

from
Chapter Two

At the end of the afternoon I turned for home. I was tired and thirsty, but had some useful drawings. I went round the Orange Grove and saw a man lying asleep under the church wall. Something about him made me stop. He lay half curled on his left side, his back against the wall in a niche in the architecture. His head was cushioned on his left arm and the hand, very dirty, was stretched out. He was neither young nor old and looked strong, but his clothes were threadbare and his light hair matted. He had clogs on his feet, well worn and with square toes turned up, quite different from the pattens the ladies clattered about Bath's dusty streets in. A great brown dog lay against him, fitting its body to his, its head resting on its paws. I stopped to look and saw that the dog was not sleeping. Its large brown eyes were open but it made no movement. I took a step towards them and at once the dog reached out a paw and placed it quietly over the man's outflung wrist.

I stayed watching them for some time but neither stirred. There were plenty of beggars in London but this man was different. I could not fathom how, but he was. Perhaps he was not a beggar but simply itinerant, but why and how he slept during the day I didn't know. The path ran close by him and was well travelled, many people walking past and speaking loudly while I stood there, but he slept on regardless. A man could sleep anywhere, it seemed. Quayle was staying with Lord Arbuthnot; Campbell and I were at the baker's; this man and his dog were behind the Abbey. I thought of drawing them but felt as though it would be indelicate. At last, oddly perturbed, I went on.

When I got back to the lodgings the man and dog were still on my mind, so I took a large new sheet of cream wove paper, sat down at the table by the window and began to draw them from memory. Drawing was always a pleasure. I started with a fine grey point to lay in the main forms, but soon put it down in favour of a softer black lead. The paper had a good tooth and the pencil dragged across it raising a slight fuzz, the lead lying just on the surface except where I pressed firmly, when it left a greasy sheen. The matt surface was cool and the picture took shape quickly. There was a dark shadow behind the man's back that threw up the texture of the stone wall of the Abbey and brought his body into relief. I hadn't noticed it at the time, but it was strong in my mind's eye. The thing I most remembered consciously was the expression in the dog's eyes and the way their depths shone golden where the sun struck them. I couldn't get it adequately with the pencil, so after a while I put it down and opened my box of watercolours.

The work went well and it was only when Campbell came in and stood behind me that I felt the crick in my back and realised that the light was going.

"What on earth is that?"

"A man I saw coming back from my walk. Who do you think he is?"

"I have no idea. Some beggar, I suppose. Or gipsy, with that big dog. But why paint him? I suppose he would make a good foreground to a picturesque landscape - a peasant resting under a tree, that sort of thing."

I continued touching in some tufts of grass at the base of the wall.

“I must say, you are giving it the treatment!” There was a note almost of disapproval. “What are you going to do with it?”

My interest in the subject had not lessened while I worked. I tried to imagine the man’s life, where he had come from, what he was doing there, how he and the dog had met. For some reason I didn’t think he was from Bath.

“I’d like to do it in oils.” The thought had been at the back of my mind.

“Oils! But you could never show it. What would be the point?” He looked at me curiously.

“I know. But I just think it’s... interesting. I get tired of views and scenes.”

“There’s no market for that sort of thing.”

“I know that, too. I can’t imagine who would buy it. I suppose it would just be for the pleasure of the thing.”

Campbell inspected it. It was more or less finished, except where I needed to touch in some highlights with white body colour. “Well, I must say, it’s nae bad. I feel I know the man - and the dog. It’s full of life. I didn’t see you as a figure painter, but perhaps you should do more. ‘Scenes of Rural Life’? Gainsborough did very well with that sort of thing.”

I hunched my shoulders. Campbell meant to be encouraging, but Gainsborough’s ragged peasant children hovering around tumbledown cottage doors were not at all what I wanted. I had admired them when I was a student and they were of course excellent of their kind, but they were based entirely on the idea that the rags, and the children, and the cottage, were only so much ‘foreground interest’. I looked at the dog’s paw resting on the man’s wrist. It had enormous dignity. That was what I wanted.