

THE STORY OF THE OPERA GAINSBOROUGH.

Thomas Gainsborough, the well known artist, has lately moved from Bath to London and is trying to establish as great a reputation in the Metropolis as he had acquired in the Western city. All seems to promise well. The beau monde is flocking to his studio, including Georgina, Duchess of Devonshire, the queen of beauty and fashion. Gainsborough painted her as a child, she is a great admirer of his work and very favourably disposed to him. If he can make a successful portrait of her, his success is assured.

But Gainsborough is not a business man. His twin passions are for painting and music and he is prepared to sacrifice everything for them. So when the Opera opens his wife is in great distress because instead of trying to concentrate his efforts on pleasing the Duchess, he is paying more attention to Miss Foyle, a harpist, whom he has induced to sit for him to give him an opportunity to buy her harp on which he has set his fancy. The Duchess is angry because more than once she has been kept waiting while he has dallied with the girl. She has been so annoyed at this that more than once she has felt inclined to cease sitting to him, but he is making a beautiful portrait of her, and she hopes moreover to make him promise to give his vote for Charles



-2-

James Fox, for the famous Westminster election is taking place and the Duchess is canvassing day and night on his behalf. Gainsborough resents being asked for his vote, for many of his sitters are Tories, and he has no wish to flout them by definitely committing himself to the Opposition Party. Lastly his eldest daughter, Molly, has engaged herself to Johann Fischer, oboe player to the Prince of Wales, and Gainsborough has forbidden him to his house.

The Opera opens in the front sitting room of Gainsborough's house in Pall Mall, his daughters, Molly and Peggy are practising their dancing, perhaps because they have vague hopes of being invited on the morrow night to Ranelagh, where a grand May-day fete is being held under the patronage of the Prince of Wales. Presently, Mrs. Gainsborough bustles in, scolds them for disordering the room when the Duchess of Devonshire is expected, then bustles out again to interview the cook.

Molly relapses into tears. The day is wet, her betrothed Johann Fischer is forbidden to the house and there seems no hope of seeing him. She is relieved from her grief by the advent of James the footman. He makes a great fuss about handing her a letter which has been given to him by Fischer, who writes that he will come to see her directly her father and mother are out of the way, which elevates her spirits into the seventh heaven. Mrs. Gainsborough returns equipped

-3-

to go out, with her hands full of unpaid bills. She laments that her husband never paid them as he promised, and that if he buys Miss Foyle's harp all his money will be wasted on it. She is sadly afraid that he is going to offend the Duchess, and if so it will mean ruin. While Mrs. Gainsborough is still lamenting, a loud knocking is heard. She surmises that it is bailiffs come to arrest Gainsborough and sends Peggy to warn him, but it turns out to be some of his musician friends, who have come to ask him to go to the Ranelagh Fete and take the part of an amateur who can't turn up. Gainsborough appears from his studio and consents; then, just as the musicians are about to go out, a large body of canvassers surge in, headed by Sir Thomas Tolley and a beadle. They profess to have been sent by the Duchess of Devonshire, and Gainsborough annoyed at her attempt to corner him in this way, plies Tolley with brandy until he has to be carried out, followed by his party. Miss Foyle is announced and the artist despite his wife's dissuasions hurries back to his studio to give the girl her sitting and finish securing the harp.

Mrs. Gainsborough sets out to do her shopping, while Molly and Peggy are left alone and scheme to admit Fischer whom they can see outside in the rain. James is enticed from the front door and Fischer let in, by the time James comes

-4-

back Fischer is in the sitting room. James wants to turn him out into the street but is bribed to go away into the kitchen. Then Fischer, wet through with the rain, urges Molly to elope with him. She is on the verge of consenting when Peggy rushes in with the news that Mrs. Gainsborough has returned. The girls conceal Fischer behind a couch. To make himself more comfortable he thrusts his legs underneath, then just as Mrs. Gainsborough enters, Molly discovers that his boots are protruding from under the front of it. She immediately sits down just over him and does her best to conceal them with her skirts. Then there comes another alarm, for Peggy, who is looking out of the window, announces that the Duchess's chariot has drawn up outside. Mrs. Gainsborough dashes out to receive her, and then the half drowned Fischer starts sneezing violently. Fortunately he manages to stop before Mrs. Gainsborough ushers in the Duchess, who sits on a chair immediately opposite the palpitating Molly.

Peggy is hurried off to warn Gainsborough, while Molly is left to face the curious glances of the Duchess, who though she is apparently fully occupied telling her canvassing experiences to Mrs. Gainsborough is all the time aware that the girl is concealing something behind her frock. Peggy comes back with the message that Gainsborough is putting the finishing touches to Miss Foyle's portrait, and if the Duchess

-5-

doesn't mind waiting just a minute or two longer he will be ready for her. Her Grace is so annoyed that Mrs. Gainsborough hurries off to the studio to make her husband get rid of Miss Foyle.

The Duchess occupies the time in discovering Molly's secret. She invites Molly to come and sit by her. Molly demurs because she says one of her shoes hurts her so she dare not walk on it. The Duchess insists. Molly hobbles across uncovering as she does one of Fischer's boots. It is in vain to pretend that it is one of her father's left about, for Fischer is taken with another fit of sneezing, and has to jump up and reveal who he is and why he is hiding. The Duchess annoyed by Gainsborough's neglect, is not disposed to be severe on the lovers. Discovering that Fischer is an eligible suitor, she promises to promote the match and invites the trio to the Fete at Ranelagh this evening and says that she will present the engaged couple to the Prince of Wales in order to secure his support.

SCENE II. GAINSBOROUGH'S STUDIO.

Gainsborough is putting the finishing touches to Miss Foyle's portrait and has arranged to buy her harp.

Miss Foyle has taken advantage of her sittings to open a flirtation with the artist which he has tolerated in order

-6-

to acquire her harp in exchange for the portrait.

She speaks reproachfully of the hopes and visions which Gainsborough has inspired by his behaviour.

Their interview is interrupted by Mrs. Gainsborough, who asks Miss Foyle to leave because the Duchess is waiting for her sitting.

Miss Foyle meekly consents and Mrs. Gainsborough goes out. Gainsborough will not let Miss Foyle go until he has refuted her assertion of there having been love making between them -. At the same time he is anxious to get rid of the girl and promises to meet her after the Fete at Ranelagh the same evening. Miss Foyle insists on being kissed on the mouth on leaving. As he is doing this the Duchess enters and is intensely angry about Gainsborough's apparent intrigue with Miss Foyle and immediately cuts short his apologies for delaying her. Then, remembering that she had promised to help Molly and wanted to secure Gainsborough's vote for Fox, she becomes more amiable in manner.

As the sitting commences she tells him that she has invited Molly and Peggy to Ranelagh.

While the Duchess speaks of them, Gainsborough sees something in her expression that he wishes to convey to canvas and asks her what her thought was at that moment.

-7-

She replies that her thought had been on a poem that she had made the previous evening on hearing the nightingale at Chatsworth. He begs to hear it - and while she sings he paints with intense concentration and satisfaction. As the song closes Gainsborough expresses grateful thanks. The Duchess at once becomes flippant and talks about Miss Foyle and her portrait.

Gainsborough asserts that Miss Foyle's portrait doesn't matter in the least, but that her's, the Duchess's, does and that she is the only sitter who fulfills an artist's ideal in every respect.

The Duchess suspects the genuineness of the compliment and tells him that the choice of different models, each to contribute a feature to an ideal figure is merely an excuse for artist's fickleness.

Gainsborough throwing down his brush, declares she has spoilt his mood for work, and the Duchess at once attacks him about his behaviour to Tolley. Gainsborough fiercely retorts and the Duchess goes on to say, after having sung an Epigram about Fox's canvass, that if he were not so cantankerous to his sitters, he would not have to waste so much valuable time on mere landscape.

Gainsborough, angry at his favourite theme being held up to contempt, bursts into a Rhapsody in praise of landscape.

-8-

The Duchess though secretly sympathising, adroitly changes the subject to her portrait which she asks to see.

Hitherto she has been perfectly satisfied with this, but now irritated by his opposition to all her requests, she begins criticising it and hardly knowing what to find fault with pitches upon the hat as a scapegoat.

Gainsborough in vain pleads that the hat is the keynote to the picture - The Duchess insists upon the hat being painted out. Gainsborough pleads - the Duchess insists.

Gainsborough, having arranged his pigments, takes up his brush, makes a final protest, to which the Duchess reiterates "Out with the hat" - Then the artist sets his brush to the canvas, not on the hat but on the FACE of the portrait.

The Duchess calls out in horror and attempts to stop his action, she tells him that he has ruined the picture and will have a spoilt canvas thrown on his hands - but he retorts that he has a pretty serving girl with a face suitable to the design and will substitute it for the Duchess and sell the picture as a fancy work.

The Duchess, furious at the insult, threatens to tell her friends of his rudeness so that none of them will sit to him.

He retorts that he will have to fall back on painting landscapes and animals. Even Her Grace cannot deprive him of sheep, dogs, cows and horses for sitters.

-9-

Then the humour of the situation strikes the Duchess. With a laugh she reminds him that he has forgotten to mention pigs in his list of subjects, and she understands his pig pictures are masterpieces. Telling him that he will find pigs very complacent sitters, and that whenever she sees little piggies at Chatsworth it will remind her of this interview, she leaves the studio with a whimsical smile unintentionally dropping her lace handkerchief as she goes out.

Gainsborough picks it up, makes as though to go after her, and then, on second thoughts, puts it in his inner breast pocket and goes out.

No sooner has he left than James enters bringing in Miss Foyle's harp.

In passing the easel on which the portrait is, he notices the ruined picture and drops the harp in consternation.

Miss Foyle entering at this moment and hearing the harp fall, goes quickly to James, and is just about to make a scene when she in her turn sees the blackened face. Staring incredulously at the picture, it gradually comes to her mind that the Duchess and Gainsborough must have had a violent quarrel. Repressing an impulse to laugh, she goes out of the room, ignoring James' outstretched hand for a tip.

End of Act I.

CARNEGIE BIBLIOTHEK
Coates
Versameling

U.S.

ACT II.Scene I. Ranelagh.

The Duchess of Devonshire, leaving the crowded Rotunda has found a secluded spot where she sings a song that chimes in with her mood, on the charm of solitude. She is interrupted by Lady Betty Foster and a bevy of young ladies who vow that they heard someone serenading the Duchess and pretend to search for the imaginary swain, while Lady Betty and another lady tell their fortunes by means of flowers. Gainsborough suddenly appears accompanied by musicians with instruments and serenades the Duchess, with a song to the "Most Glorious Goddess of the Night", in which the Duchess joins in.

The Prince and his gentlemen come up, he recognises Gainsborough, pays him a compliment on his singing, then goes on to salute the Duchess, while Gainsborough joins the musicians. The Duchess asks the Prince to invite a couple of young friends to the Royal Pavilion and stand sponsor to their betrothal. The Prince whimsically consents. Then the Master of the Ceremonies asks his permission for dancing to begin, and the royal party almost immediately begin to divide themselves into couples, the Prince taking the Duchess for his partner and Lady Betty falling to one of his friends.

While the dance is on Miss Foyle takes the opportunity to approach Gainsborough, who hitherto has not come into

contact with her at the Fete. She vehemently reproaches him for his neglect. He, not wishing to allow her to fasten on to him, is curt in his replies, which makes her more and more angry. She accuses him of being in love with the Duchess and dangling after her like a discharged flunkey hoping to be reinstated. Gainsborough retorts that his relations with the Duchess are no business of hers. Whereupon she tells him that she has seen the blackened portrait, obviously thinking that her knowledge of this should bring him on his knees to her. Gainsborough merely reiterates that it is no business of hers, and leaves her seething with passion.

The minuet is now over and Gainsborough is seized upon by the company to lead them in the dance and song which is to usher in the May-day, the whole assembly takes part in this and continue till 12 o'clock strikes and the 1st of May begins. Everybody unmask, the musicians strike up "God Bless the Prince of Wales", and the whole company join in singing it. The Prince then leads off his guests to the supper Pavilion.

Gainsborough has become lost in the crowd, both Miss Foyle and the Prince of Wales' Equerry are searching for him; the former in order to make him keep his promise which she fears he will break, the latter to invite him on behalf of the Prince of Wales to the supper party. The Equerry, aware that the girl knows the artist, asks her if she has seen him.

-12-

Miss Foyle at once resolves to revenge herself on the artist, and tells the Equerry that there's no speaking to him since he made the Duchess eat humble pie. The Equerry is intensely interested and cross-examines Miss Foyle as to what has actually happened. She, secure in the knowledge that the face of the picture was actually blackened out, invents corroborative details. How the Duchess wanted the portrait altered, Gainsborough refused, the Duchess insisted, until losing patience he blackened out the face while the Duchess screamed blue murder. If they do not believe her they can go and see the picture in the artist's studio.

As she finishes the story, Gainsborough comes among the listeners who are still laughing at the story. The Equerry gives him the Prince's invitation and Gainsborough sets out with ^{him} towards the Supper Pavilion. He notices Miss Foyle and as he passes her makes a bow but she rudely averts her face. When he has disappeared she exclaims "Her Gracious Grace flouted", and begins laughing at the scandal she has started.

-13-

ACT II.

Scene II. Ranelagh. The Royal Pavilion.

Supper has just finished, and the ladies have left the table. The Prince rises to sing a convivial song, "The best time of the day is the morning, with the small hours just begun", the men at the table all joining in the chorus. They have arrived at the concluding verse when Beechmaster and Aspen arrive and hurriedly whisper to the Prince. It is the tale of the scandal concerning the Duchess and Gainsborough and for a few minutes the whole company are gloating over it. They are interrupted by the arrival of Gainsborough who is saluted by the Prince with the news that he is expected to make the speech of the evening. He is protesting that he is no speaker when a party of ladies enter with Fischer and Molly in their midst, the latter being too heavily veiled to be recognisable. The Duchess begins a connubial song in which the others join, Gainsborough does not identify Molly and is pleased to think that Fischer is engaged to another girl; while he is congratulating himself, the Duchess presents the betrothed pair to the Prince, who gives her a congratulatory kiss.

Gainsborough is thunderstruck when he sees whom the girl is, but he recovers himself by the time the Prince brings up the betrothed couple. Molly falls on her knees before him and

pleads for forgiveness. Gainsborough raises up his daughter, embraces her, and says he will do everything in his power to help her and Fischer, and that the latter will earn his eternal gratitude by making Molly happy.

A roundelay is sung, and then the Prince breaks up the party by announcing that the music is beginning in the Rotunda. The ladies begin to move to their boxes and Lord Beechmaster seizes the opportunity to speak to the Duchess of Devonshire and incidentally repeat the latest variation of the slander which is that she went on her knees to Gainsborough to beg him to spare her picture and that he scornfully refused. The Duchess tells him that he has been bubbled and leaves him, but she has really come to the conclusion that Gainsborough has spread the slanders, telling everyone that his disfigurement of her portrait was a punishment for her presumption in daring to criticize it. That she had begged him on her bended knees to spare it and was now humbly trying to reinstate herself in his favour by introducing his daughter and future son-in-law to the Prince. The Duchess is naturally boiling over with indignation, but she reserves all her wrath for the supposed culprit.

As she walks across the room she encounters Molly and Fischer coming to thank her. Anxious not to dissipate any of their joy, she gets Lord Eldermere, one of her friends to take them to her box. Directly they are gone she goes to

confront Gainsborough. He is unconscious of having given any fresh cause for offence and has forgotten all about Miss Foyle. The songs of the Duchess and her gracious behaviour have shown that she has forgiven him about her portrait; and the complaisance with which he has accepted the son-in-law she has forced on him should surely restore him to her good books. Instead of being kindly received by the Duchess as he expects, Gainsborough finds her in a furious temper. She ironically congratulates him on his success in his new role as a forgiving father and then accuses him of slandering her. Gainsborough indignantly denies the charge and demands an explanation. She retorts that the only explanation he deserves is a horse whipping. Meanwhile the courtiers around are bandying scurrilous quips and couplets to one another about the incident. Then the Prince comes up and says that he has heard so much about the wonderful portrait that Gainsborough has painted of the Duchess that he should like to see it. He has been told that the artist has made black its principal colour. Gainsborough denies this and says that he has used black only in the hat. The Prince turns to the Duchess and asks her if she has any objection to his seeing the picture. The Duchess with visions of the blackened face before her is most anxious that it should not be seen, but she is afraid that if she with-holds her consent it will only confirm the scandal, so she throws the onus on Gainsborough, by explaining

that as the picture is not finished, the artist must say. Gainsborough says the Prince can see the picture any time he likes.

The Prince at once announces his intention of going to see the picture on the following morning.

The Duchess is furious. Had Gainsborough accepted the opportunity she gave him of asking for a delay of a day or two to finish the picture, he might have repainted the face and the slanders could have been refuted, but this gives him no time. The face will appear blackened and her reputation will be ruined. She determines to minimize the effect of the picture by depreciating its importance. So she says that she is not really interested in the work. Mr. Gainsborough may be very good at pigs and trees, but when one wants a real portrait one goes to Reynolds. Then with a disdainful curtsy to the artist she sweeps out.

Gainsborough is dazed. The Prince who is really enjoying the situation, says a few words of consolation to the artist, drinks a glass of wine with him, and then leaves him to the tender mercies of the company. One of them wittily starts a song on "Sweethearts". Gainsborough who has been consoling himself with repeated draughts of wine, says that ladies of rank and fashion are nothing to him, his ideal is the Serving Maid of Old England, and breaks out into a song on her excellence. The Courtiers play up to him thoroughly

-17-

enjoying the situation, Gainsborough becoming more and more intoxicated, at length smashes his glass against the ground and staggers out into the night.

End of Act II.

ACT III. SCENE I.THE DUCHESS'S BOUDOIR.

The Duchess in negligé, is alone with her maid, undecided whether to go to Gainsborough's studio or not. A footman announces Miss Molly Gainsborough, now Mrs. Fischer. She dismisses the maid who leaves a dress, she was carrying, on a chair, and Molly enters. She explains that she has come to thank her Grace for her kindness last night. The Duchess breaks out about the slanders Gainsborough is supposed to have uttered. Molly indignantly denies that it was possible for her father to have done anything of the kind, and when the Duchess asks who else knew about the blackening of the picture, the girl suggests Miss Foyle, who brought her harp to the studio directly the Duchess had left.

The Duchess recollects that Miss Foyle was at Ranelagh at the time the scandal started, and seems disposed to accept Molly's explanation, when in comes Lady Betty Foster who protests indignantly at the girl being allowed there, when her father has given vent to such foul slanders. Molly is indignant and stands up for her father. Lady Betty points out that though Gainsborough has spoilt the picture, he is showing it to the Prince that morning before it is possible to repair the damage. Molly asserts that if Gainsborough invited the

Prince to his studio, the picture will be perfect by the time His Royal Highness arrives. But Lady Betty has no patience with the girl, and the Duchess seeing that if Molly stays she will be only more and more insulted, begs her to go. Molly curtsying to the Duchess runs out sobbing.

Then follows a scene between the Duchess and Lady Betty, which gradually develops into a quarrel, the former defending Gainsborough and Lady Betty ridiculing her for her faith in the slanderer. At length Lady Betty flounces out of the room in a rage.

The Duchess left alone, rings her bell for her maid and has the costume she wore for the portrait brought in, then tells the maid to leave her. She is still undecided. Though she now is convinced of Gainsborough's good faith, but even if he has not slandered her, she feels it is impossible for him to restore the picture in time. In a passionate soliloquy she at length decides that it behoves her, whatever may befall, to go and withdraw the cruel insults she levelled at him, and stand by his side when the Prince visits his studio.

-20-

ACT III. SCENE 2.GAINSBOROUGH'S STUDIO.

The scene opens with Gainsborough lying on the couch, his coat off flung on a chair, having thrown himself down after his unhappy evening at the Prince's supper party at Ranelagh the night before. He is aroused by the entry of Molly, Fischer, Mrs. Gainsborough and Peggy all in a state of wild excitement.

Molly having just returned from her visit to the Duchess, endeavours to explain the Duchess's more favourable attitude in the matter of the slanders and Lady Betty's animosity, but she is so interrupted by the others that Gainsborough hardly understands. They all urge him to restore the picture. Then Mrs. Gainsborough brings matters to a head by saying that she will tell James to inform all visitors that Gainsborough is too ill to see anyone.

Gainsborough aggravated beyond endurance jumps up and rings for James and instructs him that everyone who comes is to be shown up instantly. Then saying he wishes to be alone he turns them all out. The Duchess's insults of the night before still rankle fiercely in his mind but as he repeats them his admiration of the woman overcomes his smarts, he recalls how her look of disdain was so grand that he could have shouted bravo. Taking a piece of paper he endeavours to

sketch it, then lamenting it does not give the colour, he turns to the picture. Ha, ha, he laughs, my Lady Duchess never suspected that the disfigurement was a mere splother of lamp black which a wet rag would remove. He hesitates, then decides that he can't leave the Duchess to the gang of scandal-mongers, and collecting his implements, carefully wipes out the black and restores the face to its original beauty. Feeling rejoiced at the restoration of the work he apostrophizes the portrait as though he were speaking to the sitter, addressing it as Lady Disdain and pointing out that her loveliness itself doomed to perish in a short time, will be preserved for ever through his despised picture.

He has hardly finished when the door opens and the Duchess appears, dressed in the costume of the portrait, and stands hesitatingly and diffidently on the threshold. Gainsborough stands rooted to the spot. "I - am - here," stammers the Duchess. "Your Grace does me an honour," says Gainsborough gradually regaining his self-possession. "I am here to sit," urges the Duchess humbly. "After what your Grace said last night?" queries the artist. She pleads that she never meant it, that she had to do it for self-defence, for her companions were telling her that he boasted that she had gone down on her knees to him. Gainsborough asks did she believe it? "For one brief moment," she confesses, but she could not have come to him now if she still believed it. Gainsborough boils with rage

-22-

as he hears of the slander imputed to him but she asks him "What does it matter now?"

All this time the Duchess has not seen the picture so has no idea that it has been restored, so that when the "Prince of Wales" is announced she urges Gainsborough to keep it back, and she will say that she has to give another sitting for it. The artist whispers to her that "It will be all right," and the Prince enters. While he is speaking to the Duchess, Gainsborough dexterously turns the portrait away so that it cannot be seen by the courtiers.

The Duchess with a smile of her lips though she is palpitating with anxiety, explains to the Prince that the picture is still unfinished, so that he must not judge it too harshly. He assures her that he can make allowances, while the courtiers smile and nudge one another in expectation of the awful revelation which the display of the portrait will reveal.

Gainsborough takes the Prince to where he can see it, and the Prince regards the work with deep attention, the courtiers with tentative smiles waiting for him to speak.

"Ah! I see you have introduced some black, Mr. Gainsborough", he says.

The courtiers' smiles become broad grins, but the Prince immediately adds: "But you have used it with masterly effect." Turning to the Duchess, he congratulates her on possessing such a superb portrait and slyly adds "Never has your

your friend Reynolds done a better." Then he commissions Gainsborough to paint a portrait of himself. Gainsborough after asking permission of the Duchess moves the portrait for the courtiers to see, who greet it with loud applause, prompted by Lady March with the words "Bray! Dönkeys! Bray!"

The Prince, after twitting the Duchess about trees and pigs, makes a graceful farewell and then leaves, followed by his train. Gainsborough and the Duchess are now alone. He breaks into the song that he sung to her at Ranelagh and she responds with the verse with which she answered him there. Going on his knees, he thanks her for coming to save him:

"From the results of my own rudeness and folly, my
Divinity and Guardian Angel."

As he kisses her hand, she places her other hand lovingly on his head to the soft strains of the orchestra, and slow falling of the curtain.

Finis. Opera. D.V.
A.C.