

Thomson Willing

**Some
Old Time
Beauties**

 **Publio**

Some Old Time Beauties

After Portraits by the English Masters, with Embellishment and Comment

Thomson Willing

Publio Kiadó

2013

Minden jog fenntartva!

GEORGIANA, DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE GAINSBOROUGH

The Dashing Duchess,—the impulsive, ebullient beauty whose smile swayed ministers, and for whose favor princes were beggars! A loveliness of manner, as of feature, such seductive color,—glowing carnations,—and such golden-brown hair, with a fine figure, made up an opulent personality, than which no more consummate type of beauty has been preserved to us by painter or poet.

Georgiana Spencer was the daughter of Lord Spencer, afterwards first Earl Spencer; but her impulsiveness, her waywardness, and improvidence were a legacy from her grandfather, "Jack" Spencer, the grandson and special favorite of the beautiful Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. Her "Torismond," she called him. His was a career of profligacy, a course of error and extravagance. His mother was Lady Sunderland, known in society as "the little Whig," from her small stature and her persistent politics. Her party badge was always worn,—the black patch on the left side of the face, as distinguished from the Tory fashion of wearing it on the right side. So Georgiana came legitimately by her beauty, her Whiggish politics, and her versatile vivacity of manner, as well as her improvidence and indiscretion.

But her mother's strong character was a potent influence. She was the daughter of the Right Honorable Stephen Poyntz, and was of high repute for generosity, for sensibility, for charity, and for courteous dignity of demeanor. We hear of Georgiana being a beautiful child; and Reynolds as well as Gainsborough, both made painted record of that childish beauty. Her brightness of mind gave her an interest in art, in music, and in literature; and, though not proficient in the practice of either, she had more than the society woman's knowledge of them. At seventeen, she married William, fifth Duke of Devonshire, ten years her senior. His was a temperament antipathetic to hers,—unsympathetic, unimpressionable, and taciturn, yet withal of the Cavendish characteristic persistency of purpose and honest intent.

The Duchess at once became a queen of society in the Carlton House Court. Devonshire House was an assembly place for the Whigs; and its lovely mistress was the hostess of many a statesman exalted by his wit, as of many a politician with following by virtue of his station. Like all radical companies, it was a motley mixture that found welcome there. The Prince of Wales was a devotee. The then shining Sheridan was a frequenter; but with the name of Fox has that of the Duchess been more associated than of aught other. Her supremacy among these companions was not in the manner of the French Salon leaders,—while wit, knowledge, and tact were hers, she lived not by learning, but by her liveliness and jollity. She was not the scholar in politics, but the politician among scholars out of school.

It was a roystering, revelling company; and political as well as personal penury became the portion of many as the result of these improvident and profligate days. The episode of the Duchess's career which is most known, is her purchase, by a kiss, of a vote for Fox when she was championing his cause in an election, and canvassing for votes in company with her sister, Lady Duncannon. It was said, "never before had two such lovely portraits appeared on a canvass." A butcher bargained for his vote by asking a kiss from the lovely lips of the seductive Duchess. The price was paid, amid the plaudits of the crowd. An Irish elector, impressed by the fair appellant's vivacity, exclaimed: "I could light my pipe at her eyes."

Fox was elected for the Tory borough of Westminster, and great was the rejoicing at Carlton House. A *fête* was given on the grounds the day following, and the ordinarily well-apparelled Prince appeared in a superb costume of the radical colors, blue and buff. This was the period of the Duchess's greatest glory, as well as of her most superb charm of personality; and it was about this period that Gainsborough painted his perennially delightful presentment of her. She was then twenty-seven years of age, and had been married ten years. Wraxall wrote what is probably the best contemporary description of her: "The personal charms of the Duchess of Devonshire constituted her smallest pretensions to universal admiration; nor did her beauty consist, like that of the Gunnings, in regularity of features, and faultless formation of limbs and shape; it lay in the amenity and graces of her deportment, in her irresistible manners, and the seduction of her society. Her hair was not without a tinge of red; and her face, though pleasing, yet, had it not been illuminated by her mind, might have been considered an ordinary countenance."

It is said of Gainsborough that, while painting the Duchess, "he drew his wet pencil across a mouth all thought exquisitely lovely, saying, 'Her Grace is too hard for me.'"

The lady later knew the cuts of comment, and the keen pain of justifiable jealousy. The rival in her husband's attentions was Lady

Elizabeth Foster, daughter of the Earl of Bristol, a brunette of handsome presence, and at the death of Georgiana, in 1806, she became the second wife of the Duke. There was an apparent friendship between the ladies, and Lady Elizabeth for a time lived under the same roof as the Duchess.

Madame d'Arblay, in 1791, visited her at Bath, and made record then of her introduction to the Duchess, and indicated the premonition of trouble in this wise. "Presently followed two ladies; Lady Spencer, with a look and manner warmly announcing pleasure in what she was doing, then introduced me to the first of them, saying, 'Duchess of Devonshire, Miss Burney.' She made me a very civil compliment upon hoping my health was recovering; and Lady Spencer then, slightly, and as if unavoidably, said, 'Lady Elizabeth Foster.'" Gibbon said of the latter, that, "No man could withstand her; and that if she chose to beckon the Lord Chancellor from his woolsack, in full sight of the world, he could not resist obedience." Reynolds painted a portrait of her, showing a bright-eyed, smiling lady, with close-curved hair, of girlish appearance. In Samuel Rogers's "Table Talk" are several mentions of the famous Georgiana, and especially one which tells of her love for gambling. "Gaming was the rage during her day; she indulged in it, and was made miserable by her debts. A faro-table was kept by Martindale, at which the Duchess and other high fashionables used to play. Sheridan said that the Duchess and Martindale had agreed that whatever they two won from each other should be sometimes *double*, sometimes *treble*, what it was called. And Sheridan assured me that he had handed the Duchess into her carriage when she was literally sobbing at her losses, she having lost fifteen hundred pounds, when it was supposed to be only five hundred pounds." A life such as she then led surely affected her appearance. In 1783, Walpole wrote: "The Duchess of Devonshire, the empress of fashion, is no beauty at all. She was a very fine woman, with all the freshness of youth and health, but verges fast to a coarseness.

The offspring of the Duchess Georgiana were: Georgiana Dorothy, afterwards Countess Carlisle, whose letters were lately published, and exhibit an original observation and a terse style of record; Henrietta Elizabeth, later Countess Granville; and a son, who succeeded to the Dukedom. About the latter's birth was some mystery; insinuation was active. The Duchess had little liking for domestic life, so normal neglect of child may have been construed into an unnatural dislike. Her son never married. Through the stress of the home infelicity, her beauty waned; but her bearing and breeding kept her paramount in her set. She is known to this later generation only as a superb beauty who stands with such opulent charm of costume, and of fine hauteur of manner, amid the noble groves of Chatsworth—as the once potential original of Gainsborough's greatest portrait. "The bust outlasts the throne, the coin Tiberius."

A most pathetic tribute to the beauty of the Duchess was paid by "Peter Pindar" (Dr. Wolcot), who addressed "A Petition to Time in favor of the Duchess of Devonshire," and implored the Inexorable thus:—