

TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 11.—JOSEPH NOLLEKENS, R.A.

FEW visitors to our national collection of pictures at Marlborough House can fail to be interested with a well-executed portrait by Sir William Beechey of an artist, modelling-tool in hand, who looks forth at the spectator, with a somewhat melancholy face, and an eye worn with labour: the structure of the face is not English, but there is an expression about it which would cause inquiry as to the career of the person thus represented. It is the portrait of Joseph Nollekens, a sculptor of great repute in his day, who, successfully practising the most profitable part of his art, bust-making, made much money, but only a temporary fame.

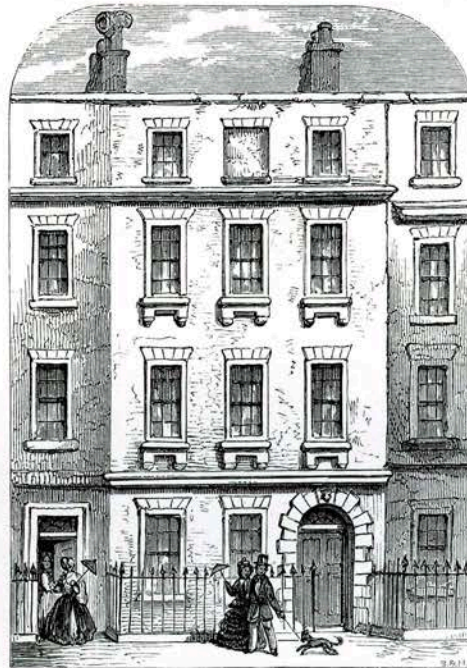
That no characters are so good or so bad as biographers make them, is a trite remark frequently enforced by experience. History as well as biography takes much of its tone from the mind of the writer. Had Nollekens left his biographer and pupil, J. T. Smith, the legacy he so confidently expected, the two volumes of small-minded narrative he gave the world as a history of "Nollekens and his Times" might have been laudatory of the genius of the sculptor, instead of wearisome with petty details of his household arrangements, with which the public have nothing to do, and would never have known but from one who was trustfully admitted into his household, and who should have reflected how far his conduct, and that of others like him, made and confirmed the parsimony of Nollekens,—by submitting to and encouraging meanness for the sake of reaping the ultimate gain of a great legacy. There is certainly poetic justice done when Volpone disappoints his parasites.

Smith commences his volumes with the bold announcement in his preface, "I am convinced that England has not produced such a character since the death of Elwes;" yet he cannot help relating his charitable liberality to Richardson, and many traits that show Nollekens only wanted the bias of his mind directed towards good, instead of fostered towards evil, by persons who would submit to anything for future gain, though listening to and recording the scandal of the lowest servants of his house, and when the man was laid in his grave printing trashy conversations not worth the reading. The best amongst us could scarcely stand so severe a test.

Joseph Nollekens was descended from foreign parents: his father was born at Antwerp; his mother was a Frenchwoman. Their son, the sculptor, was born on the 11th of August, 1737, at 28, Dean Street, Soho, in the house shown in our engraving, and in which the father died. At that period Soho Square and the neighbourhood was the fashionable residence of the nobility, and in the outskirts of London. Nollekens used to speak of his early reminiscences of that neighbourhood, when four ambassadors lived in the square, and when a windmill and a pond of water occupied the ground where Percy Chapel now stands, and it was a country walk to Marylebone Gardens. When Nollekens was thirteen years of age, he was apprenticed to Scheemakers, at that time in the height of fame, and some of whose best works are in that museum of monumental sculpture, Westminster Abbey. He was a successful student, and was awarded several useful money prizes by the Society of Arts. With these and other savings he went to Rome in 1760, where he worked for some years, and made money, returning to Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square, and marrying the daughter of Mr. Welch, the magistrate, a lady who appears to have been more parsimonious than her husband. It was probably this concatenation of circumstances that confirmed his character; but he never appears to have been other than a cheerful, kind-hearted man, and in advanced age, after the death of his wife, relaxed greatly in his narrow habits.

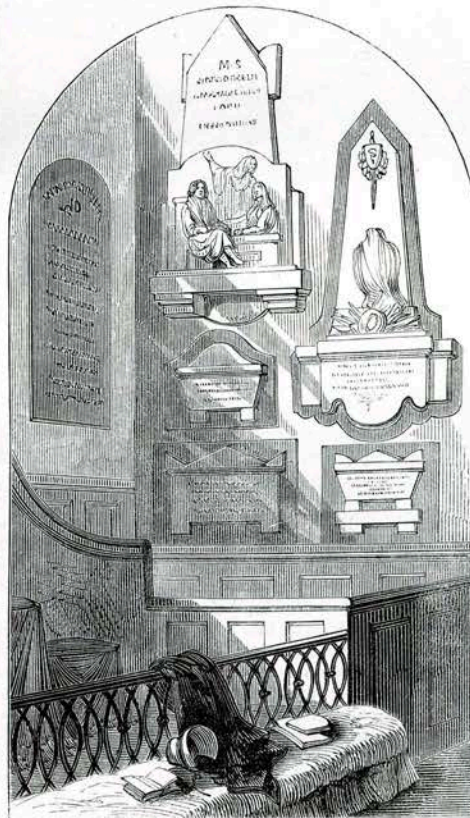
To understand Nollekens' character properly, it is necessary to take a more philosophical review of his peculiar position in early life. He came of a family of artists, persecuted people of another faith, necessitated to live poorly, to struggle hard for what they might obtain, and live among strangers without much sympathy; and in some

instances incur the dangers of strong religious prejudice. Left fatherless in early life, his mother married again, and retired to Wales, leaving Nollekens without the aid of money, advice, or education. It was a hard life for an orphan boy, to be left thus friendless in the great world of London; all the harder from the knowledge that a mother's



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love—the richest of prizes to a boy—he could never enjoy, not from any fault of his own, but from the desertion of her who should have given it. In his poverty he never did a dishonourable act; he clung to society as best he could by little acts of polite service, and received some



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friendship in return. Was he to blame if the world taught him it respected not talent, or gave it a free stage to labour on, unbacked by some independence of pocket? Consequently, when he was in Rome, he found he could more readily put some few pounds into his badly-

stocked purse by dealing in antiques than by sculpture. He purchased from the labourers who had discovered them, the terra-cottas they obtained in the Via Latina, and he sold them to Mr. Townley; they are now in our British Museum, with many other antiques, some of which have the work of Nollekens upon them, in the way of additions and restorations. The young man, by his prudence, made himself a respectable position; it was the misfortune of his early poverty, and the inherited parsimony of two generations, as well as a wife still more niggardly, that ended in making Nollekens what he was. But the worst that can be honestly said of him is, that he was close-handed for what he considered unnecessary extravagances; but he was unusually liberal to cases of real want or to charity; and to all about him he gave good wages, and occasional gratuities. It is quite as easy to prove him a justly-liberal man, as it is to prove him a miser. Allan Cunningham has dealt most honourably by him in the memoir he constructed out of most unpleasant material; his strong common sense and love of justice led him to this.

He relates how cheerfully Nollekens helped Chantrey, then young and unfriended, to a proper position in the Royal Academy Exhibition, when he sent his bust of Horne Tooke there; "having satisfied himself of its excellence, he turned round to those who were arranging the works for exhibition, and said, 'There's a fine, a very fine work; let the man who made it be known; remove one of my busts, and put this one in its place, for well it deserves it.'"

An unvarying success in his profession leaves no incident to narrate in the calm course of the sculptor's career. His busts were popular, and he had the advantage of the best sitters. Life with him was the prosecution of Art, and the equally quiet accumulation of money. Aided by his still more frugal spouse, he amassed a large fortune. He died in 1823, and was buried in Paddington Church, but it was not until fifteen years afterwards that any record of the fact appeared within its walls. At that time the Rev. Mr. Kerriek, the librarian of the public library of the Cambridge University, an old friend of the sculptor, and who was a large legatee under his will, commissioned Behnes to execute the one now placed there. The basso-relievo on it represents Nollekens in his studio at work upon the group which he designed and executed for the monument of Mrs. Heard, a work which aided greatly in securing his professional fame. The inscription above is very brief:—"M. S. Joseph Nollekens, R.A., ob. non. Kal. Maii, 1823, æt. 85. Requiescat in pace." It is among a group of monuments on the south side of the communion-table, quite in the corner of the wall, and above the monument to General Charles Crosby. The crowded tablets give this part of the church almost the effect of the show-room of a monumental sculptor.

Few of our suburban churches—for Paddington was "in the country" not many years ago—contain memorials of artists in such number as this one does. Of many of them the resting-place is unmarked; but here was buried Bushnell, the sculptor (of the figures on Temple Bar), and his more famous brother in the art, Thomas Banks, R.A. Three engravers—Francis Vivares (celebrated for his landscapes), John Hall, and Lewis Schiavonetti (best known by his engraving from Stothard's "Canterbury Pilgrims")—are also buried in the churchyard; where lie two painters—George Barrett, and William Collins, R.A. There are other Art-connections in the history of the older church, which stood in the burial-ground to the north of the present one. There William Hogarth was married to the daughter of Sir James Thornhill in 1729; and here lies Michael Bryan, author of the valuable "Dictionary of Painters and Engravers." A great artist in another walk of Art reposes here also—Reynolds' "Tragic Muse" (Mrs. Siddons), whose grand delineation of the noblest characters gave life and boldness to the designs of many artists, and whose fine figure and expressive face have been delineated by some of the greatest among them.

F. W. FAIRHOLT.