"The Painter and the Lady"

(GAINSBOROUGH and the DUCHESS)

by

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The story opens in a modern picture gallery, moderne in fact, tubular chromium, appointments, stark functional architecture, etc.. The Duchess of Devonshire, 1940 model, stands with a companion before the Gainsborough portrait of her illustrious and historic predecessor. The present Duchess is as modern as the gallery in which she stands, is dressed in flying togs. It develops that she is to ferry planes to Africa in the present war, but has come up for a last look around at especially the pictures which have become a part of her since her marriage into her cousin's (the present Duke's) family. She tells her friend that she wants a last glimpse of the Gainsborough portrait—it always brings back to her the pearl-gray haze of the 18th Century. "It was a tranquil age," she goes on, "subtle and slow-moving tempo, grace and dignity, watered silks and lily fingers—" she looks ruefully at her own hand. "Killing, even was not mechanized; if done, it was by dueling swords or pistols which were as destructive compared to our modern slaughter as the tinkling of a music-box in the emerald dusk. There was something curiously intoxicating in an age where there was leisure to acclaim a great artist, when a musical composition or a great book could stir the whole civilized world. And in this world of elaborate and slowly moving beauty she," indicating the portrait, "Georgiana, Lady Spencer, afterward Duchess of Devonshire, fell in love with Thomas Gainsborough when she was nine years old......... Voice Fades.....
Dissolve In Gainsborough's studio in Chelsea. It is poorly furnished. Gainsborough is very young but old enough to be married. Georgiana is nine. She is dressed in the long skirts of childhood of the time, a ribbon about her waist, one in her piled up hair which is a mass of curls. She is exquisitely beautiful even then, large-eyed, wilful, essentially feminine. The fight between Gainsborough starts here and is to continue throughout their lives of loving each other against separation. They battle it out, now, as to whether she is to wear a straw, beribboned hat in posing for her picture. Angrily she throws it off. He is enraged, picks it up jams it upon his own head. She laughs hilariously. He grows quieter and serious, comes up to her, tells her that one day he will be great and that if he asks her then to pose with a small barrel over her head, she will be honoured to comply. She tosses her head. "My Lady Disdain," he calls her. She says that some day she will make a great marriage and then he will have to beg her to pose for her portrait instead of treating her as a naughty child. "What are you?" he inquires laughing at her "oldness". Demurely she informs him that she loves him. He howls with laughter. She goes on, undisturbed, "You will see. You have married a stupid, flat-souled wife, Mr. Gainsborough, and I shall have to make a rich marriage, but I shall always love you and you will always love me...to the end...we shall love...."

Quick shots of the marriage of the young Lady Georgiana to the old roué, the Duke of Devonshire...Gainsborough, moody and restless, attending the wedding.....and at home afterward, unable to paint, upbraided by his "flat-souled" wife for his sloth.....

Fade In Gainsborough studio, better furnished. The G- family his daughter Molly, fifteen, well-developed and in love with young Johann Fischer, oboe player in the Court orchestra, and his wife, bastard daughter of the Duke
of Bedford, devoted to G-- in a carping way, practical, thrifty and impatient with his temperament. She looks upon her husband's genius as merely something with which to pay bills.

Gainsborough has forbidden young Johann Fischer the house, forbidden Molly to see him. Molly pouts. Mrs. G-- concurs with G-- as Fischer is poor.

Gainsborough is unable to contain himself, his joy for long. The Duchess of Devonshire is coming to sit for her portrait, the child who told him so gravely, ten years ago, that they would always love one another. He knows this is true and is serene against the disapproval of his wife, but......the artist triumphing over the lover, he announces that he will show that upstart, Sir Joshua Reynolds, that BLACK can be the composition centre of a great picture (he has declared the reverse to be true). He will paint the Duchess in the large black hat which is the fashion of the day. His wife reminds him that her Grace will not like that as every eye will be drawn to the hat, not her countenance. Gainsborough retorts revealing his resentment of the fate which has married him to the thrifty, commonplace Mrs. G--; and the Duchess to the lands and wealth of the Duke. Mrs. G-- comes back that if he'd stick to landscapes, which with her small competence were bringing them a promise of security.....that he's let Joshua Reynolds make a fool of him with his taunts and challenges, was goaded into painting the Blue Boy when Sir Joshua declared blue could not be used as the centre composition of a picture. He retorts that the Blue Boy has had notice from the court and critics. But the mundane Mrs. G-- reminds him it hasn't sold!

Gainsborough drives his wife and Molly from the studio, tells them he has to endure Miss Foyle for an hour before Georgiana's arrival. In the dialogue here, it is shown that Miss Foyle, red-haired and owner of an exquisite harp which Gainsborough covets, is something of a problem.
She is in love with him. But he wants only the harp. He prepares his brushes and easel. Ménagères tote in the harp. Miss Foyle breezes in. As she poses, she tries every conceivable way to lure the man and artist whose one thought is the Duchess of Devonshire, with an occasional keen desire for the harp. Finally he pushes her away, plays the harp, is entranced with his own music, forgets her. She grows markedly seductive and poor Gainsborough with his passion for the harp, succumbs. He kisses her and.....the Duchess of Devonshire, the centre of his emotional life, comes in! She is early for her appointment and has given in to an urge to appear before time.

The duchess, despite her virginal luminosity which her marriage, in not a marriage, has not dispelled, is a fury of rage and disappointment. She turns on Miss Foyle who is glad to make her escape WITH HARP, carried by confused menervants and the Duchess turns her ex coriation upon poor Gainsborough who tries to explain he is only in love with the harp. (this is historically authentic. Gainsborough was a fine musician, playing the Viola de Gamba and composing). Georgiana persists in misunderstanding. G-- upbraids her for her marriage, selling herself to the disgusting old duke who cannot let the maidservants of her circle alone. She suddenly accepts the status of Miss Foyle and her harp, laughs uproariously which infuriates Gainsborough more than her former anger. And then, their talk gradually becomes nostalgic....if he and she could have been married but......he admits he has been trying to get Miss Karo Foyle's harp. Georgiana regrets that she cannot give him the finest harp in the world but her husband's inordinate pride would not bear the gossip engendered in London if she gave him one. Gainsborough chafes under her patronizing and the fight is on again. Finally Georgiana shrugs, tells him to get to work and that if her husband likes the portrait, he will be generous and G-- can buy two harps. Gainsborough
resents this, reminds her she is only the model, he is the artist. She grows tender, tells him his greatest inspiration will come from painting her portrait because they love each other.

Gainsborough is painting all the while the quarrel rages, jubilant over the animation he has aroused in her. And when she speaks of their love, he deftly catches the wistful quality of her expression. Eventually, the talk turns to the trivialities of the day. He throws down his brushes, tells her she has reverted from Georgiana to the Duchess of Devonshire...he will do no more today. They part formally, he as a husband, she as the wife and chattel of the old Duke.....Fade...

Montage of sittings for the portrait with excited talk among the fashionables of London about the new picture. In all sittings, fights between them are indicated....Hold on final sitting when Gainsborough, exhausted, steps back invites Georgiana to see the picture. She is tired, too, and capricious, today, complains that he has made her look too old...perhaps it's the hat! That's it! He must remove the hat! He protests that Joshua Reynolds has challenged him, he must show that mountebank. Georgiana doesn't care about Reynolds. He must take out the hat. He cools down, grows sarcastic, says, "Perhaps you would like me to take it out today, then tomorrow when you change your mind, paint it in again." Georgiana doesn't care a damn about the hat, merely wants to assert her power over him. The hat must come out!

In a final burst of rage, he grabs up a large brush smears black over the whole face of the portrait. The Duchess is horrified, then tearful, penitent. She knows in her heart he is a great artist. She is a bad, wicked woman..... Gainsborough lets her suffer, enjoying comforting her. She leaves........

Fade In..."Ranelagh" the fashionable Pavilion of the time where Court dances, masks, etc. are held. A garden party given by the Prince
of Wales, later to be George IV, is in progress. Moonlight over the
formal gardens give a shimmering, ineffable beauty to the grace and
dignity of the 18th Century dress and studied manners, a diffused charm
to the whole. On the Pavilion couples are dancing the graceful minuet;
other couples are making love. The young lovers, Molly Gainsborough and
Johann Fischer talk of the blackened portrait and Lord Aspen, the effem-
inate gossip of the circle overhears. He has been snubbed by the Duch-
ess so delights in spreading the report which become exaggerated into
scandal (G-- has probably beaten the Duchess, as well). This reaches
the ears of the Duke who garrumphs, tut-tuts and fumes. But he is no
match for his sprightly Duchess who also has heard the gossip, and stops
the dance to sing a duet with Gainsborough, "Most Beauteous Goddess of
the Night" (p. 194 Opera Score). The Prince of Wales hears the song,
falls madly for Georgiana, seeks her out, imploring her to let him serve
her in some way. She plays with him a bit, then tells him he will
please her if he can give his protection to young Molly and Johann. The
Prince eagerly agrees, halts festivities again, announces the engagement
of Molly and Johann "with our gracious permission."

Gainsborough is furious at this.

Lord Aspen maliciously tells the Duchess that now that she has
thwarted the artist xxxxxx about his daughter, Gainsborough will make
her ridiculous before all London. Georgiana believes that it is G-- who
has boasted of spoiling the portrait. She insults the poor artist before
the assemblage. The Duke feels he must engage G-- in a duel forthwith.
Gainsborough eagerly agrees. They all move to an open greensward. The
two fight and Gainsborough disarms the Duke but not before he has susta-
ed a wound in his right arm. He forces the Duke to drink a toast to
"all the serving maids" of England. Gainsborough throws his glass down
smashes it on the ground.
The Duchess, terrified that Gainsborough will be run out of London, his career ruined, seeks out the infatuated Prince and asks what she can do. The weak Prince says he cannot give his sanction to G-- unless he can produce another portrait, quickly, to circumvent the scandal. This is a bitter pill for the Duchess but she is thoughtful...as we fade...

It is early morning in the Duchess's boudoir. May Day songs are heard outside the window (chorus). The Duchess sings, "What Should I Do?" (p. 291 Opera Score) with the chorus as obligato.

The Duke enters. The Duchess pretends a headache, immediately the song is over. The Duke reproaches her but is promptly reminded of his notorious affairs. Discomfited and routed the Duke is glad to get out. And various friends arrive according to the custom of the day, to condole, apparently, but secretly delighted with the intrigue. They hint strongly that this is Gainsborough's downfall, pronounce him boorish and impossible. He will be ostracized by the Prince and then by all the great names of England....As they chatter, Georgiana is convinced that she must humble herself, make any sacrifice to save the man she loves from oblivion. She asks them to leave her alone, tells her maid to bring the dress and hat she used to pose in...Fade...

Gainsborough's studio... Miss Foyle is having final sitting. Gainsborough anticipates the harp...throws down his brush, tells her her portrait is finished and the harp is his! He will take it in payment. Miss Foyle, wounded that he has painted her for her harp rejects the portrait, tells him he can hang it in the Academy in place of the one she hears he spoiled, of the Duchess, in fit of rage. Gainsborough is ready to blast her for her presumption when his wife, followed by the Bailiff comes in. The Bailiff has come to take the furnishings per Sheriff's orders. G-- gets an idea. He offers the portrait of Miss Foyle, tells him he can
get enough for it at public sale to satisfy all his, G--'s debts. There is a comical scene in which the Bailiff is doubtful of the picture's having any value but he is talked down by the indignant Mrs. G--. He finally takes the picture and leaves. Miss Foyle who has been stunned by the perfidy of the man she has made herself believe loves her, comes to life, runs out after him, writes a cheque for the portrait and has the Bailiff deliver it at her home...sentimental about Gainsborough to the last.

Molly and Johann come in and Mrs. G-- rails at G-- for allowing them to be engaged. G-- reminds them that he cannot fight a duel with the Prince of Wales and that as she is striving so hard for success as she interprets it, she'd better shut up. For without the approval and patronage of his Royal Highness, no artist can hope to arrive...... And then, he suddenly remembers his real peeve, blaming his wife for his former disapproval of Molly's marrying Johann.... Why shouldn't Molly marry a musician? Does not her father compose, play the Viola de Gamba? Mrs. G-- throws up her hands in surrender to his childishness. Gainsborough begins to talk of his Duchess, the one person who loves him for what he is, not what he does. Mrs. G-- reminds him spitefully that they quarrel endlessly. That is all very well, he retorts, they are of necessity separated, yet always together. Mrs. G-- goes out in high dudgeon at this "silly sentimentality". Gainsborough is kind and understanding with Molly and Johann, telling them they do not know what a privilege it is to marry the person one loves, strive together in happiness, for success. And then he tells them he wants to be alone. Molly and Johann are understanding, leave the studio.

Alone, now, Gainsborough moves his portrait of the Duchess, tenderly, keeping its back to the camera, facing the camera, himself. He works over it with a cloth, singing the while, "My Lady Disdain" (p. 351 Opera Score)
As the song ends, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, enters. She stops at the door, listens to the last notes hanging upon the summer air. She tells him she is ready to pose twelve hours, all night and the next day...anything...so that he may not be completely ruined. He realizes that she is completely selfless in this, discounts her own part in the gossip entirely. They are in perfect accord for the moment and Gainsborough is about to show her the portrait, tell her that he only smeared it with lamp-black which can be removed with a cloth--and has been--when, the Prince and his courtiers come in, among them, Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Gainsborough triumphantly uncovers the picture leaving all open-mouthed with astonishment. He implies that they are fools, that it has all been malicious, idle gossip. Here is the perfect picture, proof in itself. The Duchess after her own first astonishment which she cleverly covers, enjoys Gainsborough's artfulness, hugely. There is much acclaim, flattery of the Duchess and congratulation of Gainsborough....

Sir Joshua Reynolds steps forward, walks over gazes at the Blue Boy which is still unsold, picks up the large picture lugs it over to place it by the side of the Duchess's portrait. He gazes from one to the other, turns to G-- takes him warmly by the hand, tells him he does not realize his own greatness, that he has transcended all formulae, rules of technique and blasted the conventions of painting. There is a reconciliation between the two men, each masters. The Prince and all the others leave. The Duchess and Gainsborough are left to a tender love scene in which he kneels before her, calling her, his"Divinity," his"angel of inspiration." He tells her that he has that knowledge all true artists have, that he will receive recognition, if not in his lifetime, after his death. They, despite his wife and her husband are always inseparable. They will, he tells her sadly, pass as all things mortal pass but he--and she--by his paintings, will achieve immortality.
We fade back to the Present. The modern Duchess of Devonshire has finished her story. She takes a last look at the portrait, touches the hand of her companion, leaves for the airport to take a plane to Africa. The idea is conveyed, first and here, that her companion is an artist, married, lost to her and the modern tempo lacks the restraint the tolerance, the sacrifice to follow the line of the 18th Century. The man, her lover, looks after her, reading her intent. The music of the opera comes in... there is the hum of a plane dipping low over the Gallery... a fading and then... a crash! The music trails to a Fade Out.