

# HALIFAX PEARL,

A VOLUME DEVOTED TO POLITE LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Published every Friday evening, at Fifteen Shillings per Annum, in advance.

VOLUME TWO.

FRIDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 9, 1833.

NUMBER FORTY FIVE.

## SAMUEL FOOTE, THE ECCENTRIC COMEDIAN.

Footo—the unscrupulous Mathews of the last century, and one of the most singular men ever produced in England—was born in 1721, at Truro in Cornwall. He could boast of being at least a gentleman by birth, for his father was a land-proprietor and magistrate of ancient descent, while his mother was the daughter of Sir Edward Goodere, Bart., who at one time represented the county of Hereford in Parliament. His wit was developed in his very childhood; and his power of mimicry is said to have been suddenly brought into play, when a boy of twelve, in consequence of a discussion arising at his father's table respecting a rustic who had fallen under the observation of the parochial authorities. He on this occasion gave so lively an image of the demeanour and language which three of the justices were likely to assume when the culprit should be brought before them, that his father, one of the individuals taken off, rewarded him for the amusement he had given the company, and thus unintentionally encouraged a propensity which was afterwards to lead the youth into a mode of life which no father could have helped regretting. He was educated at Worcester College, Oxford, which had been founded by one of his near relations, and of which the superior, Dr. Gower, was unfortunately an apt subject for his humour. Observing the rope of the chapel bell was allowed to hang near to the ground in an open space where cows were sometimes turned for the night, he hung a wisp of straw to the end of it; the unavoidable consequence was, that some one of the animals was sure to seize the straw in the course of the night, and thus cause the bell to toll. A solemn consultation was held, and the provost undertook with the sexton to sit up in the chapel all night, for the purpose of catching the delinquent. They took their dreary station; at the midnight hour the bell tolled as before: out rushed the two watchmen, one of whom, seizing the cow in the dark, thought he had caught a gentleman commoner; while the doctor, grasping the animal by a different part of its body, exclaimed that he was convinced the postman was the rogue, for he felt his horns. Lights were speedily brought, and disclosed the nature of the jest, which served Oxford in laughter for a week.

Footo was an idle student, for which he was some times punished by having severe tasks imposed on him, as if one who would not study the ordinary proper time could be expected to give his mind to an uninteresting pursuit for an extraordinary time. When summoned before the provost, in order to be reprimanded for his junketings, the wag would come with a vast folio dictionary under his arm; the doctor would begin, using, as was his custom, a great number of quaint learned words, on hearing which Footo would gravely beg pardon for interrupting him—look up the word in the dictionary—and then as gravely request him to go on. There could be no reasonable hope of such a youth as a student; yet he was sent to the Temple, with a view to his going to the bar. He is said to have here made no proficiency except in fashionable vices and dissipation. In 1741, he married a young lady of good family in Worcestershire, and immediately after went with his spouse to spend a month with his father in Cornwall.

Footo, having shortly after outrun his fortune, was induced by a bookseller, on a promise of ten pounds, to write a pamphlet in defence of his uncle Goodere, who was at this time in prison, previous to his trial for the inhuman murder of his brother, and for which he was afterwards executed. Perhaps some of the amiable prejudice called family pride aided in making him take up his pen in behalf of one who seems to have been as ruthless a monster as ever breathed. It must also be recollected that he was now only twenty. Whatever was the morality of the transaction—and indeed it is almost absurd to discuss such a point, considering the general nature of the man—it is related that when he went to receive the wages of his task, he was reduced so low as to be obliged to wear his boots to conceal that he wanted stockings. Having got the money, he bought a pair of stockings at a shop as he passed along. Immediately after, meeting a couple of boon companions, he was easily persuaded to go to dine with them at a tavern. While the wine was afterwards circulating, one of his friends exclaimed, "Why, hey, Footo, how is this? You seem to have no stockings on!" "No," replied the wit, with great presence of mind, "I never wear any at this time of the year, till I am going to dress for the evening; and you see (pulling out his recent purchase) I am always provided with a pair for the occasion." His mother succeeded by the death of her brother, Sir John D. Goodere, to five thousand per annum, but does not seem to have remained free from pecuniary embarrass-

ments more than her son. The celebrated correspondence between her and Footo, given in the jest-books, is quite authentic, but rather too laconically expressed. An authentic copy is subjoined:—

"DEAR SAM—I am in prison for debt; come and assist your loving mother,  
E. FOOTE."

"DEAR MOTHER—So am I; which prevents his duty being paid to his loving mother by her affectionate son,  
SAM. FOOTE."

P. S.—I have sent my attorney to assist you; in the mean time, let us hope better days."

It is not impossible that Mrs. Footo's imprisonment took place before her accession of fortune was realized, and when she was a widow, for her husband died soon after Sam's marriage. This lady lived to eighty-four, and is said to have been much like her son, both in body and mind—witty, social, and fond of a pretty strong joke. From the character of her brothers, it seems not unlikely that, with the humour she gave her son, she also communicated a certain degree of insanity, the source of the many eccentricities which he displayed through life.

The necessities arising from pure prodigality drove Footo to the stage in 1744. He appeared at the Haymarket Theatre, as Othello, Macklin supporting him in Iago; but the performance was a failure.

But when I played Othello, thousands swore  
They never saw such tragedy before—

says a rival wit in a retributory burlesque of the mimic. He tried comedy, and made a hit in the character of *Fondwife*. His salary proving unequal to his expenditure, he again became embarrassed, but relieved himself by an expedient, of which we will not attempt to estimate the morality. A lady of great fortune, anxious to be married, consulted the wit as to what she should do. He, recollecting his boon companion Sir Francis Delaval, who was as embarrassed as himself, recommended the lady to go to the conjuror in the Old Bailey, whom he represented as a man of uncommon skill and penetration. He employed another friend to personate the wise man, who depicted Sir Francis at full length, and described the time when, the place where, and the dress in which, she would see him. The lady was so struck with the coincidence of all the circumstances, as to marry the broken-down prodigal in a few days. An ample reward signalled the ingenuity of the adviser, and enabled him once more to face the world.

It was in spring 1747 that Footo commenced, in the Haymarket Theatre, his career as the sole entertainer of the audience, and thus was the originator of that kind of amusement which Dibdin, Mathews, and others, afterwards practised with success. The piece, written by himself, and styled the *Divisions of the Morning*, consisted chiefly of a series of imitations of well-known living persons. It met with immense applause, and soon raised the jealousy of the two great theatres of the metropolis, through whose intervention his career was stopped by the Westminster justices. In this dilemma he took it upon himself to invite the public one evening to tea: multitudes came; and while all were wondering what he would do, he appeared before them, and mentioned that, "as he was training some young performers for the stage, he would, while tea was getting ready, proceed, if they had no objection, with his instructions." This, it may easily be conceived, was nothing else than a plan for taking off the players who were persecuting him, at the same time that he evaded the consequences of their rancour. His invitations to tea brought splendid audiences, and much money, but were interrupted by his receipt of a large legacy which kept him for five years in the condition of an idle voluptuary. In 1753, he once more became connected with the stage, for which he produced a comedy in two acts, entitled *Taste*, which experienced great success, and was followed by a similar production entitled *The Author*. He had here caricatured, under the name of Cadwallader, a Welsh gentleman of his acquaintance, who was noted for pride of pedigree. Honest Mr. Aprice, for that was his real name, was present at the play several times, without suspecting that, in Cadwallader, he saw another self; but at length, when he found every body calling him by that name, he began to perceive the joke, which enraged him so much that he applied to the Lord Chamberlain for an interdict against the play, which was granted. It is rather odd that the wit himself was characterised by the same foible, and not less blind to it than Mr. Aprice. Some of his friends, knowing this, resolved to make it the subject of a jest at his expense. As they were laughing at

persons piquing themselves on their descent, one of them slyly observed that, however people might ridicule family pretensions he believed there never was a man well descended who was no proud of it. Footo, snapping the bait, replied, "No doubt, no doubt; for instance, now, though I trust I may be considered as far from a vain man, yet being descended from as ancient a family as any in Cornwall, I am not a little proud of it, as, indeed, you will see I may be;" and accordingly ordered a servant to bring the genealogical tree of the family, which he began to elucidate with all the absurdity that he so felicitously ridiculed in Cadwallader.

The spirit of these and other early compositions of Footo was to seize some point of fashionable folly, and expose it in a few scenes of broad humour, with the addition of the mimetic representation, by the author himself, of some noted real character. There was little of plot or contrivance in the pieces, but strong caricature painting, and ludicrous incidents, which rendered them extremely diverting. He took a somewhat higher aim when, in 1760, he burlesqued methodism in the *Minor*, a play which excited some angry controversy, but proved attractive to the public. His *Mayor of Garrat*, produced in 1763, was the nearest approach he made to legitimate comedy: its merits have kept it in vogue as one of the stock pieces of the British stage down almost to the present times.

In 1757, Footo paid a visit to Dublin, along with Tate Wilkinson, and the united mimicry of the two attracted large audiences. On this occasion Wilkinson mimicked even his companion, who, with the usual thin-skinnedness of the professed jester, did not relish the joke, and said it was the only attempt of his friend which did not succeed. At the end of this year, we find Footo engaged in a totally new speculation in the Irish capital. He set up as a fortune-teller, in a room hung with black cloth, and lighted by a single lantern, the light of which was scrupulously kept from his face: he succeeded so far, it is said, as to realize on some occasions £50 a-day, at half-a-crown from each dupe. In 1759, when out at elbows in London, he paid his first visit to Scotland, borrowing a hundred pounds from Garrick to defray the expenses of his journey. He was well received in Edinburgh society, and by the public in general. Yet the Scots did not escape his sarcasm. One day, an old lady who asked for a toast, gave *Charles the Third*—meaning, of course, the Pretender. "Of Spain, madam?" inquired Footo. "No, sir," cried the lady pettishly, "of England." "Never mind her," said one of the company; "she is one of our old folks who have not got rid of their political prejudices." "Oh, dear sir, make no apology," cried Footo; "I was prepared for all this, as, from your living so far north, I suppose none of you have yet heard of the Revolution." He afterwards paid several visits to Scotland, where, during 1771, he was manager of the Edinburgh theatre for a season, clearing a thousand pounds by the venture. He found that the Scotch, with all their gravity, have some little drollery amongst them. Robert Cullen, son of the eminent physician, and a noted mimic, and the Laird of Logan, not less distinguished as a wit, became his intimate friends. Another of the native humorists encountered him in a somewhat extraordinary way. This was Mr. McCulloch of Ardwel, in the stewardry of Kirkcudbright, whose sayings are to this day quoted in his native province. In travelling from his country residence to Edinburgh with his own carriage, Mr. McCulloch spent, as usual, a night in the inn at Moffat, and next day proceeded to ascend the terrible hill of Erickstane, which connects two great districts of Scotland, and forms decidedly the most difficult and dangerous piece of road in the whole country. A deep snow had fallen during the night, and Mr. McCulloch, after proceeding three or four miles, was compelled to turn back. When he regained his inn, he found a smart carriage, with a gentleman in the inside, standing at the door, while the horses were getting changed: this he ascertained to be the equipage of Mr. Footo, the celebrated comedian. The Laird of Ardwel immediately went up to the panel and wrote upon it in chalk, the words—

Let not a single foot profane  
The sacred snows of Erickstane.

Footo, surprised to see a punch little man writing on his carriage, came out to read the inscription, which amused him so much, that he immediately went and introduced himself to the writer. Further explanations then took place, which readily convinced him of the impossibility of proceeding farther that day; and the consequence was, that the two gentlemen resolved to make themselves as happy as possible where they were. The snow lay long; the terrors of Erickstane relented not for a fortnight; but