

ACT I. Scene 1.

The best parlour. The candles are lighted, but a strong glow from the Sunset comes in through the window.

Enter Sarah, holding a large key in her hand. Letitia follows stealthily. Sarah goes to a tall closed cupboard by the side of the fireplace and puts the key in the lock. Letitia steps forward and grasps Sarah's outstretched arm.

L. You shall not have them.

S. (angrily) Indeed I will. (turns the key and pulls open the door, disclosing a hanging cupboard with a shelf above, both empty).

L. (disparingly) They are gone! Oh, they are gone!

S. They never were there!

L. But I saw them put there last night.

S. (angrily) You could not. What do you know about Mother's best tablecloths? She said that she put them there six weeks ago; but I knew she had not.

L. Oh, drat your mother's tablecloths. I was not looking for them. It was the paints.

S. The paints?

L. Yes, the paints, the pencils, the palette. (S. stares at her in bewilderment). Listen, last night my father brought down for Thomas a lot of painting materials.

S. Oh yes.- My father asked him to.

L. Oh, there were such a lot. There was a great big piece of canvas (raising ~~herself~~ herself on her tiptoes) it was nearly as tall as I am, and it was broad (looks

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round for something to compare it to). Oh, it was so broad, it was far broader than you are.

S. Humph.

L. (quickly) and then there were pencils and colours; Oh, such wonderful colours, all in tiny little bags. I showed them to Tom and we opened some of them: - vermillions and carmines far brighter than rouge. Then I asked him to let me have some to colour my cheeks with.

S. and what happened?

L. (diffidently) He told me he could make my cheeks far brighter than any rouge would, and I asked him how
(a long pause)

S. Then what did he do?

L. Oh - he was most unpolite. He - he - he put his arms round my neck and he - he - kissed me.

S. Why did you not box his ears and tell him to go?

L. I could not, he is so big and strong. He embraced me so tightly that I could not move my arms. I have never been so hugged before. It felt - it felt -

S. (contemptuously) just as though you were wearing a pair of new stays and had laced them over tightly. But you had a mouth, why did not you tell him to stop?

L. I could not open it. Whenever I tried to part my lips, he pressed his to mine and kissed me so fast and furiously, I was just helpless. But you know it was not really improper, because he is only a boy of 14.

S. But he is as big as a man and he acts just like a man.

L. That is what made it so nice. If his coat was cut

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differently and he had buckles on his shoes, (diffidently) - and he had silk small clothes and stockings, he would make a regular beau. But then he is such an original. Do you know what he did after he had kissed me?

S. Wiped his lips?

L. No indeed. Just as I was thinking I should swoon in his arms, he suddenly took me by the shoulders, pushed me away at arm's length and, looking me in the face, cried "Your cheeks are like blushing roses, and colours flow in and out of them as though the wind was blowing the petals; I must paint your portrait; I will begin it now.

S. Did he?

L. No. Mr. Gainsborough came and took hold of him by the nape of his neck; - I thought he would wrench poor Thomas's head of,- He cried "No, no, Tommy, my boy", you shan't have a chance of touching your paints until you come out of school to-morrow, or else you will be playing truant all day. Put them away at once!" He made Tom stow everything into the cupboard; then locked the door and took away the key. Poor Tom looked so overcome that I nearly shed tears myself. He thought I was doing it on account of the portrait and he whispered to me "Never mind, Letty, I will paint you by candle light when I get home from school and I will make your eyes shine brighter than the candles."

S. They would look just like cat's eyes.

L. But who has taken the painting things away? It must have been Mr. Gainsborough!

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- S. No, you may wager your life it was Tom. He would not leave new colours and canvas without getting hold of them at the earliest opportunity. I expect he has played truant from school and has been spending the day in the wood.
- L. The wretch - the wicked wretch, playing truant from school!
(pause) And not asking me to go with him. I will never forgive him - never - never.
(footsteps heard on the pavement outside. S. rushes to the window and looks out, then turns to the cupboard and hastily locks the door).
- S. Hist. Here comes my Uncle. For Heavens sake say nothing to him. He is Tom's schoolmaster and would flog him within an inch of his life if he knew he had been playing truant again. Last time he wacked him so that he sprained his arm and Tom could not sit down for a week afterwards.

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(Enter Mrs. Gainsborough carrying a tablecloth followed by the Rev. Humphrey Burrows, Mr. and Mrs. Dupoint, Humphrey Gainsborough, with a serving girl in the rear.)

Mrs. G. (handing tablecloth to Sarah) I have found the cloth.

You girls lay this table for supper. (Turns to the Rev. B.) What were you saying, Brother?

(The two girls lay the table, H.G. assisting them and being chided for putting things in the wrong places. The servant girl walks round the table with a big dish which she puts down at intervals and takes up again.

Mr. and Mrs. D. sit down).

Rev. B. I have come on a very serious errand. I want to re-monstrate with your husband for allowing Tom to be so frequently absent from school. The boy is getting a dunce. For, when he does come, he spends nearly all his time in disfiguring the lesson books belonging to himself and his companions with silly drawings. The only thing he can do well is writing. He can write better than I can myself.

Mrs. G. But that is wonderful, brother.

Rev. B. Pooh, writing is nothing. Men of the highest intellect are always bad writers. I am so myself. To-day I intended to give Tom a good flogging to stimulate him to better work. And lo, instead of Master Tom turning up, I get this letter from his father. (pulls a document from his pocket and reads aloud) "Dear and Reverend Sir, I would ask you to excuse Tom from his lessons to-day, as I

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want him to write some letters for me. Your affectionate brother, John Gainsborough".

Mrs.G. Well, that is very curious. Tom wanted to stay away to-day, because we had visitors. But John said he was to to school whatever happened.

Rev.B. (handing letter to her) Well, there's his letter, read it for yourself, I can swear to his handwriting.

Mrs.G. (takes and glances over it) That's John's writing, sure enough. (Turns to the Rev.B. and Mr. D.) Oh, you men, always promising something and then immediately going and doing the direct opposite. Won't I have it in for John when he comes home. And he's due now. It's getting quite dark. (turns to Sarah) You had better light the candles, dear.

Sarah (aside) Poor father. Won't he get a scolding, I can see it in Mother's eye.

S.G. (aside) Isn't Mr. Gainsborough going to get it; Missus can be a tartar when she likes. (Enter John Gainsborough smiling; everybody stares at him. The Rev.B. standing stiffly, frowning heavily, Mrs. G. holding letter.

J.G. Welcome all; I hope you have all got good appetites. (advances to his wife to kiss her)

Mrs.G. Oh John! To think that after all you said you should have written this.

Rev.B. I am grieved that you should encourage Tom in his idle habits by allowing him to stay away from school. ~~XXXXX~~.

Mrs. G. I can never believe what you say again, John.

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J.G. (very testily) What on earth have I done now?

Mrs.G. You know you promised.

J.G. Promised what?

Mrs.G. You said that whatever happened, Tom should go to school to-day and then you write this for him (hands him the letter).

J.G. (takes it and reads, scratching his head in bewilderment) But I didn't write this. I've never even seen it before.

Mrs.G. Fie, John. It's your own handwriting. I could recognise it anywhere.

Rev.B. The flourish in your signature is unmistakable.

J.G. It looks my own hand, sure enough. But I tell you I've no recollection whatever of it. Tom must have got hold of some old letter and have used it again.

Rev.B. Impossible. I always burn your letters directly I receive them. (Takes hold of letter) And look, there's to-day's date written on it most prominently.

J.G. I tell you, I have never seen it before. I did not give Tom leave to stay away from school. I was so determined that he should go to-day that I locked up all his new painting things in this cupboard so that he should not be tempted by them. You shall see them for yourselves.
(produces key from his pocket, goes to cupboard and with a great flourish inserts key and opens the door, standing on one side, so that all the others can see). Look!

S.G. (thrusting forward before the rest) Lawks a mussy, there's nothing there.

Let. It's empty.

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S. The cupboard is quite bare.

Mr.D. Where have they gone?

Mrs.G. Oh John, to think that you are trying to deceive us again.

Rev.B. I regret that you have stooped to falsehood to disguise your support of your son's idleness.

J.G. I tell you I did lock the things up. Tom must have got another key and taken them. I believe that he has written that letter himself. Where is he? Bring him here!

Mrs.G. He has not come home yet.

J.G. (keeps silent for a moment, reflecting; the others all watch him) I have it. Tom will have been in the wood. Now it's dark he will be coming home and he will certainly try to put back these painting things without letting us know. Let us put out the lights and hide ourselves, so that he will think the room empty. We will see what he will do, and I wager he will convince you by his actions that he is alone to blame. Quick! Quick! He may be back at any moment. (blows out the candles nearest him, the others follow suit. The candles are extinguished, but a strong light from the afterglow comes in through the window, leaving the sides of the room in deep shadow.)

J.G. Now hide yourselves, hurry, hurry. Not a word now.

S.G. Lawks a mussy me. I am frightened.

J.G. Silence, girl.

(everybody hides. There are faint cries of "Oh, you stop, you mustn't. Dont. You are standing on my foot.")

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And louder: "Hush, hush". Voice of Tom, coming through the window; at first faintly and then gradually louder.)

T.G. (singing) No more my Harriet, of Polly no more,
Nor all the bright beauties that charm'd me
before
My heart for a slave to gay Venus I've sold
And barter'd my freedom for ringlets of gold
I'll throw down my pipe, and neglect all my
flocks
And will sing to my lass with the golden looks.

Thank Heaven, they must be all in the back parlour, or ~~xxx~~ else my singing would have brought some of their heads squalling out of the window for me. Now to put the things away. (His head appears above the windowframe, silhouetted against the light. He reaches over the table and drops bags of paint and brushes on the side nearest the audience. Then the easel. He carefully puts the picture between the table and the wall; lastly he scrambles in through the window himself, standing on the table).

Mrs.G. (in an agonised voice) Thomas! You are standing on my best tablecloth in your dirty boots! (Tom hesitates a moment, then jumps down into the room).

J.G. Bother! Mother, you have spoilt everything. Lights! Bring the lights!

(Enter one or two with lighted candles. They light the other candles and in a moment the stage is flooded with light. Thomas is revealed standing in front of the table. The others are grouped at the sides of the stage, looking at him.

J.G. (seizing Tom by the arm. The latter looks round hopelessly

to each speaker in turn).

J.G. Why have you been playing truant?

Mrs.G. Did your father excuse you from school to-day?

Rev.B. (holding out letter) Is this letter in your father's handwriting?

T.G. (desperately) Can't you see it's in father's handwriting.

Rev.B. (holding up his hands) There! I was convinced it was so.

Mrs.G. John! John! And you said you didn't.

J.G. I did not write it, I tell you.

T.G. (more confidently) Don't you remember writing it? Er - er - just before you got into the trap.

J.G. No! I remember nothing whatever about it.

Mrs.G. Poor man. His memory is going. Every week during the last six months he has promised to buy me a new bonnet and I have not got it yet.

Rev.B. There's nothing more to be said. We must ascribe it all to a lapse of memory, and devoutly hope that further lapses will not recur.

J.G. (while the others are speaking, keeps repeating): I did not write it. I tell you I did not write it. (Tom stands in an attitude of injured innocence).

Mr.D. (with the air of one trying to end a painful episode) Get out your canvas Tom and show us what you've been doing. (Tom goes behind the table and begins raising the picture very carefully)

Mrs.G. It's going to be a cold night. Close the windows, Sarah. (S. goes to the other side of the table to close window)
Mrs.G. turns to Mrs. D.) You and your good man shall

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Mrs.G. sleep warm to-night. I am going to get out my best warming pan to heat your bed. (goes and takes down warming pan from wall). It wants dusting like everything else nowadays. (she begins dusting the outside and then opens the lid) Gracious goodness! What are all these letters here.

(pulls out a number of letters) And they are all in John's handwriting too. (takes up one of the letters in her hand and reads it aloud) "Dear and Reverend Sir, please excuse Tom's absence from school yesterday, as he had a rash all over him and I was afraid it was measles. Your affectionate brother, John Gainsborough". Tom has never had a rash, I can't understand it. (begins turning over the letters) Why, they are all excuses for Tom staying away from school. (Hands them round). (Turns to J.G.)

When did you write all these?

J.G. I tell you I have never written any of them. (strides up to Tom, who has just handed his picture to G.D.. siezes hold of Tom across the table.) Tom, these are your work, Confess, or else I will give you the greatest flogging you have ever had in your life.

(the others each starts reading a letter, with the exception of the servant girl, who holds hers in her hand hopelessly staring at it.)

S.G. Lawks a mussy, but what be I to do with this, I can't read.

Mrs.D. R. & dear Sir, please excuse Tom's absence from school yesterday, you birched him so severely the day before, that the poor boy could not sit down to do his lessons. Your affectionate brother, J.G.

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- S. R. & d. S., Please excuse Tom's absence from school yesterday, but he was so afflicted with the shivering ague that his teeth were clattering ~~kika~~ together like a pair of castanets. Y. a. b., J.G.
- L. R. & d. S., Please excuse Tom's absence from school yesterday, but he had a bad colic ~~yesterday~~ and was so doubled up with griping pains that he could not move a step. Y. a. b., J.G.,
- H.G. R. & d. S., Please excuse Tom's absence from school yesterday, but I ~~have~~ kept him at home to make an inventory of my stock in trade of shrouds. Y. a. b., J.G.
- Rev.B. R. & d. S., Please excuse Tom being away from school, I kept him at home yesterday to help getting in the wool. Y. a. b., J.G.
- S.G. (goes about thrusting her letter to everyone in turn) Lawks a mussy, please read this. I don't know my alphabet. (J.G., in the meanwhile is grasping hold of Tom, calling out to him "confess, confess".)
- Tom G. I did write these letters, but I never showed any of them. (a sigh). I didn't think they were quite good enough to pass.
- J.G. And you wrote that first letter?
- T.G. Yes.
- J.G. You wretched boy; you accused me of having done it.
- T.G. I didn't; I only asked you if you had done it. There is no harm in asking a thing.
- J.G. (Turning round and facing the company) Didn't I tell you; Tom has forged the lot. The boy is born to be hanged.

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(Tom, finding that his father has let him go, steals to the window and opens it; he is just scrambling through, when the Rev. B. rushes up and siezing him by the leg pulls him back over the table on to the floor, while G.D. is examining Tom's picture)

Rev.H.B. There is no escape for the wicked! Wretched boy, you have not only played truant, you have committed forgery and theft. If I gave information to the justices of these heinous crimes, they would find you guilty and sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you are dead.

Mrs.G. (darts forward and siezing Tom by the other arm, tries to drag him away from the Rev.B) My boy, my boy, they shall not hang you!

Rev.H.B. (keeping hold of Tom) You mistake me. I do not intend to denounce him to the justices. I will punish him myself and as we are told not to let the Sun go down on our wrath, I will administer chastisement at once. (Beckons Humphry). Humphry, run across and fetch my big birchrod from the school. (Humphry leaves)

Letitia. (running up to J.G.) Don't let him punish Tom, Mr. Gainsborough. Don't, don't! (she slyly beckons to S. who runs up too).

G.D. (who has been examining Tom's picture, props it up on a chair then retires backwards, looking at it) Wonderful! Wonderful!

S.G. (nearly knocked over by him, pops her head under his arm) Lawks a mussy, it's only some silly trees.

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J.D. What's the matter now? I've told you I did not write the letters.

Rev.B. (turning to him and still keeping hold of Tom) We know that and I am about to administer chastisement to the wicked culprit.

G.D. Come, look what he's done. It's wonderful, Wootton or Scott could not have painted better. He deserves a reward, not punishment for what he has done.

J.G. (looking at picture) Prodigious! I had no idea that the boy could do such work. I said that Tom would be hanged. I am wrong, he is a genius.

G.D. Let him come back with me to London. I will take care of him while he learns art. Not that he requires much teaching.

T.G. (endeavouring to shake himself loose) Oh, let me go, Father. I shall never be any good at school. I love painting and drawing. If I could only study them, I would work like the Devil.

Rev.B. You are doing that already with your nefarious misdeeds.

T.G. Oh, do let me go.

G.D. I will be responsible for him.

(Enter Humphry with birch which he hands to Rev.B. who, keeping hold of his collar with his left hand, takes the birch in his right.)

Rev.B. Wretched boy. You shall not escape the just punishment of your misdeeds by your pretended love for art. Prepare to receive your chastisement.

J.G. (stepping forward and putting his hand on Tom's shoulder)

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J.G. It is his father who has the right to say whether he shall be punished or not.

Rev.B. Not so. As his schoolmaster I have the higher authority; I am his spiritual pastor and master.

(Letitia casts herself at J.G.'s feet, bringing S. down with her)

Let. Oh, do not let Tom be punished.

S. Don't.

J.G. I take your authority away. Tom is no longer your pupil. He is not coming back to school. He shall go to London.

T.G. (shaking himself free and coming forward) Hurrah!
Good-bye to all these silly lessons. I shall study art and shall become a great painter like Van Dyck.

Curtain.