

Act I., Scene 2. (Time five years later)

The garden of John Gainsborough's house at Sudbury.

The garden is at the back of the house only a projecting portion of which, containing a door, is visible on the extreme left. The far end of the garden facing the spectator is bordered by a low hedge, fence, or wall, with a gate in the middle, beyond this is a country lane with woodlands on the far side. To the right of the gate are a couple of trees. In front of these is a large table, heaped up with woollen shrouds. John Gainsborough is discovered looking over these, and occasionally beating them with a long thin stick in a desultory manner, his eyes being more fixed on the lane than on his work, while the trees more or less conceal him from any passers-by.

J. G. (soliloquizing in a serio-comic manner): War!
war! bloody war! Fifty thousand wild Highlanders advancing over the Border to destroy, ravish and murder. Millions of English-men shivering in their beds anticipating having their throats cut, and yet not a man among them is provident enough to order a shroud in readiness for his decease. (Holds up a shroud and pats it) It's most disheartening. Hundreds of corpses being made in Scotland and all these superfine shrouds in readiness, yet people are so busy killing one another that they can't find time or money to give their victims genteel funerals (Puts shroud on table with a bang. Sees moth on another) Ah! there's a moth. (Makes a grab for it and catches it between his finger and thumb and holding out his hand crushes it) What a pity it is that some of my fat apoplectic neighbours can't be popped

off in the same way, they're several of them who would have died long ago but they are so mean that they grudge the money for their funerals. Here's someone coming I'll look out and see if it's one of the likely cases. (Ensconces himself behind the trees) 'Tis most disappointing. I was hoping to see some tottering invalid with death marked on his countenance, instead of which is a young and charming girl, her face beams with health and vitality. I'll have another look before she passes (Pops his head out again from behind the trees. Margaret Burr in a hood dashes by hurriedly) Had I been thirty years younger I should have liked to have followed her and found out where she is staying. Hello! Here comes a young spark tailing after her. (Peers forward to get a better view) Damn me if it's not my own son Tom. What is he doing here. (He conceals himself as much as possible. Tom appears, passing along the other side of the fence. He carries a bundle of painting materials and walks quickly with head averted, as he comes level with Gainsborough the latter springs forward and catches him by the shoulder. Tom turns round and faces his father looking very taken aback)

J. G. (Still retaining his grasp of Tom): Hullo Master Tom. You stay away from Sudbury for five years, and then pass your father's house without so much as saying "How do you do?". (As he speaks he draws Tom on the other side of the fence

towards the gate).

T. G. (trying to escape from his father's grasp): I was coming in very shortly Sir, - but - er - er - (hesitates and then continues fluently) Someone has gone off with my luggage and I was following on to try and secure it. I must haste Sir - Please let me loose - Else it will be gone past recovery. (Tries to free himself).

J. G. (Retaining his grasp. Aside): He means his baggage and a mighty pretty one she was too. But Tom is too young for love affairs. I must keep them apart (Aloud) I have been watching in the garden all morning and not an atom of luggage has gone by.

T. G. (Confusedly): I - er - wasn't following the luggage (more fluently) I heard that it got mixed up with the lady's and had been taken away by her servant, so I was trying to overtake her to find out where it was gone.

J. G.: But no lady has passed this way.

T. G.: She was quite young - a girl in fact.

J. G.: No wench of any kind has passed.

T. G.: But I saw her Sir. I was following her. If you had not stopped me I should have overtaken her by now.

J. G. (Pulling Tom more strenuously towards the gate): You have caught a touch of the sun, my lad. You are imagining things. Come in and I'll give you a glass of rum to restore you. (Drags him through the gate) Poor fellow you had better

have a wet handkerchief round your head. Come this way. (Tom drops his bundle on the grass while his father draws him to the house and goes in).

T. G. (Sotto voce): Can he be speaking the truth? I would have sworn that she came past here. She seemed beautiful - almost too beautiful to be real.

(J. G. comes out with a chair and touches Tom on the arm. Tom without properly turning round thrusts out a hand. J. G. puts the chair into it)

T. G. (Holding it with a bewildered air): Whatever is this for? I thought you were bringing the rum.

J. G.: You must sit down to recover yourself. (Puts down the chair/on the ground in the shade and forces Tom into it. Exit into the house again.)

T. G. (Getting up from his chair and unconsciously speaking aloud): If I shut my eyes I can still see her. Am I acquiring the faculty of imagining images of wonderful loveliness and recreating them at will. (Shuts his eyes and assumes an ecstatic attitude. John Gainsborough has been standing in the doorway with a glass of rum in his hand, listening).

J. G. (Sotto voce): It seems a case of love at first sight. I must put a damper on his ardour. (Retreats into the door again and emerges with a wet cloth. He steals up behind Tom and suddenly wraps it round his forehead.)

T. G.: Oh! What the devil are you doing?

J. G.: It's only a wet bandage to cool your fevered brow. You must keep in the shade. (Draws him back to the chair again and pushes him down on it) Now keep still there and I will bring the rum. (Darts into the house and returns with a glass of rum which Tom takes and sips) How are things in London?

T. G.: Fine! Sir. I have wonderful prospects.

J. G.: Oh damn prospects. What are the certainties?

T. G.: I have taken a studio.

J. G. (Ironically): That's a certainty, truly. A certain expense. How is the money coming in?

T. G.: Money is very tight unfortunately. Everybody is keeping hold of what they have got, owing to the Jacobite invasion.

J. G.: It's the same here. But what are your wonderful prospects?

T. G.: I have painted a picture of the Charterhouse which the governors of the Foundling Hospital have accepted.

J. G.: How much have they paid for it?

T. G.: It's a gift Sir. All the great artists are giving their pictures to the Hospital. Hogarth, Wilson, Hayman, Scott, Highmore, Hudson, Monamy, Ramsay, Moser - in short every painter who is at all known. It's a great compliment to a young artist like myself to have it accepted.

J. G.: Compliments cut no pie-crusts. What cash have you taken since you set up your studio?

T. G.: I am owed for several portraits. The money is quite safe, but it is impossible to collect it now and my landlord is pressing for his rent. I was hoping Sir, seeing that I have cost you nothing since I was fourteen, you would let me have some cash to see me through the hard times.

J. G.: I would give you some if I had it, but I can't raise a farthing. The only thing I can give you is a shroud (Tosses one over to him) You can have as many as you like.

T. G.: But Sir, a mere hundred pounds would set me up.

J. G.: I can't do it. You may have as many shrouds as you like. Perhaps you may raise money by selling them. I can't. (Moodily walking up and down cogitating).

T. G. (Takes up a shroud and fingers it. Sotto voce): Confound it! Does he expect me to give up painting and become an undertaker.

J. G. (Sotto voce): Evidently Tom has not put by a farthing. Painting seems as poor a business as shroud making. The fellow is good looking, he should get hold of a rich wife and then he would be set up for life. (Turns to Tom. Aloud) Have you ever thought of marrying, Tom?

T. G.: No Sir. I can't afford to keep a wife.

J. G.: If you kept your eyes open, you might find a

wife who would keep you.

T. G. (In a very dignified attitude): I shall marry no woman whom I do not love.

J. G.: That ought to be no obstacle. Before you left home you used to fall in love with every girl you met. Sometimes two or three in the same week.

T. G.: I have reformed now. I have other things to think of. I scarcely so much as look at a girl.

J. G. (Aside): The young liar. He speaks with so much assurance that if I had not seen him scurrying after that girl this morning I might have believed him. (Aloud) Look here. I have heard of a beautiful girl with two hundred pounds a year of her own.

T. G.: Does she live in Sudbury?

J. G.: No in London. I have not seen her yet, but I can get you an introduction from her half-brother. (Aside) I had best not tell Tom that he was my commercial traveller and had to fly from Sudbury because they thought that he was a Jacobite spy.

T. G. (Walking up and down as though in deep cogitation): She sounds very much of a pig in a poke. (Stops and strikes an attitude) But I would have you know Sir that I cannot love to order and I will marry no one whom I do not love.

(Sounds of loud voices approaching along the road. Both turn to see what it is. Tom taking the opportunity to pull off

the bandage from his head. A party of villagers armed with pitchforks, hayforks and flails come walking along the road, as they reach the gate the leader of the party stands in front of it and the others gather about him.)

Leader: Have you see a wench go along the road?

T. G. (Aside): My girl. I bet my life. Why are they after her?

J. G.: What kind of a wench?

Leader: A Scotch girl. She comes down on the coach last night with her pockets full of money and is spying out the land for the Pretender.

2nd Villager: Ay, she be a Jacobite spy.

T. G.: What would a Jacobite spy do here?

3rd Villager: 'Tis said that fifty thousand French are going to land at Harwich and Prince Charlie and his wild Highlanders will meet them at Sudbury and then go on to London.

4th Villager: Ay she's come to spy out the land sure enough.

Villagers together: Ay, she's a Jacobite spy. Ay. Ay.

Leader: There's a hundred pound reward for catching a Jacobite spy.

Villagers: Ay. A hundred pounds.

T. G.: No girl has passed here. (Turns to J. G.) Has there father?

J. G.: No. Not a soul has passed all morning.

T. G.: Ah. I remember now. As I got off the coach I saw a girl.

Villagers (Disconnectedly): Ay. That would be her. Where did she go?

T. G.: She came in this direction.

Villagers: Ay. Ay. That would be her. The darned spy.

T. G.: And when she thought no one was looking. She ran back and sped along the road to Harwich.

About half the crowd (Disconnectedly): Lets get on to the Harwich Road. That would be the way.

Leader: I saw her come this way, and she's not passed back.

2nd V.: She's a witch.

3rd V.: Ay all Scotch girls are witches.

4th V.: She must be a witch. We've been following her all morning but whenever we try to get near her, she's gone.

2nd V.: Tis fearful to meddle with a witch.

Leader: Knock her on the head before she can cast a spell. Tis a hundred pounds reward dead or alive. Come on follow me.

2nd V.: To Harwich?

Leader: To the wood that's where I saw her going.

T. G.: You will have your journey for your pains. I tell you I saw her going to Harwich.

Leader: I'll believe my own eyes rather than yours. (turning to the others) Come on, who wants the hundred pounds, dead or alive! (goes on ahead the others following).

Villagers (Shouting as they go): Dead or alive. Dead. Dead.

(John Gainsborough stands by the fence watching them troop off, while Tom gathers his painting materials together and wraps them in the shroud, then hurries to the gate. He is passing through when his father sees him and tries to stop him.)

J. G.: Stop for heaven's sake.

T. G. (Shaking him off and moving out into the road): I am going. I must go. You shan't stop me.

J. G.: The girl will have escaped by now. If these yokels think that you have helped her and lost them their hundred pounds reward. They'll kill you without mercy and deem themselves patriots for doing so.

T. G.: Don't be alarmed. There's rain threatening and when it comes, it will soon drive them under cover. I shall try and do some painting before it commences. (Aside) She is gone to the woods. I will set up my easel where the three glades meet, she will inevitably pass there on her return.

J. G.: I know you are going after that girl. For God's sake don't interfere. Stop! Stop!

(Tom dashes off. John Gainsborough makes a half effort to follow him and then pauses.)

J. G.: He's gone too far. My old legs can never overtake him. God grant I don't see him brought back feet foremost. (He steps back and his eye lights on the pile of shrouds) Oh why did I give him that shroud. It will be a judgment on me for my light words about my neighbours if the first of the batch, which I was grumbling at not selling, should be the winding sheet of my own son.