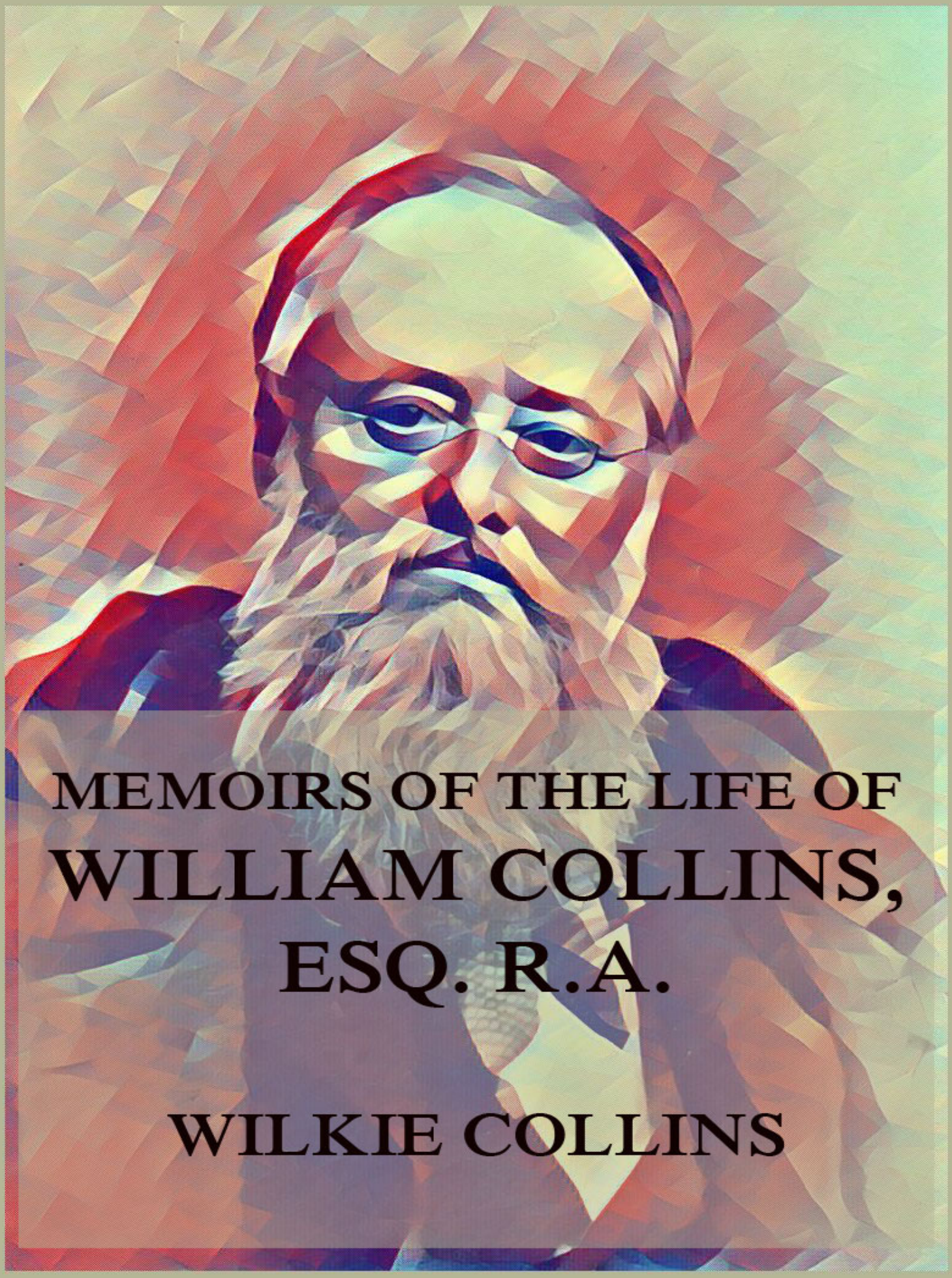

MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF WILLIAM COLLINS, ESQ. R.A.

WILKIE COLLINS

Memoirs Of The Life Of William Collins, Esq., R.A.

Volumes 1 & 2

WILKIE COLLINS

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VOLUME I.

PREFACE.

The writer of such portions of the following pages as are not occupied by his father's diaries and correspondence, has endeavored to perform his task with delicacy and care, and hopes to have succeeded in presenting to the friends and lovers of Art, a faithful record of a life devoted, with an enthusiasm worthy of its object, to the attainment of excellence in a pursuit which is admitted, by common consent, to refine no less than to exalt the human heart.

The Journals and Letters of Mr. Collins, which are interwoven with this Memoir, are not presented to the public on account of any literary merit they may be found to possess, but merely as expositions, under his own hand, of his personal and professional character — of the motives by which he was uniformly actuated, in his private and public capacities; and of the reflections which were suggested to his mind by his genius and experience throughout his professional career.

Having blended with the passages of the Memoir to which they refer, such explanations as might otherwise have been looked for in this place, the only duty which remains for the Author to perform, (and a most grateful one it is,) is to return his sincere thanks for the valuable assistance which has been afforded to him in various ways, throughout the progress of his work, by many of his father's friends; among whom he begs to be allowed to mention: the Right Honorable Sir Robert Peel, Bart, (who favored him further by accepting the dedication of the

book); the late Sir Thomas Baring, Bart.; C. R. Leslie, Esq., R.A.; C. L. Eastlake, Esq., R.A.; Joseph Bullar, Esq., M.D.; Mrs. Hunter; Miss F. Clarkson; R. H. Dana, Esq.; Bernard Barton, Esq.; William Richardson, Esq.; Samuel Joseph, Esq.; and E. V. Rippingille, Esq.

Among the more intimate associates of the late Mr. Collins, who have favored the Author with anecdotes and recollections of their departed friend, are: William Etty, Esq., R.A.; C. R. Leslie, Esq., R.A.; James Stark, Esq.; and George Richmond, Esq.: whilst, by the courtesy of Thomas Uwins, Esq., R.A., he has been enabled to obtain access to his father's works, painted for His Majesty George IV., now in the private apartments of Windsor Castle.

Through the kindness of Messrs. John and James Kirton, in furnishing him with their recollections of Mr. Collins and his family, at a very early period, he has been enabled to present some interesting particulars of his father's life, at a time not included in the sources of biographical information possessed by other friends.

In conclusion, the Author has to express his sense of the benefit he has received from the valuable literary advice of Alaric A. Watts, Esq., during the progress and publication of the work!

CHAPTER I. 1788—1807.

To write biography successfully, is to present the truth under its most instructive and agreeable aspect. This undertaking, though in appearance simple, combines among its requirements so much justice in the appreciation of character, and so much discrimination in the selection of examples, that its difficulties have been felt by the greatest as by the humblest intellects that have approached it. A task thus experienced as arduous, by all who have attempted it, must present a double responsibility when the office of biographer is assumed by a son. He is constantly tempted to view as biographical events, occurrences which are only privately important in domestic life; he is perplexed by being called on to delineate a character which it has hitherto been his only ambition to respect; and he is aware throughout the progress of his labors, that where undue partiality is merely suspected in others, it is anticipated from him as an influence naturally inherent in the nature of his undertaking.

Feeling the difficulty and delicacy of the employment on which I am about to venture, and unwilling to attempt a remonstrance, which may be disingenuous, and which must be useless, against any objections of partiality which may meet it when completed, I shall confine myself to communicating my motives for entering on the present work; thereby leading the reader to infer for himself, in what measure my relationship to the subject of this Memoir may be advantageous, instead of asserting from my own convictions, how little it may be prejudicial to the furtherance of my design.

To trace character in a painter through its various processes of formation; to exhibit in the studies by which he is strengthened, in the accidents by which he is directed, in the toils which he suffers, and in the consolations which he derives, what may be termed his adventures in his connection with the world; and further, to display such portions of his professional life, as comprehend his friendly intercourse with his contemporaries, as well as the incidents of his gradual advance towards prosperity, and the powerful influence of rightly-constituted genius in the Art, in exalting and sustaining personal character; are my principal objects, in reference to that part of the present work, which depends more exclusively upon its author, and less upon the journals and letters which are connected with its subject. In thus reviewing my father's career as a painter, it is my hope to produce that which may interest in some degree the lover of Art, and fortify the student, by the example of reputation honestly acquired, and difficulties successfully overcome; while it tends at the same time to convey a just idea of the welcome, steadily, if not always immediately, accorded to true genius in painting; not only by those whose wealth enables them to become its patrons, but also by the general attention of the public at large.

In what measure my opportunities of gathering biographical knowledge from my father's conversation, and from my own observation of his habits and studies, may enable me in writing his life, upon the principles above explained, to produce a narrative, in which what may appear curious and true shall compensate for what may be thought partial and trifling, it is now for the reader to judge. The motives with which I enter upon my task are already communicated. To emulate, in the composition of the following Memoirs, the candor and moral courage which formed conspicuous ingredients in the character that they are to delineate, and to preserve them as free from

error and as remote from exaggeration as I may, is all that I can further promise to the reader, to give them that claim to his attention which may at least awaken his curiosity, though it may not procure his applause,

William Collins was born in Great Titchfieldstreet, London, on the 18th September, 1788. His father was an Irishman, a native of Wicklow; his mother was a Scottish lady, born in the neighborhood of Edinburgh. He was the second of a family of three children, — the eldest of whom, a girl, died a month before his birth; the youngest, a boy, lived to see his brother attain high celebrity in the art, but died several years before him. It was a favorite tradition in the family of the painter, that they were descended from the same stock as the great poet whose name they bore. Of his ancestors I am enabled to mention one — Doctor Samuel Collins — who signalized himself in the seventeenth century by his professional skill, and who has found a place in our Biographical Dictionaries as one of the most remarkable anatomists of his time. The family originally came from Chichester, whence, about the time of the Revolution of 1688, a branch of it emigrated to Ireland, and fought on the side of King William, at the battle of the Boyne; settling definitely in Ireland from that period to the birth of Mr. Collins's father. An imprudent marriage, bringing with it the usual train of domestic privations and disappointments, had so far reduced the pecuniary resources of the family of Mr. Collins's grandfather, that his father found himself, on arriving at manhood, entirely dependent on his own exertions for support — exertions, which were soon rendered doubly important by his subsequent union with a young and portionless wife.

It will be found that I shall advert at greater length than may appear immediately necessary to some of my readers, to the character and employments of Mr. Collins's father. But the pursuits that he chose for himself, as a man of letters and a dealer in pictures, and the remarkable

influence that his knowledge of art and artists had in determining his son in following the career in which he was afterwards destined to become eminent, concur to make him an object of no ordinary importance and interest at this stage of a work devoted to the curiosities of painting, as well as to the biography of a painter.

His poetical abilities, developed, I believe, at an early age, and his social accomplishments as a man of polished manners and ready wit, soon brought Mr. Collins, sen., into contact with most of the painters and authors of his time. In choosing, therefore, as a dealer in pictures, a pursuit that might swell his precarious profits as a man of letters, the company he frequented may reasonably be imagined to have had no small influence in urging such a selection. But his choice was an unfortunate one; too honorable to descend to the rapacities, and too independent to stoop to the humiliations, attaching to picture-dealing in those days, neither by principles, nor disposition, was he in any way fitted for the uncongenial character he had assumed; and, though he continued throughout his life to force his attention to the pursuit in which he had engaged, he remained to the last a poet in his inward predilections, and a poor man in his outward circumstances.

His "Memoirs of a Picture" — to which I shall presently refer at length — his " Life of George Morland," and his " Poem on the Slave Trade," — illustrated by two of Morland's most successful pictures, subsequently engraved by J. R. Smith — were his principal works; but they brought him more popularity than profit. In those days, when literary genius was yet unemancipated from the fetters of patronage; the numbers of the reading and book-buying public were comparatively small; and the fine old race of genuine garret authors still existed, to fire the ingenuity of rapacious bailiffs, and point the sarcasms of indignant biographers. Articles in the public journals, songs, fugitive pieces, and all the other miscellanies of the literary brain,

flowed plentifully from Mr. Collins's pen; gaining for him the reputation of a smart public writer, and procuring for him an immediate, but scanty support. No literary occupations were too various for the thoroughly Irish universality of his capacity. He wrote sermons for a cathedral dignitary, who was possessed of more spiritual grace than intellectual power; and, during the administration of Mr. Wyndham, composed a political pamphlet, to further the views of a friend; which procured that fortunate individual a Government situation of four hundred a year, but left the builder of his fortunes in the same condition of pecuniary embarrassment in which he had produced the pamphlet, and in which, to the last day of his life, he was fated to remain.

But no severity of disappointment and misfortune was powerful enough to sour the temper or depress the disposition of this warm-hearted and honorable man. All the little money he received was cheerfully and instinctively devoted to the pleasures and advantages of his family: and in spite of the embarrassment of his circumstances, he contrived to give his sons, William and Francis, as sound and as liberal an education as could possibly be desired. Surrounded from their earliest infancy by pictures of all ages and subjects, accustomed to hear no conversation so frequently as conversation on Art, thrown daily into the society of artists of all orders, from the penniless and dissipated Morland, to the prosperous and respectable West, nothing was more natural than that the two boys should begin to draw at an early age. In overlooking their ravages among old palettes, their predatory investigations among effete color-bladders, and their industrious pictorial embellishment of strips of old canvas and scraps of forgotten paper, it was not difficult for the practiced eye of the elder Mr. Collins, to discover in William, — who took the lead, on evenings and half-holidays, in all ebullitions of graphic enthusiasm, — some

promise of the capacity that was lying dormant in the first rude essays of his childish pencil. Year by year the father watched and treasured up the son's drawings, until the boy's spontaneous intimation of his bias towards the painter's life enabled him to encourage his ambition to begin the serious direction of his studies, and to predict with delight and triumph that he might perhaps live long enough " to see poor Bill an R.A."

Before, however, I proceed to occupy myself with the incidents of Mr. Collins's boyhood, I would offer a few remarks on the principal work which his father produced, — the " Memoirs of a Picture." I have been told that this book enjoyed, in its day, no inconsiderable share of popularity. It is so novel in arrangement, it belongs so completely, both in style and matter, to a school of fiction now abandoned by modern writers, it is so thoroughly devoted to painters and painting, and so amusingly characteristic of the manners and customs of the patrons and picture-dealers of the day, (and I might add, of the hardihood of the author himself, in venturing to expose the secret politics of the pursuit to which he was attached,) that a short analysis of its characters and story, whether it be considered as a family curiosity, a literary antiquity, or an illustration of the condition of the Art and the position of the artists of a bygone age, can hardly be condemned as an intrusion on the purposes, or an obstacle to the progress of the present biography.

The work is contained in three volumes, and comprises a curious combination of the serious purpose of biography with the gay license of fiction. The first and the third volumes are occupied by the — history of the picture. The second volume is episodically devoted to a memoir of George Morland, so filled with characteristic anecdotes, told with such genuine Irish raciness of style and good-natured drollery of reflection, that this pleasant biography

is by no means improperly placed between the two volumes of fiction by which it is supported on either side.

The story opens with an account of the sudden disappearance from its place in the royal collection of France, of the subject of the memoirs, "an unique and inestimable jewel, painted by the. immortal Guido." The perpetrator of this pictorial abduction is an accomplished scamp, named the Chevalier Vanderwigtie, whose adventures before the period of the theft, and whose safe arrival on the frontiers with his prize, advance us considerably through the preparatory divisions of volume the first.

All is not success, however, with the Chevalier. After he and his picture have run several perilous risks, both are finally threatened with ruin by a party of Prussian cavalry, who, utterly ignorant of the existence of Guido, begin paying their devotions at the shrine of his genius by scratching his production (which is painted on copper) on its back with their knives, to ascertain whether any precious metal lurks beneath. Finding themselves disappointed in the search, they resign " the gem " with contempt, but take care to make use of its possessor by enlisting him in a regiment of dragoons. Unseated, like many an honester man, in the course of his martial exercises, by his new Bucephalus, the Chevalier is placed, for the injury thereby contracted, in the hands of a surgeon, who robs him of his divine picture, probably from a natural anxiety to secure his medical fees, and sells it, after all its adventures, to a Dutch picture-dealer at Rotterdam for a hundred guilders.

At this point the narrative, true to its end, leaves the ill-fated Vanderwigtie inconsolable for his loss in the hut of a peasant, to follow the fortunes of the stolen Guido, which has become contaminated for the first time by the touch of a professed dealer.

And now has this charming picture — shamefully stolen by the shameless Vanderwigtie, outrageously lacerated on its sacred back by the knives of illiterate Prussians, treacherously ravished from its unscrupulous possessor by a larcenous Hippocrates, and unworthily sold for a paltry remuneration to a Dutch Maecenas with commercial views — fallen into hands that will treasure it with befitting respect? Alas, our virtuoso of the Dykes is darkly ignorant of the value of the Vanderwigtian jewel! he immures it contemptuously amid the gross materialism of oil, candles, and the miscellaneous and household rubbish of his upper shop. The cheek of the Virgin (who is the subject of the picture) is pressed, perhaps, by an old shoe-brush, and the fleecy clouds supporting her attendant cherubs are deepened to stormy tints by the agency of an unconscious blacking-ball! Does this profanation speedily end? — far from it. Two English dealers purchase " the show-pictures " in the burgomaster's collection, but think not of diving for concealed gems into the dirtiest recesses of his kitchen floor, — the shoe-brush and the blacking-ball remain undisputed masters of the sentiment they profane, and the atmosphere they cloud! But a day of glory is approaching for the insulted Guido: a Flemish artist discovers it, appreciates it, purchases it, carries it home, washes it, wonders over it, worships it! The professors of picture - dealing (ingenuous souls!) see it and depreciate it, but artists and connoisseurs arrive in crowds to honor it, A whole twelvemonth does it remain in the possession of the fortunate artist; who at the expiration of that period suddenly proves himself to be a man of genius by falling into pecuniary difficulties, and is compelled by " dire necessity " to part with the inestimable gem, — of which, however, he takes care to make two copies, reproducing the original exactly, down to the very scratches on its back from the knives of the Prussians. Scarcely has he completed these fraudulent materials for future profit

before the story of the original theft of "Guido's matchless offspring " has penetrated throughout the length and breadth of artistic Europe. Among the dealers who now cluster round the Flemish artist are two, commissioned by an English nobleman to buy the Guido. After a scene of hard bargaining, these penetrating gentlemen relieve their professional friend of one of his copies, at an expense of seven hundred and fifty ducats, and start for England with their fancied prize; while the Flemish artist, having palmed off one counterfeit successfully in Holland, departs, like a shrewd man of business, to disembarrass himself of the other mock original in the contrary direction of Spain.

But the copy is destined to no better fortune in its perambulations than the original. The dealers are robbed of the counterfeit Guido, on English ground. In vain, on their arrival in London, do they advertise their loss of their " unique original" — it has passed into the possession of a broken-down dandy, the captain of the robbers; who, in a fit of generosity, has given it to a broken-down painter — a member of his gang — who, desirous of ready money, sells it to a broken-down lady of quality, who is the captain's " chereamie" and who leaving the mock Guido in the care of her servants at her house in London, shortly after purchasing it, starts with the captain on a tour of pleasure on the Continent. The poor painter is generously included in their travelling arrangements; and, to improve him in his art, the party visit the different collections of pictures on their route. While examining one of these, its owner, in consideration of the presence of the painter, volunteers the exhibition of a hidden and priceless gem; and, unlocking a drawer, displays to their astonished eyes the indubitable original Guido, which, under the seal of strict secrecy, he has purchased from the Flemish painter in his season of destitution and distress.

Meanwhile the story returns to the counterfeit picture, which the captain's lovely companion has left in the

custody of her servants in London. These faithful retainers, finding their time in their mistress's absence hanging heavily on their hands, determine, like their betters, to employ it in seeing society. The rooms are lighted up; the company invited; the supper is prepared; the cellar is opened. Each courteous footman sits manfully down to his bottle; each skittish Abigail sips enchantingly from her partner's brimming glass. The evening begins with social hilarity, proceeds with easy intoxication, ends with utter drunkenness. On the field of Bacchanalian battle, sleep and snore profoundly the men of the mighty calf and gaudy shoulder-knot. The hours pass, candles burn down, sparks drop unheeded, linen catches light, no one is awake, the house is on fire! Then, " the summoned firemen wake at call;" the house is saved, but the furniture is burnt; and the counterfeit picture, among other valuables, is actually lost. Time wends onward, the lady and her companions return, and prove their patriotism by falling into debt as soon as they touch their native shores. An execution is put into the house, and marauding brokers seize on the domestic spoil. To the share of one of their numbers falls an old butt, filled with stagnant water.

The myrmidon of trade's interests, on emptying his prize, discovers a cabinet at the bottom of the butt (thrown there doubtless during the confusion of the fire). He breaks it open, and the mock Guido, radiant and uninjured as ever, meets his astonished gaze. Friends are found to apprise him of its value, and swear to its originality: he endeavors to sell it to the connoisseurs; but failing in that, disposes of it, in desperation, for forty guineas, to a dealer in Leicester-fields.

Two years elapse, and the mock picture, for which all offers are refused, is still in the possession of its last purchaser. The story now reverts to the owner of the real Guido, and to a young artist whom he is employing, who is a son of the dealer in Leicester-fields. As a man of real

taste, he recognizes in his patron's picture the original of his father's counterfeit in the shop in London; but his penetration is far from being shared by two illustrious foreign professors of picture-dealing, who are on a visit to the connoisseur's collection. One of these worthies is the celebrated Des-chong-fong, a Chinese mandarin, who presents himself as engaged, with his companion, by the Great Mogul, to strip all Europe of its pictures, to form a collection for the imperial palace. The artist and the patron shrewdly suspect the professors to be fools in judgment and knaves in intention. In order to prove their convictions they represent the real Guido to be a copy, and exalt the fame of the picture in Leicester-fields as the great original of the master, Des-chong-fong and his friend fall helplessly into the snare laid for them; and, after proving by an elaborate criticism that the picture before them is a most arrant and preposterous copy, set off for London, in order to possess themselves — or rather their master, the Great Mogul — of the original gem. After a sharp scene of diplomatic shuffling, they obtain the dealer's counterfeit Guido for six hundred guineas. With this, and other works of art, they open a gallery; and, determining to " break" the whole army of London dealers, commence purchasing; and (oddly enough considering their mission to Europe) selling again, at enormous profits, whatever pictures they can lay their hands upon. Matters proceed smoothly for some time, when they are suddenly threatened with ruin by the loss of their Guido, which is stolen for the second time; — all London is searched to recover it, but in vain. At length, one morning, a Liverpool picture-dealer calls on them with works for sale, one of which is exactly similar to the lost Guido. They tax him with the theft; he vows that the picture was never in England before it came into his hands. Des-Chong-fong and Co. are furious, and refuse to part with it. An action is entered; and all picture-dealing London awaits

in horrid expectation the impending result of an appeal to law.

On his side, the Liverpool dealer is fitly furnished with evidence to support his cause. He has bought the picture of a captain in the navy, who, during the war with France, received it as part of his prizemoney from the capture of a French lugger — the owner of the contested Guido having been slain in the conflict. On inquiry, this unfortunate virtuoso turns out to be our old friend the Flemish painter, who, not having succeeded in disposing of his second copy of the Guido, has retained it in his possession ever since it was produced. A young lady, with whom the copyist was eloping at the time of his death, still survives, to bear testimony, with the English captain, as to the manner in which the Liverpool dealer became possessed of the second of the counterfeit gems.

But this portentous mass of evidence fails to stagger the immoveable obstinacy of the great Deschong-fong. He scouts logic and probabilities with all the serenity of a juryman waiting for his dinner, or a politician with a reputation for consistency. The action is to be tried in the face of everybody and everything. Already the gentlemen of the wig hug joyfully their goodly briefs — already the day is fixed, and the last line of the pleadings arranged, when a stranger darkens the Des-chong-fongian doors, and flits discursively among the Des-chong-fongian pictures. No sooner does he discern the disputed Guido than he flouts it with undissembled scorn, and declares it to be but the copy of a wondrous original that is lost. Des-chong-fong and Co. open their mouths to speak, but the words die away upon their quivering lips: the stranger explain — sit is Vanderwigtie himself!

And now, like one of the Homeric heroes, the enterprising Chevalier — the old, original Vanderwigtie— narrates his achievements and adventures to the deluded ambassador of the Great Mogul. How he stole the real Guido from the

royal collection of France; how he lost it to the Prussian doctor; how he heard of it in the foreign connoisseur's gallery; how that illustrious patron of the Arts has been lately driven from his pictures and his possessions by the Revolution; how his collection has been ravaged by the British troops; and how he himself has been sent to England, by the Elector of Saxony, to recover the lost Guido — which is suspected to have passed into Anglo-Saxon hands — flows overpoweringly from Vander wig tie's mellifluous lips. Humbled is the crest of Des-chong-fong — he compromises, apologizes, pays expenses, and stops the action. " A fig for all copies, where is the divine original! " is now the universal shout. Vanderwigtie has " cried havoc and let slip the dogs or' picture-dealing! Des-chong-fong; the dealers of Liverpool and Leicester-fields; the Chevalier himself; all men who have a taste for pictures and a turn for knavery, now spread like a plague of locusts over the length and breadth of the land. But, alas, it is too late! The waters of Lethe have closed over the precious picture — bribery and intimidation, knavery and eloquence, exert themselves in vain — Des-chong-fong and "every beast after his kind," may howl their applications to the empty wind — the labors of the historian of the picture are irretrievably closed — the hero of the Memoirs: the real inestimable Guido, from that day to this, has never been found.

Such is an outline of the story of this amusing book. The Shandean profusion of its digressions and anecdotes I have not ventured to follow, from the fear of appearing to occupy too large a space in this biography with a subject connected only with its earlier passages. In originality and discrimination of character the work I have endeavored to analyze may be inferior to the novels of Smollett; but in execution I cannot but think it fully their equal — for in some of its reflective and philosophical passages it even approaches the excellence of the great master of British

fiction — Fielding, in his lighter and simpler moods. With these observations I now dismiss it — only remarking, that, though intellect is not often hereditary, it has passed, in the instance of Mr. Collins's father, from parent to child; for I cannot accuse myself of a supposition merely fanciful, in imagining that the dry humor and good-natured gaiety of the author of " Memoirs of a Picture," has since been reflected, through another medium, by the painter of " Fetching the Doctor," and " Happy as a King."

In mentioning the habits and customs of his father's household, as a cause, awakening Mr. Collins to a perception of his fitness for the Art, another advantage afforded to his mind at an early period should not have been left unnoticed: this was the uncommon enthusiasm of both his parents for the charms of natural scenery. The rural beauties of their respective birthplaces — Wicklow, and the neighborhood of Edinburgh, on the side of Lasswade and Rosslyn — were themes of ever-delighting conversation and remembrance to his father and mother. While yet a child he became imbued with the spirit of these descriptions, which, acting upon a mind naturally formed for the appreciation of the beautiful and the pure, became as it were the young student's first alphabet in the Art — preparing the new field for its after cultivation; nursing the infant predilections that Time and Nature were destined to mature, until, in attaining their " local habitation" on the canvas, they became the missionaries of that universal worship which the loveliness of nature was first created to inspire.

Once set forth seriously on his new employments, the boy's enthusiasm for his pursuit began immediately — never afterwards to relax: every moment of his spare time was devoted to the pencil. Year after year passed on, and found him still patiently striving with the gigantic and innumerable difficulties attendant on the study of painting. Whatever natural object he perceived, he endeavored to

imitate upon paper: even a group of old blacking-bottles, picturesquely arranged by his friend Linnell, (then a student like himself) supplied him with a fund of material too precious to be disdained.

Ere, however, I proceed to track the progress of his mind in his youth, an anecdote of his boyish days may not appear too uninteresting to claim a place at this portion of the narrative: his first sight of the sea-coast was at Brighton, whither he was taken by his father. As soon as they gained the beach, the boy took out his little sketchbook, and began instantly to attempt to draw the sea. He made six separate endeavors to trace the forms of the waves as they rolled at his feet, and express the misty uniformity of the distant horizon line: but every fresh effort was equally unsuccessful, and he burst into tears as he closed the book and gave up the attempt in despair. Such was the first study of coast scenery by the painter who was afterwards destined to found his highest claims to original genius and public approbation on his representations of the various beauties of his native shores.

As he proceeded in his youthful employments in the Art, his studies became divided into two branches, — drawing from Nature as frequently as his then limited opportunities would allow, and copying pictures and drawings for the small patrons and picture-dealers of the day. In this latter occupation he soon attained so great a facility as to be able to produce resemblances of his originals, which I have heard described by those who have seen them as unusually remarkable for their fidelity and correctness. To the early habit of readiness of eye and correctness of hand thus engendered, is to be ascribed much of that power of transcribing the most elaborate minutiae of Nature, which, in their smallest details, his original and matured efforts are generally considered to present. His father's intimacy with the gifted but eccentric George Morland enabled him to obtain that master's advice and assistance in the early

superintendence of his son's studies. Mr. Collins's first introduction to the great painter was but too characteristic of poor Morland's dissipated habits. For some days the young student had awaited, with mingled anxiety and awe, his promised interview with a man whom he then regarded with all the admiration of the tyro for the professor: but his expectations remained unfulfilled, — the tavern and the sponging-house still held Morland entangled in their toils. At length, one evening, while he was hard at work over a copy, his father entered the room and informed him, with a face of unusual gravity, that Morland was below, but that his introduction to his future master had better be delayed; his impatience, however, to gain a sight of the great man overcame his discretion. He stole softly downstairs, opened the kitchen door, by a sort of instinct, and looked cautiously in. On two old chairs, placed by the smoldering fire, sat, or rather lolled, two men, both sunk in the heavy sleep of intoxication. The only light in the room was a small rush candle, which imperfectly displayed the forms of the visitors. One, in spite of the ravages of dissipation, was still a remarkably handsome man, both in face and figure. The other was of immense stature and strength, coarse, and almost brutal in appearance. The first was George Morland; the second, a celebrated prizefighter of the day, who was the painter's chosen companion at that particular time. As soon as his astonishment would allow him, Mr. Collins quietly quitted the room, without disturbing the congenial pair. The remembrance of this strange introduction never deserted his memory; it opened to him a new view of those moral debasements which in some instances are but too watchful to clog the steps of genius on its heavenward path.

My father was never himself of opinion, on looking back to his youthful career, that he gained any remarkable advantage in the practical part of his Art from the kind of instruction which Morland was able to convey. He always

considered that he was indebted for the most valuable information of his student days, before he entered the Academy, to the higher and more refined taste of his father. Gifted and kindhearted as he undoubtedly was, Morland's miserably irregular habits, and coarse, material mode of life, rendered him poorly available as the instructor of an industrious and enthusiastic boy; and the young disciple reaped little more advantage from his privilege of being present in the room where the master painted, than the opportunity of witnessing the wondrous rapidity and truth of execution that ever waited upon poor Morland's vivid conceptions, and never, to the last hour of his wayward existence, deserted his ready hand.

Among the anecdotes of Morland mentioned in his Biography by Mr. Collins's father, is one that may not be thought unworthy of insertion, as it not only proves the painter to have been possessed of ready social wit, but shows him to have been capable of accomplishing that most difficult of all humorous achievements — a harmless practical joke:

" During our painter's abode in the rules of the Bench, he was in the habit of meeting frequently, where he spent his evenings, a very discreet, reputable man, turned of fifty at least. This personage had frequently assumed the office of censor-general to the company, and his manners, added to a very correct demeanor, induced them to submit with a tolerably obedient grace. George used now and then, however, to 'kick,' as he said, and then the old gentleman was always too hard-mouthed for him. This inequality at length produced an open rupture between the two, and one night our painter, finding the voice of the company rather against him, rose up in a seemingly dreadful passion, and appearing as if nearly choked with rage, muttered out at last, that he knew what would hang the old rascal, notwithstanding all his cant about morality. This assertion, uttered with so much vehemence, very much, surprised the

company, and seriously alarmed the old man, who called upon George sternly to know what he dared to say against him. The painter answered with a repetition of the offensive words: ' I know what would hang him' After a very violent altercation, some of the company now taking part with Morland, it was agreed upon all hands, and at the particular request of the old gentleman, that the painter should declare the worst. With great apparent reluctance George at length got up, and addressing the company, said: 'I have declared twice that I knew what would hang Mr. ––– ; and now, gentlemen, since I am called upon before you all, I'll expose it.' He then very deliberately drew from his pocket a piece of lay cord, and handing it across the table, desired Mr. ––– to try the experiment; and if it failed, that would prove him a liar before the whole company, if he dared but to try. The manual and verbal joke was more than the old man was prepared for, and the whole company for the first time (perhaps not very fairly) laughed at his expense."

I am here enabled to lay before the reader some interesting particulars of the painter's boyhood, and of his connection with Morland, which are the result of the early recollections of Mr. John Kirton, (one of the oldest surviving friends of his family,) and which have been kindly communicated by him to assist me, in the present portion of this work:

"We were both of an age," writes Mr. Kirton. " At seven years old we went to Warburton's school, in Little Titchfieldstreet. He was not very quick, and was often in disgrace for imperfect lessons, Warburton was a clever man, but very severe. * * * His father often took him to pass the day with George Morland, at Somers Town, of which he was very proud. When Morland died, in 1804, we watched his funeral, which took place at St. James's Chapel, Hampstead-road; he was buried exactly in the middle of the small square plat, as you enter the gates, on the left hand.

At that time I think it was the only grave in that plat. When all the attendants were gone away, he put his stick into the wet earth as far as it would go, carried it carefully home, and when dry, varnished it. He kept it as long as I knew him, and had much veneration for it.*

[The deep reverence for genius in the art which induced the painter in his youth to preserve some fragments of the earth in which Morland was buried, as above described, animated him with all its early fervor in the maturity of his career. The same feelings which had moved the boy over Morland's grave, actuated the man, when long afterwards, on the death of Wilkie, he painted a view of the last house that his friend had inhabited, as a memorial of a dwelling sacred to him for the sake of the genius and character of its illustrious owner.]*

His father is buried in the same cemetery a little farther down, on the left-hand side, close to the path. His father, himself, his brother Frank and I, made long peregrinations in the fields between Highgate and Wilsden. He always had his sketchbook with him, and generally came home well stored. He was then very quick with his pencil. He had great respect for the talents of Morland. When we were by ourselves, more than once we went to the public-house for which Morland had painted the sign to eat bread and cheese and drink porter, merely because he had lived there for some time. The room where he had painted the sign was once, at his request, shown to us by the landlady, at which he was much pleased. Another time we went over ditches and brick-fields, near Somers Town, to look at the yard where Morland used to keep his pigs, rabbits, &c, and where he said Morland had given him lessons: he even pointed out their respective places, and the window where he used to sit. When Frank and myself were in the van, during a walk — he being behind, sketching — and we saw

anything we thought would suit him, we called to him to come on, saying, ' Bill, here 's another sketch for Morland.' The first oil-painting he ever did was not a happy subject for a young artist; it was a portrait of himself, dressed in a blue coat and striped yellow waistcoat, a la Morland. I can now well imagine how he must have been vexed, when he showed it to me the first time, and asked if I knew who it was like: it baffled me to guess. However, as he said all our family knew who it was, I was allowed to take it home for their opinion: they were all, like myself, at fault. When he told me it was himself I could not help laughing; it was no more like him than it was like me: this made him very angry, and caused him to give my judgment in the Art a very contemptible name. When I got married our meetings became less frequent; and although we were friendly, and he called several times to see me in Wardour-street, they gradually became fewer in number."

Such are Mr. Kirton's recollections of the painter's early apprenticeship to the Art, To those who find pleasure in tracing genius back to its first sources, — to its first bursts of enthusiasm, — to its first disappointments, this little narrative will not be read without curiosity and interest, and will prepare the mind agreeably to follow those records of the youthful progress of the subject of this Memoir which it is now necessary to resume.

The year 1807 brought with it an important epoch in the painter's life. By this time he had for many years drawn from the best models he could procure, had studied under his father and Morland, and had attained correctness of eye and hand, while assisting, at the same time, in his own support, by copying pictures of good and various schools. He was now to devote himself more usefully and entirely to his own improvement in the Art, by entering as a student at the Royal Academy. His name appears in the catalogue of that Institution for 1807, as a contributor to its exhibition, as well as an attendant on its schools; but as I never heard

him refer to the two pictures then sent in, (both views near Millbank) I can only imagine that he had forgotten them, or that he thought them productions too puerile to be deserving of mention to anyone. In a letter from his pen, written to answer a demand for some autobiographical notices of his life, to be inserted in a periodical publication, he thus expresses himself with regard to his early education and first successes in the Art.

"My father, William Collins, was considered a man of talent. * * * In the early part of his life he contributed very largely to the Journal published by Woodfall. His taste in, and love for, the Fine Arts, he constantly evinced in his writings and his encouragement of rising merit. From such a source it is not extraordinary that I should derive a partiality for painting. He was my only instructor — indeed his judgment was so matured that the lessons he imprinted upon my mind I hope I shall never forget, * * * In the year 1807, I was admitted a student of the Royal Academy, where I was regular in my attendance on the different schools. In 1809 and 1810, I became honored with some share of public notice, through the medium of the British Institution. * * * "

In the following letter, written by the painter from a friend's house to his family, and in the kind and cheerful answer which it called forth, will be found some reference to the time of his entry on his new sphere of duties, and employments at the Royal Academy.

" To Mr. W. Collins, sen.

" Dorking, July 8th, 1807.

" Dear Father, — I think I shall come home either on Saturday or Monday next; but as it will be probably necessary to pay the carriage on or before my arrival, (you understand me) and having got rid of most of my cash, it follows that, as usual, you must raise if possible a certain sum, not exceeding a one pound note, which I think will

come cheaper to me than any smaller amount. I received the colors the same evening you sent them. I am very much obliged to you; as also for the letter. I live here like a prince.* I was at the theatre, Dorking, a few nights since, which most elegantly gratified the senses, that of smelling not even excepted — there being four candles to light us all; two of which, by about nine o'clock, (no doubt frightened at the company) hid themselves in their sockets! There were also four lamps for stage lights, which helped to expose the following audience:— Boxes, six; Pit, sixteen; Gallery, twenty -five!

" I should be glad to know if the Academy is open; and any other information you choose to give, will be very acceptable to yours affectionately,

" W. Collins."

[His usual anxiety to deserve the hospitality of his friends prompted him to ornament a summer house, belonging to the gentleman with whom he was now staying, with imitations of busts, in niches, all round the walls. They remained there until very lately.]*

" To Mr. W. Collins, jun.

" London, 9th July, 1807.

" * * * We were certain our good friends would entertain you in the most hospitable manner, though we could have had no such ambitious hope of your being treated "like a prince." However, I trust my good friend Moore will impart a little of his philosophical indifference respecting the good things of this life to you, before you depart for humble home, lest the contrast between living " like a prince," and being the son of a poor author, may be too much for the lofty notions of your royal highness. Enclosed, for all this, you will find the sum you desired; and, were my funds equal to those of our gracious Monarch — or rather, had I as many pence as he is said to have millions of pounds, be

assured you should be infinitely more than welcome to twenty times this paltry sum. You inquire respecting the opening of the Academy, and I can tell you it opened last Monday, notice of which was given to all the students by public advertisement; and I shall be glad if you can, without being pressed to the contrary, come up to town when my friend Moore does — knowing that you can never come in safer, or better company. * * *

" Your affectionate Father,

" William Collins."

A few days after this, the " son of the poor author" quitted his little paternal studio, and with a beating heart entered the Academic lists that were to prepare him for the Artist's course — then little suspecting that he was destined to add one more to the bright list of modern English painters, who have passed through the schools of the Academy on their way to the gates of Fame.

CHAPTER II. 1807—1816.

In commencing his course of instruction at the Royal Academy, the student sets out by making drawings from the best casts of the finest antique statues. By this first process his taste is formed on the universal and immutable models of the highest excellence in the Art he is to adopt; and he proceeds to the next gradation in his studies, drawing from the living model, with such fixed ideas of symmetry and proportion as preserve him from confusing the faults and excellencies of the animated form, and enable him to appreciate its higher and more important general qualities, as the ulterior object of one main branch of his professional qualifications. "While his ideas are thus preserved from the degeneration which the unavoidable imperfections of the models before him might otherwise inspire, the most perfect outward and mechanical correctness of eye and hand is demanded from him, in his representations of the form; while a readiness in rightly interpreting the position, action, and appearance, of muscles and joints, is instilled by the annual delivery of lectures on pictorial anatomy, by the best professors which that class of English medical science can afford. Nor is this all. While he is thus attaining knowledge of Nature, with ease, harmony, and correctness of pencil; from the study of the living model, he is enabled at the same time to learn color, composition, and light and shade, by the privilege of copying from pictures by the old masters, in the School of Painting. Here his studies (as in the other schools) are superintended directly by the Royal Academicians, who advise, assist, and encourage him, until