Voyages

Moodie, Susanna, Thurston, John

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Moodie, Susanna and John Thurston.
Voyages: Short Narratives of Susanna Moodie.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6619

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=149256
My cousin was an artist. An odd man in the fullest acceptance of the word. He was odd in his appearance, in his manners, in his expressions, and ways of thinking. A perfect original, for I never met with any one like him, in my long journey through life.

He had served his apprenticeship with the great Bartolozzy, who was the first copper-plate engraver of his time.

He had so won the esteem of his celebrated master, that on the expiration of his apprenticeship, he returned to him the £400 premium he had received with him, together with a pair of handsome gold knee-buckles, which were indispensable articles in a gentleman's dress of the last century.

During his long residence with the Italians, he had imbibed a great dislike to every thing English. He wrote and spoke in the Italian language. I verily believe, that he thought in Italian; and being an exquisite musician, both on the viol to Gomba and the violin, never played any but Italian music. He was a Catholic too, although born of Protestant parents. Not that he had any particular preference for that religion, for I don't think that he troubled his mind at all about it; but it was, he said, "The religion of Kings and Emperors. The only one fit for a gentleman, and a man of taste."

He admired the grandeur of the ceremonial, which he considered highly picturesque; and the works of art that
adorned the beautiful chapel in Spanish Place; and above all, the exquisite music and singing.

When staying with him and his niece, during the winter of 1826, he always insisted upon our going with him to this place of worship. It was there that my soul thrilled to the inspired notes of the divine Malabran, and many of the great musical celebrities of that day.

"You Protestants," he would say, "give your best music to the Devil; we Catholics to God."

He used to repeat an anecdote of a friend of his, a Mr. Nugent, who was also a Catholic, and a brother artist, with great glee. Some gentleman, who was sitting for his portrait, was laughing at him about his religion.

"You believe in Purgatory too?"

"Yes sir," replied Nugent, "and let me tell you, that you may go farther and fare worse!"

Cousin was considerably more than sixty when I first knew him. He was above the middle size, of a thin spare figure, and had the finest dark eyes I ever saw in a human head. His features were regular, and very handsome; but his face was sadly marred by the small-pox — a matter to him of deep and lasting regret.

"Beauty is God's greatest gift," he would say. "It is rank, wealth, power. What compensation can the world give to one who is cursed with hopeless ugliness?"

No one could look into his intelligent face, and think him ugly. But then, he dressed in such a queer fashion, and paid so little attention to his toilet, that days would pass without his combing his hair or washing his hands and face. The young artists, who loved him for his benevolence, and to whom he was a father in times of distress, had nick-named him "Dirty Dick." He knew it, but did not reform his slovenly habits. "Pho! Pho! what does it matter. I am an old man. Who cares for old men? Let them call me what they like. I mean to do as I please."

Every thing was dirty about him. His studio was a dark den, in which every thing was covered with a deep layer of dust. The floor was strewn with dirty music and dirty old books, for he was an antiquarian, among his other
accomplishments, and he sat at a dirty easel, in an old thread-bare black coat and pants, now brown with age. His fine iron-grey hair, curling round his lofty temples in tangled masses — his left hand serving for a palette, and covered with patches of color most laughable to behold.

I used to laugh at him and quiz him most outrageous-ly. I was a great favorite with the old man, and he took it all in good part. His walking costume was still more ridiculous, and consisted of a blue dress coat and gilt buttons, buff leather breeches and Hessian military boots, a yellow Cassimere waistcoat, and a high, stiff black stock. I was really ashamed of being seen with him in the streets. Every one turned round and looked at us. He walked so rapidly, that as we went up Oxford street, every coachman threw open the door of his vehicle.

“A coach — want a coach, sir. Camberwell — Peckham, sir.”

Cousin would laugh, put out his tongue — an ugly fashion he had — and reply: —

“Coach be — I prefer the Apostles’ horses!”

An Irishman answered him very pertly — “An’ bedad they can travel purty fast!”

Cousin was a confirmed old bachelor, but he had once been in love. But I will tell the story as it was told to me.

“The rich banker, Mr. H ——, had an only daughter — a very beautiful girl. You know how Tom C —— admires beauty! He met the young lady at her father’s table, and fell head over ears in love. He was a fine clever young fellow in those days. The old gentleman was greatly pleased with his wit and talent, and gave him a carte blanche to his house. Tom availed himself of the privilege, and went every day to look at Arabella H ——; for naturally shy with women, he seldom plucked up courage enough to speak to her, still less to inform her of his passion. The young lady, I have every reason to know, loved him too; but as it is not customary for women to make the first advances, she patiently waited from day to day, expecting the young artist to declare himself. This state of things lasted for seven years. The young lady grew tired of her tardy wooer.

My Cousin Tom
One day he went as usual, and missed his idol from her place at table. ‘Where is Arabella — is she ill?’ he enquired anxiously of her father.

“Oh have you not heard the news, Tom? Arabella is married!”

“Is she!” with a great oath. ‘Then what business have I here!’

“He started up from the table, and ran through the streets like a madman, without his hat, and making the most vehement gesticulations, and never entered the house again. Poor Tom! It was a dreadful disappointment; he has never studied the graces, except in pictures, since. He, however, has not forgotten his first love: I can trace her likeness in every female head he paints.”

He had a collection of very fine paintings from the old masters, which covered the walls of his dining-room; but they were so covered with the accumulated dust of years, that it hid the pictures more effectually than any veil. One day, when he was absent at a sale of books, I took upon myself to clean the neglected master-pieces. I wish I had let it alone; they were only fit for a bachelor artist’s private studio. His old housekeeper, a character in her way, stood by, quietly watching the progress of the work.

“Now you see what you have done! My dear old mistress, master’s mother, always kept them naked figures behind muslin curtains; but master is so absent-minded, he’ll never notice them coming staring out upon us, in broad daylight.”

Fortunately for me, her prediction was verified. He never noticed the brilliancy of the restored pictures. He had a habit of talking aloud to himself; but as it was always in a foreign language — for he was a great linguist — he had the talk all to himself. He was once coming down to — — , to spend the Christmas with us, and it so happened, that he was the only passenger in the mail. Finding the time hang heavily on his hands, he began repeating, in a loud sonorous voice, the first canto in the “Jerusalem Delivered” of Tasso. When the coach stopped to change horses, old Jey, the guard, and father of the present
celebrated marine artist, put his head in at the window. “For God-sake, Mr. C ——, tell me to whom you are talking. I am sure there is no one but yourself in the coach.”

“To the Devil!” was the curt reply.

“Indeed, sir — He does not often travel this road. — I hope you may find him a pleasant companion!”

Cousin laughed for a week over this adventure. When speaking of his younger days, it was always with deep regret that they had so soon vanished; and he generally ended such reminiscenses with blasphemously cursing his old age.

Another of his oddities consisted in his wishing to be the last man, that he might see the destruction of the earth. “What a grand spectacle,” he would say. “It would be worth living for a thousand years to witness.”

He was the first artist that used the pencil in water-color portraits. These he executed so well, that his studio never wanted a subject. Five and twenty guineas was his usual price for a likeness; which, as he worked very rapidly, was generally finished in two sittings. He was a master in his art. His pictures were very elegant; and he had a peculiar faculty of conveying to paper or canvass the exact expression of the sitter’s face. He hated to paint an ugly person, and as a consequence, his likenesses were always flattering.

“You can never make a woman as good looking as she thinks herself. They like to be flattered. It is only improving the features a little, and giving a better complexion than nature gave. While you retain the expression in which the real identity lies, you must get a good likeness — a picture that will please every one.”

“But, cousin, is that right?”

“Yes, it pleases them, and fills my pockets, and both parties are satisfied. I never painted but one person whose vanity it was impossible to gratify. He was the ugliest man in London, and had the worst countenance I ever saw. In fact, a perfect brute! Lord George Gordon, of Wilkes and Liberty notoriety. He sat to me fourteen times, for his portrait. I improved his coarse features as much as I could; but with all my skill, he made a vile picture. His face was
covered with warts. I omitted them, and gave nature the lie, by giving him an expression which she had not given. He was still unsatisfied. I then drew him just as he was — warts and all. He was in a furious rage, and said 'I had painted him like the Devil!'

"I do not think, my Lord, that the Devil would be flattered with the likeness. You are a — ugly fellow. You may take the portraits or leave them; but you shall pay me for the time I have wasted on such a disagreeable subject.' He tore the pictures to pieces, and left me, foaming with passion. 'But I made him pay me,' he said, rubbing his hands with glee. 'Yes; I made him pay me!'"

He had a beautiful half-length portrait of Lady Hamilton. It was taken at the time she was struggling for bread, and sitting as a model to young artists. It was a charming face. I was never tired of looking at it.

"Ah, poor Emma!" he said, gloomily. "She was one of nature's master-pieces — a Queen of Beauty! Like Absalom, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot, she was without spot or blemish. You will find the models of her foot and hand in that closet. The Venus de Medici could not show finer. And what was her fate?"

"She deserved it!" I said, coldly.

"Bah! that's the way women judge each other. They are merciless. She married for bread — to obtain a home — a kind, talented man, double her age. The result might have been anticipated. Clever, fascinating, beautiful — think of the temptations that surrounded her! the admiration she excited wherever she went! She made Nelson a hero! He dying, bequeathed her to his country; and that country left her to perish in poverty, heart-broken and alone. When I was last in France, I went to see her grave. No stone marks the spot; and the grave was so shallow, that by putting down my stick through the loose sand, I could touch the coffin. It makes me savage to think of it."

With all his eccentricities, cousin Tom had a large, generous heart. He heard that a young, promising artist, whom he had not seen for some time, was without employment, and starving in a garret. He sent him, anonymously,
thirty pounds; and rubbing his hands, and laughing, said, as if to himself, "Poor Devil, he will get a good supper tonight, without feeling obliged to any one!"

In one of his rambles, he found two forlorn cats locked up in the area of an old stone house in Charlotte street. The creatures could neither get out of the area, nor back into the house. "They were perfect skeletons — mad with hunger," he said. "I had to buy them meat, or they would have devoured each other."

For more than a month he visited these cats every day, bearing on a skewer a supply of cat's meat. The animals knew his step, and used to greet him with a chorus of affectionate mews. One night we were just sitting down to tea, when he suddenly started up, with an oath. "I have forgotten to feed my prisoners!" and rushed out to supply their wants.

New tenants came to the house. The cats were released from durance vile; but he called upon the fresh occupants, and recommended his poor pensioners to their protection.

While I am upon the subject of cats, I will relate one of the drollest things that cousin did, while I was staying at his house. He had a large cat, whom he called "Black Tom." The creature was without a white hair — as black as night. It had a weird, ghost-like appearance, sitting, silently staring at you, with its large yellow eyes, in the dim twilight of a dingy London house. Cousin was very fond of his black namesake, and made him the sharer of both his bed and board. The attachment was mutual. Tom always followed close at his master's heels, or sat perched upon his knee, by the hour together.

It was droll to see cousin nursing his favourite. He had a habit of leaning back in his chair, with his hands clasped behind his head — his eyes closed, and himself in a half-dreamy state, — only that he kept up a perpetual tattooing with both his feet, which not only made him shake all over, but jarred the room and every thing in it. As the motion increased in violence, Tom actually danced up and down upon his master's knee, uttering now and then a
plaintive remonstrance, in sundry low mews. It was impossible to witness this without laughing.

For three days Black Tom disappeared. At the end of the first, cousin began to grow fidgety; at the close of the second, he speculated sadly about his pet, and went out into the street calling "Tom! Tom!" in a melancholy voice, and enquiring of the wondering foot passengers, if they had "seen his black cat?"

The people, I have no doubt, thought him mad.

The next day his anxiety and grief grew desperate. He wrote a large placard, describing Tom's personal peculiarities, and offering the reward of a sovereign to any one who would restore him to his rightful owner. This he pasted, with his own hands, upon a large iron gate opposite, that closed a short cut from Newman street into Rathbone Place.

Before three hours had elapsed, the house was besieged with boys, bringing (in hope of getting the reward) cats in baskets — cats in bags, or lugged by the neck and tail. Dire were the mewings, as each poor puss was held up for inspection; and loud the execrations of cousin, when a red or gray cat was offered to his notice, or a slim, lean cat of the genus feminine. At length a boy more fortunate than the rest, presented a black cat in a pillow-case, which cousin was determined must be Tom, because it was black; and he paid the joyful bearer the sovereign, without further parley. The animal was set loose in the hall; but instead of answering to the call of the delighted owner, it gave a loud squall, and rushed down into the kitchen, taking refuge in the copper-hole.

An hour after, I found cousin's housekeeper, Jane, upon her knees, peering under the copper, and talking thus: — "Is it Tom? No, it isn't. Well, I think it is; but he don't seem to me to behave like him. Tom! Tom!"

"Mew!" from the frightened puss. "Law! I don't think it can be he. That's not his way of mewing. It isn't Tom. I believe master has thrown that sovereign of his into the dirt. Do, Miss S ———, just look here, and tell me if that is our own Tom!"
I was soon down on my knees beside her, peeping at the rescued Tom, whose eyes glared at us, like two burning coals, from his dingy retreat.

“Had Tom a white patch on his breast, Jane?”

“No, no. He was as black as soot!”

I fell a laughing. “Mercy! what will cousin say to this beast with a white shirt-frill?”

“It isn’t Tom, then? He shan’t stay a moment here,” cried Jane, starting up, and seizing the broom. “I knew it wasn’t our own decent-behaved cat. Out, brute!” One touch of the broom, away rushed the surreptitious Tom. I opened the door, and he passed like a flash into the street.

“Law! how shall I tell master? He’ll be so mad; and when he gets angry, he swears so. It is awful to hear him.”

“I’ll tell him.”

To me young and full of mischief, it was a capital joke. I heard the floor shaking as I approached the parlour. Cousin was tattooing as usual, with both his feet, and talking to himself. I opened the door; was it ghost or demon! The real Simon Pure was dancing up and down on his master’s knee!

“Where did you find Tom?”

“Oh, he came home of himself. I was sitting thinking of him, when he jumped up upon my knee, and began drumming with all his might.”

“But it was not Tom for whom you gave the sovereign.”

“I know it,” said cousin, quietly. “It’s all the same. I gave the sovereign to recover Tom, and he is here. I should have lost it anyhow; and that poor boy has got a famous price for the lean family cat. I’m contented; Tom’s happy; and that young imp is rejoicing over his good fortune — perhaps buying bread for his starving mother.”

Tom played his master a sad trick a few weeks after this, which in the first moments of exasperation, nearly cost puss his life.

Cousin had been four years painting a half-length picture in oils, of the Madonna. Many beautiful faces had looked out from that canvass, but none satisfied the artist.
Whenever the picture was nearly finished, he expunged it, and commenced a new one. His old friend, C. G ——, the Consul-General for Prussia, used to step in every day for a chat with him. "Ah! dere he is, at de everlastin' virgin," was the common salutation he gave the artist.

It was during my stay with him that the picture was finished to his entire satisfaction. It wanted but a few days for the opening of the Exhibition at Somerset House, and he was anxious to send something.

"Ah! she will do now!" he cried, after giving the last touches. "What do you think S ——," to me.

"She is divine! But how will you get the picture dry in time to send?"

"I will manage that." And he whistled, sung, rubbed his hands, and tattooed with his feet, more vigorously than ever.

I was going out to a party in the evening with my cousin Eliza, his niece. We had washed some lace edge to trim the front of our dresses. There was a paved court behind the house, into which the studio opened. Against the dingy brick wall, cousin had tried to cherish a few stunted rose trees. Upon the still leafless boughs of said trees, I had hung our small wash to dry. Opposite the dingy brick wall on the one side, was the steep side of the next house, with no window looking into our court, but a blank, which was meant to represent one. In this blank, brick recess, cousin had placed the Madonna to dry in the shade; and truly no sun ever peered into that narrow court, surrounded by lofty walls.

After we had dined, I went to fetch in the lace, and prepare for the evening.

"What are you laughing at, in that outrageous manner? Girl, you will kill yourself!" and cousin Tom emerged out of the studio. I was holding to the iron rails, on either side of the stone steps, that led down into the court.

The tears were running down my cheeks. I pointed up to the picture. "Did you ever see before a Madonna with a moustache?"

How he storm'd, and raged, and stamped — and how
I laughed! I knew it was cruel. I tried to stop it. I was sorry — really sorry — but if I had had to die for it, laugh I must. The Madonna had been placed head downwards in the blind window. Black Tom, who had followed his master into the court when he put up the picture, no sooner found the court clear than he jumped up to the stone ledge of the blank recess, and began walking to and fro in front of the painting, touching it every time he passed; and as the color was quite wet, he not only took that off, but left a patch of black hairs in its stead. One of the virgin's eyes had been wiped out with his tail; and he had bestowed upon the elegant chin, a regular beard. She looked everything but divine — the most ridiculous and disreputable caricature of beauty.

In the meanwhile, the author of the mischief, unconscious of the heretical sacrilege of which he had been guilty, jumped down from his lofty perch, and began rubbing himself against the poor artist's legs — bestowing upon the old shabby pants a layer of paint, mingled with black hairs. "Tom, you rascal! You have ruined me! I will kill you!"

He would have kept his word, had not Tom looked up in his face, and uttered one of his little affectionate greetings. This softened his master's ire.

"Take him out of my sight, S. You were worse than him, for laughing at the destruction of my best picture, for you knew how it would annoy me!"

"I plead guilty; but just look at it yourself. How could any one help it?"

He looked — fell a laughing; took down the unlucky picture, and flung it back into the studio, then turning to me, said, with his usual air of quiet drollery: "I forgive you, Gipsy! I wonder the transfiguration did not make the cat laugh!"

He came home one night very gloomy and sad, and began walking to and fro the long drawing-room, with rapid steps, and talking half-aloud to himself. "John Milton dead — dead in the workhouse — and I not know it! I his old friend and fellow-student. Dear me! it's too dreadful to
be true! A man of his talent to be allowed to perish thus! It's a disgrace to the country. Yes! yes! such is the fate of genius."

This Milton was a landscape painter and engraver of some eminence. Cousin Tom brooded for months over his sad fate.

Dear old cousin, — some of the happiest months I ever spent in London were spent in that dirty house in Newman street. Though I laughed at your oddities, I loved you for your real worth. I was young then — full of hope, and ambitious of future fame. You encouraged all my scribbling propensities, and prophesied — . Ah, well! it never came to pass. Like you, I shall sink to an unknown and unhonored grave, and be forgotten in the land of my exile.

—