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John Thomas Smith

Excerpt

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## NOLLEKENS

AND

## HIS TIMES.

## CHAPTER XV.

Cause of Mr. Nollekens dismissing his Confessor.—Songs of his youthful days.—His bed.—Unquiet nights productive of charity.—Liberality to his domestics.—Coarseness of his food and manner of eating.—Inferiority of his wardrobe, and meanness of his domestic arrangements.—Character of his drawings and those of other Sculptors.—His Monumental designs and models.—Infirmity of his latter days, and death.—Attested copy of his Will and Codicils.

ONE rainy morning, Nollekens, after confession, invited his holy father to stay till the weather cleared up. The wet, however, continued till dinner was ready, and Nollekens felt obliged to ask the Priest to partake of a bird, one of the last of a present from his Grace the Duke of Newcastle. Down they sat; the

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reverend man helped his host to a wing, and then carved for himself, assuring Nollekens that he never indulged in much food; though he soon picked the rest of the bones. “I have no pudding,” said Nollekens, “but won’t you have a glass of wine? Oh, you have got some ale.” However, Bronze brought in a bottle of wine; and on the remove, Nollekens, after taking a glass, went, as usual, to sleep. The priest, after enjoying himself, was desired by Nollekens, while removing the handkerchief from his head, to take another glass. “Tank you, Sare, I have a finish de bottel.”—“The devil you have!” muttered Nollekens. “Now, Sare,” continued his Reverence, “ass de rain be ovare, I vil take my leaf.”—“Well, do so,” said Nollekens, who was not only determined to let him go without his coffee, but gave strict orders to Bronze not to let the old rascal in again. “Why, do you know,” continued he, “that he ate up all that large bird, for he only gave me one wing; and he swallowed all the ale; and out of a whole bottle of wine, I had only one glass!”

After this, being without a Confessor, Mrs. Holt, his kind attendant, read his prayers to him; but when she had gone through them, his feelings were so little affected by his religious

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duties, that he always made her conclude her labours by reading either “Gay’s Fables,” or “The Beggar’s Opera!” at the latter of which, when she came to certain songs, he would laugh most heartily, saying, “I used to sing them songs once; and it was when I was courting my *Polly*.”

I recollect that the bedstead upon which Mr. Nollekens slept of late years was four-posted; the curtains being yellow, orange, red, and black, and when first put up, they made a most gorgeous display: though he had for many years but one counterpane, of which he was so extremely choice, that he would not suffer it to be washed, but Mrs. Holt, being ashamed to see it, put on one of her own of a much superior quality. When he saw it upon the bed, he swore at her, and asked her why it had been washed? but upon her informing him that it was one of her own, he allowed it to remain, saying, “Well, indeed, it does look very comfortable.”\*

\* When this counterpane required washing, Mrs. Holt put on his own, at which he angrily cried out, “I won’t have it on, I always sleep better without one; I don’t like a counterpane;” to which she answered, that “The poorest creature in a workhouse had a rug on his bed, and that she would have it on.”

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Mrs. Holt, to whom I am obliged for many particulars in these volumes, who had by her amiable disposition and strict attention to cleanliness, rendered the two last years of Mr. Nollekens's life more comfortable than any period of his existence, informed me that when he could not rest in his bed, he would frequently endeavour to raise himself up, and call to her to know if she was asleep. Mrs. Holt, who rested upon a hard sofa by the side of his bed, would answer, "I'm here, Sir; can I give you any thing?"—*Nollekens*. "Sit up; I can't sleep: I can't rest. Is there any body that I know that wants a little money to do 'em good?"—*Mrs. Holt*. "Yes, Sir, there is Mrs. ———."—*Nollekens*. "Well, in the morning I'll send her ten pounds."—"That's a good old boy," said she, patting him on the back, "you will eat a better dinner for it tomorrow, and enjoy it." And Mrs. Holt has added, that she never knew him to forget his promise.

With all his propensity for saving, he indulged for many years in the gratification of making his household domestics a present of a little sum of money on his birth-day; and lately, upon this occasion, he became even more

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generous, by bestowing on them, to their great astonishment, ten and twenty pounds each.

A broad-necked gooseberry-bottle, leather-bunged, containing coffee, which had been purchased and ground full forty years, was brought out when he intended to give a particular friend a treat; but it was so dried to the sides of the bottle, that it was with difficulty he could scrape together enough for the purpose, and even when it *was* made, time had so altered its properties, from the top having been but half closed, that it was impossible to tell what it had originally been. He used to say, however, of this turbid mixture, "Some people fine their coffee with the skin of a sole, but for my part, I think this is clear enough for any body!"

Mrs. Wilson, a most amiable lady, one of the daughters of Mr. Major, the late celebrated Engraver of the Stamp-Office, was once asked to stay and drink tea with him. As Mr. Nollekens was putting in more tea than he would for himself, he was stopped by Mrs. Wilson, who observed, that she was afraid he had misunderstood her, for she could not stay: on which he muttered, "Oh! I'm glad you spoke," and then returned half the tea out of the pot to the canister. I do not wonder that so elegant a

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woman as Mrs. Wilson declined his invitation, particularly at this time, when the paralytic seizures which he had undergone, rendered his society at some times insupportable ; for, independent of his natural stupidity and ignorance in conversation, his bodily humours appeared in several parts of his person as well as his face, which was seldom free from scorbutic eruptions, particularly about his mouth. Indeed, poor man ! his appearance and want of decent manners rendered it impossible for any one accustomed to tolerable society, to associate with him ; and yet there were persons, whose servants would send such an object from their master's door, who actually sat down and partook of his boiled rabbit smothered with parsley and butter, even when he had thick napkins four times doubled under his chin. For my own part, I must say, I always declined accepting an invitation, though I have seen ladies arrive in their carriages, with an expectation of being remembered when next he made his Will ; for it was pretty well known, that in the course of the last twenty-five years, he had made several, in some of which he had remembered all his old friends. However, I shall for the present drop this subject, and state to my readers the few amusements which he enjoyed at this period.

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His principal attendant, Goblet, who at this time was empowered with the full control of the studio, stone-yard, and gate, cleared a space of ground which he formed into a small garden, purposely to be viewed from a window of an upper room, into which he and Mrs. Holt, and sometimes poor Bronze, guided the castored-chair with the man who had for years repeatedly promised to make them all happy for life. Of these three persons, Mr. Nollekens made the most free with Bronze; he listened to her silly nonsense with the full expectation of hearing what she had often said, and then would joke in his way in return; and though she was not over-cleanly in her domestic habits or person, he voraciously ate the food prepared by her hands. His attendant, Mrs. Holt, always cooked her own dinner; for lately, though Nollekens's savoury dish was sometimes relished by a crafty visitor, she declined eating with him, well knowing how negligent Bronze was as to the state of her culinary articles before she used them. Indeed, Bronze, in her grey-haired state, became addicted to drinking, and then Mrs. Holt would not allow her to dress any thing more for her master, but kindly cooked his dinner herself.

Perhaps there never was a Royal Academician, or even a servant of one, whose wardrobes

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were so scantily provided with change of dress as those of Mr. Nollekens and his old servant Bronze. He had but one night-cap, two shirts, and three pairs of stockings; two coats, one of them his *Pourpre de Pape*, one pair of small-clothes, and two waistcoats. His shoes had been repeatedly mended and nailed; they were two odd ones, and the best of his last two pair. This was the amount of his dress: indeed, so niggardly was he as to his clothes, that when Mrs. Holt took possession of his effects, she declared she would not live with him, unless he had a new coat and waistcoat. With this reasonable request he complied, saying nothing about any other part of his dress. Poor Bronze, who had to support herself upon what were called board-wages, had barely a change, and looked more like the wife of a chimney-sweeper than any other kind of human being. As for table linen, two small breakfast napkins and a large old tablecloth, a descendant in the family, which, when used, was always folded into four, was the whole of his stock; for he possessed no doileys; and Bronze declared to me that she had never seen such a thing as a jack-towel in the house, nor even the nail-holes where one had been. She always washed without soap: there were no hearth-stones nor black-lead dust for the



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stoves; nor a cake of whitening for the kitchen-grate; nor even a yard of oil-cloth to preserve the stones from grease, much less an old bit of bed-side carpet, to keep the bones of poor old Bronze free from rheumatism.

In this state, Mrs. Holt found things at No. 9, Mortimer-street, and in a worse condition did they appear when the secrets of the prison-house were laid open, as will be found after the insertion of Mr. Nollekens's Will in a future page of this volume.

Of late years he diverted himself with several sketch-books filled with outlines and measurements of busts, statues, groups, and basso-relievos, which he had most industriously and carefully made during his residence in Italy from numerous fragments, and several celebrated antiques in the Vatican, the Palaces, and Villas Bassano, Belvidere, Bologna, Borghese, Frascati, Giustiniani, Loretto, Mantua, Massani, Tivoli, &c.

These sketch-books, which are now mostly in the possession of Mrs. Palmer, may very justly be considered to contain some of his best drawings, and are beyond doubt most valuable memoranda. Of the interesting subjects delineated,—particularly as to their measurements, which in my belief are strictly accurate,—the outlines in my mind bear too visibly the cold

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hand of perseverance only, since they are not executed with any thing like the feeling with which Flaxman drew; and when compared with his Italian studies, also made from some of the same antiques, they fall far short of the mind visible in every thing Flaxman touched, even in his earliest years. However this may be, and feebly as Nollekens's copies were made, he unquestionably not only considerably outstripped his master Scheemakers, but, to do him only common justice, his strides were considered greatly beyond the usual extent of the abilities in drawing of the Sculptors of his early days; Rysbrack excepted, whose drawings, though certainly considerably mannered, possess a fertility of invention, and a spirit of style in their execution, seldom emanating from the hand of a Sculptor of modern times.\* They are for the most part washed in bistre, and are frequently to be met with. Michel Angelo's

\* Painters, and indeed Engravers, at that time were much better draughtsmen than the Sculptors. There were Moser, Mortimer, Cipriani, West, Barry, Bartolozzi, Sherwin, Ryland, Strutt, Legat, and Grignon, who drew the figure well. Since their time we have been enabled to boast of Blake, Flaxman, Lawrence, Stothard, Burney, Ryley, Howard, Hilton, Eddy, Briggs, and Morton, all faithful and constant delineators of form and muscular action.