finished, he called to pay the remainder, and receive his prints; but, upon his expressing himself with some surprise as to their coarseness of execution, Barry asked him, if he knew what it was he *did* expect?"—"More finished engravings," replied Mr. Young; who, after experiencing farther rudeness from the artist, took his departure, observing that he was very welcome to keep the money he had already received.

During Mr. Nollekens's residence at Rome,

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he purchased among other articles by which he made considerable sums of money, numerous pieces of ancient Roman terracottas, some of exquisite taste, from the labourers who were employed in digging gravel at Porta Latina: they were mostly discovered at the bottom of a dry well, and must evidently have been placed there for security. Nollekens, who bought them for a mere trifle, sold them, upon his arrival in England, to Mr. Townley, and, together with that gentleman's marbles, they have since been purchased by Government for a considerable sum, and are now let into the walls of the first room of the Gallery of Antiquities in the British Museum. In this collection there are many duplicates, which are so precisely like each other, that in all probability, they were pressed from the same mould. Independently of the graceful figures which are introduced in several of these compositions, the foliated ornaments are extremely light and beautiful.

Mr. Nollekens, from the year 1761 to the time he left Rome, consigned several of his productions to his friend *Athenian* Stuart, who had undertaken, in consequence of an early intimacy, to see them placed in the best of the exhibitions in London, which he certainly