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Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor

Excerpt

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L I F E

O F

S I R J O S H U A R E Y N O L D S .

CHAPTER VI.

1773—1775. *ÆTAT.* 50—52.

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[1773, *ætat.* 50.—SIR JOSHUA'S prosperous and pleasant life had now settled into the routine of what may be called

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its second stage. His days, from ten to four, were given to the labour he loved; his evenings to society at his own house, or abroad. His Sundays were generally days of rest; crowned often by a dinner at his own villa at Richmond, or at the house of one of his many friends in that beautiful neighbourhood—Owen Cambridge, George Colman, Mrs. Clive, or his old master, Hudson. In the autumn he made short visits to country houses; dividing himself among the many friends who sought his cheerful and unpretending company at Blenheim or Althorpe, Easton, Amphill, or Elton. Every now and then he made a longer excursion, generally to his native county, for which his affection seems never to have lessened, and where municipal was now added to social honour. At still wider intervals came a visit to the Continent.

But even when Sir Joshua was working his hardest, his life, through this stage, was not what it had been for his first ten years in London. An unbroken stream of sitters no longer poured into his studio, hour by hour between ten and four, from January to May, and again from September to December, with some slackening, but rarely any intermission, in the summer months. Much as Reynolds loved painting, no man probably could long have borne the strain of such labour. He now gave more time to society. His circle of acquaintance had enlarged, and he never lost a friend. The average total of sitters for the year had now fallen from the hundred and fifty, forty, thirty, at which it stood between 1755 and 1765, to sixty and seventy. Many of these are old friends and frequent sitters, in whose case the strain on the painter's mind must have been less severe, and the sittings relieved with pleasant

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1773, ÆTAT. 50.

HIS FANCY PICTURES.

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and familiar chat. The intervals left by sitters Sir Joshua occupied on fancy subjects. "Boy," "Girl," "Shepherd-boy," "Shepherd-girl," "Children," are now continually recurring entries. It is to this stage that we must refer some of his most ambitious historical pieces, as the Ugolino, as well as most of those charming little pictures, so many of which contest places in our memories with his finest portraits, as much by virtue of their character and grace as by their power and ease of execution. Many of these belong to this year. One is the Strawberry Girl,¹ with her pottle on her arm, creeping timidly along and glancing round her with large black eyes. She might be little Red Riding Hood hearing the first rustle of the wolf in the wayside bushes, could we substitute a red hood for the odd turban-like headdress with which the painter has crowned his little maiden, and which even Sir Joshua's taste can barely make becoming, and hang on her arm the basket with butter and eggs for her sick grandmother, instead of the strawberry-pottle which gives her a name. To the same style belongs Muscipula² holding up the mouse-trap, while the cat eagerly sniffs at the poor little prisoner; Robinetta³ feeding her bird, perched on her shoulder; and Dorinda⁴ sadly crying over her pet's body by the side of its empty cage; the little shepherdess wreathing her lamb's neck with flowers, or leaning on the stile with her crook, while her lambs crop the may-bloom in the hedgerow. Nor are the boys of this class less characteristic, if less charming, than

¹ Now Lord Hertford's.² Belonging to Lord Lansdowne.³ At Peckforton and Lord Lons-

dale's.

⁴ At Lord Lonsdale's, and in small at Frystone, Mr. Monckton Milnes's.

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the girls, whether we take the honest, sturdy little street-salesman, with his cabbage-nets on a pole, and the little sister looking over his shoulder timidly, but with faith in the brother's protection; or the little gipsy vagrant¹ whom Sir Joshua had picked up, perhaps, dabbling in the kennels of Hedge Lane, or offering his link at the President's coach-window as he drove home from a late sitting at the Club, or an evening party at Mrs. Montague's. Struck by the boy's golden-brown skin, bright black eyes, and knowing smile, Sir Joshua tells him to come—the next disengaged morning—to the great house in the centre of the west side of the Fields, where he will travestie him into a blackguard Cupid or Mercury,² and put him on the canvas besides in his own gipsy rags. Then the streets furnish more refined faces, which he can turn to account as piping shepherds, contemplative youths, stripling St. Johns, and angels of the Nativity. It was in the streets, doubtless, that he picked up his famous Irish beggarman, White, formerly a paviour, now sitting for Ugolino. Thanks to Sir Joshua, White is now in such vogue as a model, that he can hardly find hours in the week for sitting. He has engagements at once, to sit to Mr. Hone in St. James's Place, as St. Paviarius; as a bandit or smuggler to Mr. Mortimer in the Piazzas; as an Apostle, to Mr. West in Panton Square; as a philosopher, to Mr. William Pars, A.R.A., in Percy Street. Such jobs are well enough, but he'd rather go back to begging, he declares, than stand for stingy Mr. Nollekens' bustos,—he pays so badly.³

¹ Both at Knole.² See these pictures at Knole.³ Smith's 'Life of Nollekens.'

White sat for the hair of Dr. Johnson's bust.—Ed.

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1773, ÆTAT. 50. A WEEK'S ENGAGEMENTS.

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As a sample of Sir Joshua's life at this time, let us follow him through a week's engagements, filling up the outlines furnished by the pocket-book as we best can.

Monday, March 1.—“The boy” comes at ten; probably for the youngest son but one of the Ugolino group, which Sir Joshua is finishing for the exhibition. At eleven arrives an Irish gentleman, the Right Hon. Luke Gardiner,¹ now in London for his marriage with Miss Elizabeth Montgomery, one of the three beautiful daughters of Sir William Montgomery; of whom another is engaged to Viscount Townshend (lately succeeded in the Lord Lieutenancy of Ireland by Lord Harcourt), and the third to the Hon. John Beresford. All three marriages are to come off this year, or next at latest. The upshot of Mr. Gardiner's sittings, besides his own picture,² was a commission to paint the three beautiful sisters, who began to sit to Sir Joshua in May. Mr. Gardiner wished, as he says in the letter introducing Miss Montgomery, to have their portraits “representing some emblematical or historical subject.” Hence the picture, now in the National Gallery, of the three young ladies wreathing a term of Hymen with flowers. If an allegory was to be employed—and we see it was the patron's suggestion, and not the painter's—there could not be one more appropriate to these three beautiful girls, standing hand in hand on the threshold of marriage, with the future so bright before them. No other sitter is appointed

¹ Afterwards Lord Mountjoy, and first Earl of Blessington: killed at the head of his regiment at the battle of

Ross in 1798.

² Now at Petworth.—Ed.

for Monday; but at seven in the evening there is the Academy lecture, which Sir Joshua never misses—though Mr. Penny could hardly teach him much about painting. There is a reminder “To speak for a painter—Lord Pembroke,” which hint we may eke out as we please; either Lord Pembroke had some work for a painter, and had asked Sir Joshua to find him one—a kind of commission the President very often had; or there was some painter in whom Lord Pembroke was interested, and had asked Sir Joshua to speak in favour of the man, or his pictures, to the Academicians whom he might meet at the lecture.

On Tuesday, between nine and eleven, Sir Joshua, strange to say, is not to be found in his painting-room. He is “in the City,” no doubt busy with one of his investments; perhaps getting rid of some of his India stock, which keeps falling as the struggle between the Company and the Government grows more and more fierce. He is back in Leicester Fields at eleven, to receive Mr. Gardiner, and perhaps the design for the picture of the three Irish beauties is already discussed. But Sir Joshua has an appointment with Mr. Knapp for twelve, so Mr. Gardiner’s sitting is interrupted, but resumed at two, and probably continues till four o’clock strikes, and Sir Joshua lays aside his palette for the day. As he has no engagement to dinner abroad, he very likely receives one of his pleasant unceremonious scrambling parties at five, followed by a rubber or loo-table, with talk, and tea presided over by his nieces, Mary Palmer and her younger sister, Sir Joshua’s pet, “Offy,” who has lately been sitting for

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1773, ÆTAT. 50. A WEEK'S ENGAGEMENTS.

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the Strawberry Girl, but thinks her uncle has made her far too much of a child for fourteen. Between cards and conversation, the guests sit late, and twelve has struck before steady Ralph Kirkley has lighted the last of the party out, and barred and bolted the house. Such precautions are not unnecessary in Leicester Fields, when the neighbourhood swarms with loose characters, and supplies a large proportion of their cases to Sir John Fielding and Justice Welch at Bow Street.

On Wednesday, at ten, the boy comes to sit for "the Shepherd,"¹ and Sir Joshua either keeps him till four, or works on his Ugolino, or his Strawberry Girl, or the portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland, or passes a last golden glaze over his group of the beautiful young actress Mrs. Hartley, as a Nymph, carrying on her shoulder her boy, vine-wreathed, for an infant Bacchus.² And so the moments fly till it is time to dress for a four o'clock dinner at the British Coffee House, where Sir Joshua has appointed to meet a party, Sir Thomas Mills, probably, Cumberland, Adam Drummond, Richard Burke (now home on leave from his post at Grenada), and perhaps Caleb Whitefoord and Dr. Barnard. They adjourn to Drury Lane at half-past six. The play is Home's new tragedy of 'Alonzo.' This is the third or author's night; when the proceeds of the house, after deducting the

¹ This I believe to have been the Piping Shepherd, one of Sir Joshua's small exquisite fancy pictures, though it remained on his hands at his death, and was bought at Lady Thomond's sale by Sir George Phillips.

² Now in the possession of Mr. Bentley, of 7, Portland Place. Golden in colour, sweet in expression, and perfect in preservation.—ED.

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expenses,' go into the pockets of the author, who, besides, often realised by the sale of his copyright to the publishers as much as he received from the theatre. Mr. Home's 'Douglas' has made him a reputation, and the house is crowded. 'Alonzo' is a terrible specimen of the heaviest legitimate tragedy, with all the stock motives and machinery: a secret marriage between Alonzo (Reddish) and Ormisinda (Mrs. Barry); a mistake of jealousy by Alonzo, and a retirement from the world in disgust; a son, Alberto (Clinch), brought up in ignorance of his father; in Act V. a combat between Alonzo and Alberto, interrupted by Ormisinda —distracted, in white satin — who stabs *herself* to prevent the unnatural duel, and is followed by Alonzo, who stabs *himself*; both suicides being without the slightest rational ground that I can discover. Thanks to Mrs. Barry's pathetic tones and lovely face, and the reputation of 'Douglas,' these five acts of doleful declamation ran their eleven nights, a fair success for that day. But in spite of respect for Mr. Home, admiration for Mrs. Barry, and excellent breeding, one imagines Sir Joshua hiding an occasional yawn, and very thankful when they came to the killing, and he could get away to bed; or, likelier still, to a merry supper at the British or the Turk's Head.

Thursday is blank of appointments for either sitter or model. But there is plenty of work in retouching and finishing. At four there is a "dinner at home," but the party breaks up in time for Sir Joshua to attend Mrs. Ord's *conversazione* at eight. Mrs. Ord is

¹ Then 60*l.* at Drury Lane. Happy times those for managers and authors!

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the clever wife of a wealthy Northumbrian gentleman, and, though only a surgeon's daughter, has made her way to the front rank of the Blues, among whom she holds a place immediately after Mrs. Montague, Mrs. Walsingham, and Mrs. Vesey. Here Sir Joshua is certain to meet the chief literary lions of the day, Johnson roaring supreme among them, and occasionally turning upon a rebellious or offending brother lion and rending him; a bishop or two—very probably Shipley of St. Asaph, or Newton of Bristol, who, grave divine and writer on the Prophecies as he was, had not thought it wrong, even before he won his preferment, to travel all the way from Grosvenor Square to Goodman's Fields to see young Garrick; a sprinkling of lawyers and doctors, Dr. Warren or Dr. Brocklesby, Mr. Pepys, or young Mr. Jones, who has lately published his poems from the Persian. There will drop in, besides, during the evening, some of the fashionable wits and noblemen who mix with the literary society of the time—Topham Beauclerc, Lord Palmerston, Lord Lucan, Lord Mulgrave, Lord Ossory; and even George Selwyn may saunter in like a man walking in his sleep, and drop out one of his *mots*, of which the pungency is doubled by the languid gravity of the speaker. More formidable than the gentlemen is the closely packed circle of ladies, in high *têtes*,—crowned, most of them, with queer caps, or lappets, or other fabrics of lace and ribbon,—long stomachers, ample ruffles, and broad stiff skirts of substantial flowered silk or rich brocade. There will be Mrs. Montague, with her thin clever face, her grand air, her bright eyes, and her blaze of diamonds, talking formally and pompously, but neither unkindly

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nor sillily, to the Duchess of Portland and Lady Spencer; flanked perhaps by Mrs. Chapone, with a face like a Gorgon, but a model of the proprieties and decorums, and an oracle, as having sat at the feet of Richardson; or Mrs. Carter, the lady who knows Greek, and has translated Epictetus, and corresponds with masters of colleges and bishops; or Mrs. Lenox, another literary lady, but less learned than Mrs. Carter—for *her* translations of the Greek are through the French—and less favoured by fortune than most about her. She is just now in great distress, as the apartments which have been granted her in Somerset House are about to be pulled down in the course of Sir William Chambers's projected rebuilding, and she will pour out her griefs and fears in Sir Joshua's sympathising ear, or to Johnson, who, tyrant as he is to the strong, has always a kindly heart for the weak and suffering.

But the younger and cheerfuller part of the society edge away, we may be sure, from this deep-blue section of Mrs. Ord's circle, and gather rather where flighty, deaf, and short-sighted Mrs. Vesey rattles out her incomparable Irish bulls and unconscious blunders with imperturbable good humour: or where—metal more attractive still—Mrs. Thrale (in spite of bankruptcy hanging over her husband's head) bandies epigrams and quotations with the wittiest and most bookish of the men, and rivals the most attractive of the women by the charms of her slight active figure, her bright black eyes, white teeth, and animated, if rather marked, features: or where Mrs. Cholmondeley, by her badinage and her beauty, reminds those who knew her lovely and witty sister, Peg Woffington, of that charming woman.