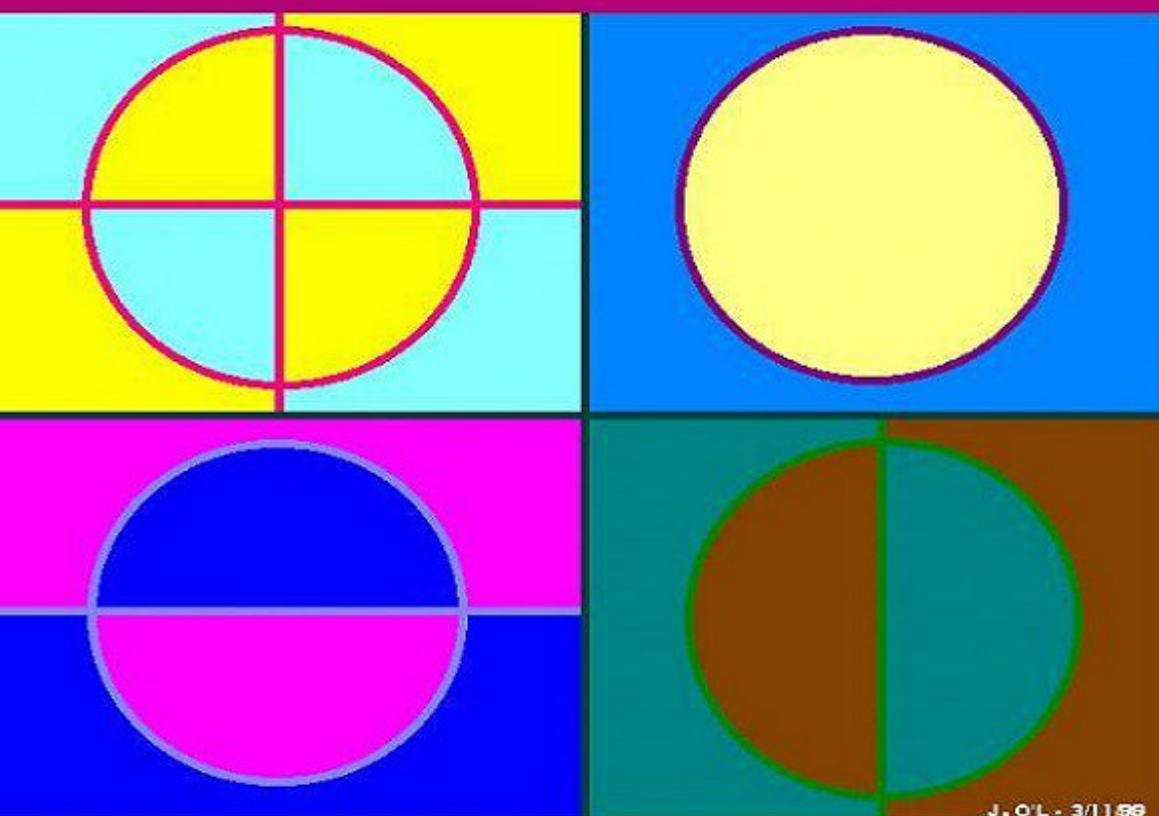


Thwarted Ambitions

John O'Loughlin



J.O.L. - 3/11/89

THWARTED AMBITIONS

By

JOHN O'LOUGHLIN

Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Prose

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

Biographical Footnote

CHAPTER ONE

"Will it look anything like me when it's finished?" the writer Andrew Doyle casually inquired of the man seated at the easel, whose slender body was partly obscured by the canvas upon which he was still busily applying large dollops of deep rich paint.

"Yes, I dare say it will," Robert Harding replied. "At least, it'll look more like you than anyone else."

"Thank goodness for that!" the thirty-year-old Irishman sighed. "One can never be too sure nowadays."

There ensued a short pause, before the artist asked: Do you object to Expressionist interpretations, then?"

"Only when they distort one's image unfavourably," quipped Andrew. "As long as you don't purposely make me out to be worse-looking than I really am ..."

"You needn't worry about that!" declared Harding reassuringly, a large pair of dark-brown eyes momentarily focusing on his sitter's impassive face.

"It's usually the opposite tendency I have to guard against. For it's precisely the tendency to make people out to be better-looking than they really are which seems to appeal to so many of them, ensuring me a guaranteed sale at the expense of artistic truth!"

"And you don't like to flatter them?" the writer knowingly ventured.

"Not if my integrity as an artist suffers in consequence!" Harding averred. "For I don't relish being dictated to by wealthy patrons."

Andrew Doyle had to smile. "Well, you needn't worry about that where I'm concerned," he said. "I can only just afford to pay the price you're asking."

"Which, in any case, is a special concession," affirmed the artist, some liberal brushwork just audible beneath his rather deep baritone voice. "If it

wasn't for the fact that you're my next-door neighbour, I'd charge you at least twice as much."

"What, three-hundred quid?" gasped Andrew unbelievably.

"Maybe more."

At which remark there came a gentle stirring to their left, as Carol Jackson, current girlfriend of the man who spoke it, was heard to comment: "He's a born capitalist!" – a statement which duly drew both men's attention to her scantily-clad reclining form. "If it wasn't for the fact that I normally profit from him, I'd have no hesitation in considering him a ruthless shark."

"Oh come now!" protested Harding jokingly, a mock appearance of outraged innocence momentarily taking possession of his handsome thirty-three-year-old face. "I never charge above my worth, not even where people whom I personally dislike the look of are concerned."

Andrew Doyle fidgeted nervously in his chair. "And are there many of those?" he asked.

"Too many, I'm afraid!" replied Harding bluntly. "Three-quarter-witted aristocrats, half-witted bourgeoisie, and quarter-witted proletarians, to name but ..."

"I sincerely hope I'm not classifiable in the latter category!" interposed Carol, her acerbic tone-of-voice betraying an emotional sharpness partly intended to avenge her on her lover's previous protest. "I should hate to think you have such a low opinion of my mind."

"Not that low, honey," the artist admitted. "But certainly lower than my opinion of your body. After all, it's the latter which really matters, isn't it?"

Miss Jackson refrained from commenting on this evidently rhetorical question, but conceded Harding the privilege of a wry smile, which could be interpreted as a tacit confirmation of the fact. Yes, it was first and foremost as a body that she expected to be respected, considering the degree of its sexual attractiveness. A high opinion of her mind from a man like him would simply have detracted, in her view, from its standing, made

her feel too masculine. It was usually through her body that she obtained her chief pride in life, both as a lover and, no less significantly, as a model. And that body or, at any rate, three-quarters of it was very conspicuously on show today – thanks in part to the exceptionally fine weather.

"No, I don't particularly mind a woman being half-witted when she's attractive," Harding resumed, following a reflective pause. "It's when she's ugly that I take offence. My aesthetic sensibilities are then somewhat grossly offended."

"As I can well imagine," chuckled Andrew, before turning an admiring eye away from the sensuous sunbather on the ground and refocusing his attention on the artist. "An attractive female doesn't have to be too intelligent, does she?"

"Not for my purposes," admitted Harding with a sly wink. "Yet, to tell you the truth, I've known some who did. Exceptions to the rule, of course, but attractive *and* highly intelligent, would you believe? Quite a problem, my friend."

Andrew Doyle felt both puzzled and intrigued. "In what way?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, in a number of ways actually," the artist declared. "But chiefly as regards my art." He brushed away at the canvas awhile, his gaze slightly abstracted, before adding: "They'd criticize or make fun of it on the pretext that it was too decadent or too arcane or too simple or too traditional or too derivative or too commonplace or too ... something or other."

"And was it?"

"How should I know?" Harding exclaimed. "I never bothered to inquire why. So far as I'm concerned my work is what it has to be, irrespective of the current fashion. But these cursed clever females knew better, of course.

They'd have expected me to knuckle under to the latest aesthetic conventions at a moment's notice, the drop of a fashionable hat, so to speak. Never mind one's personal psychology or class/race integrity. Just keep-up with the artistic trends."

"Which you presumably refused to do?" Andrew conjectured.

Robert Harding sighed and vaguely nodded. "Only when it was necessary for me to follow my personal bent and do what I felt had to be done," he confirmed. "Although there were times, I have to admit, when I was ahead of them – relatively rare as they were! But even then I was subject to criticism or mockery from the more intelligent women, who were of the express opinion that I'd done the wrong thing, departed from art altogether, mixed-up too many diverse styles, gone too far ahead, and so on. Whatever I did, I just couldn't win. So in the end I gave-up collecting highly intelligent women and reverted – or perhaps I should say progressed – to collecting only moderately intelligent ones, who didn't know enough about modern art to unduly exasperate me with their opinions, and who very rarely commented upon my creative faults or presumed shortcomings."

"I see," said Andrew, whose sitter's impassivity was slightly ruffled by a trace of ironic amusement at Harding's expense, since it seemed to him that the artist was exaggerating his misfortunes for the sake of a little masculine sympathy. After all, weren't some women intelligent enough to keep quiet about matters which might give offence to any man with whom they had intimate or, at any rate, regular connections? He had known a few who were, anyway. Rather than making them critical of one's literary or aesthetic predilections, their intelligence sufficed to keep them discreet, to inhibit the formulation of rash or superficial judgements, opinions, etc., which might have upset their lover and had a detrimental, if not fatal, effect upon their relationship. Perhaps Harding had lacked the good fortune to encounter such females? Perhaps, on the other hand, he had no real use for them, since possessing an instinctive ability or subconscious need to attract the other sort – a sort whose above-average intelligence required that they adopt a condescending and, at times, positively hostile opinion of his work? It wasn't for Andrew to arrive at any definite conclusions on that score, but he half-suspected, from what he already knew about his next-door neighbour, that there might well be more than a grain of masochistic truth in the latter assumption! Even Carol Jackson, whose predominantly sensual nature apparently precluded her from placing any great pride in her intellect, struck one as being somewhat imperious, if not downright rude, at times. Attractive she might be, but it was hardly in Andrew Doyle's sensitive and fundamentally self-respecting nature to consider attractiveness an excuse for impertinence! On the contrary, he would

automatically have revolted against any female who exploited her good looks or sexual standing in what, to him, seemed such an ignominious fashion. Experience had more than adequately taught him that he had no patience for women who were rude. They simply offended him.

Towards four o'clock the artist opted for a late-afternoon tea break, thereby giving his subject an opportunity to stretch his legs by strolling around the elongated back garden in which he had been patiently, even stoically, sitting for the greater part of the day. Apart from the presence of a couple of old apple trees, a few lilac bushes, and a narrow bed of roses along the length of the fence adjoining his property, the garden in question contained little to suggest that its owner had any real interest in gardening, since it was of such a simple and straightforward appearance. What interest Harding might have had in his garden appeared to be confined to keeping it in trim, not to encouraging it to blossom! This artist was fundamentally a negative gardener – in other words, one whose only motivation for cutting the grass or pruning the rose bushes or removing the weeds was to prevent his garden from becoming a kind of mini-jungle. As for pride in the garden or gardening *per se*, he would evidently have considered that *infra dignum*, since too much the artist or aesthete to desire being associated, in his imagination, with the philistine status of a mere gardener!

Following their tea interval, the delicate business of portrait painting and sitting was resumed with fresh resolve, the artist assuring his handsome client that he would soon be through with the task to-hand, which had now taken him the best part of a week.

"And when you've finally completed it?" Andrew asked, curious to learn what Harding's next project would be.

"I'll be able to start work on a portrait of Henry Grace," the latter revealed.

"Who's he?"

Harding looked up from the canvas with an expression of genuine surprise on his flushed face. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of *him*?" he gasped.

"I'm afraid not," confessed Andrew, a faint but perceptible blush betraying his sudden psychic discomfiture in response to Harding's well-nigh

incredulous expression.

"Well, he's one of the leading art critics of our time," the artist duly affirmed. "Famous throughout the greater part of the Western world."

"Really?" Andrew exclaimed, as an enthusiasm for fresh knowledge suddenly usurped the domain of his emotional unease.... Not that it was a knowledge he valued particularly highly, since, by natural inclination, far more interested in artists than in art critics. But, even so, the addition of Henry Grace to his small store of names such as Charles Baudelaire, André Breton, Herbert Read, Kenneth Clark, Anthony Blunt, and Edward Lucie-Smith was not without at least some significance to him, in that he now possessed a rudimentary knowledge of approximately seven art critics, past and present. Admittedly, seven was a small number compared with the hundreds of artists who had claimed a place, no matter how humbly, amid his teeming brain cells. But it was a growing number nonetheless! Had he not known so much about so many artists he would certainly have felt more ashamed of himself, where Harding's manifest surprise was concerned. But the fact of one's knowledge in one context usually precludes feelings of shame at one's ignorance in another, especially when the latter is ordinarily regarded by one as of less interest or value anyway. However, being an artist, Harding doubtless had cause to lay claim to a greater knowledge of art critics, so it was understandable that he made such a show of surprise at Andrew's expense, even though, unbeknown to himself, the latter's ignorance was perfectly justified. Alas, our habit of projecting ourselves into the world around us, including the human world, is not one that we can easily shake off or dispense with! We measure others according to our own standards, no matter how insular or limited those standards may happen to be!

"Yes, it will be the first time I've been granted the privilege of painting the portrait of a really eminent critic," Harding rejoined, as soon as it became clear to him that the other man had nothing to add to his initial exclamation, "so, for once, albeit with due respect to yourself, I'm quite looking forward to knuckling down to the job. It will be interesting to hear his comments on the subject."

"How did you receive the commission, if that's the right word?" asked Andrew.

"Simply through Mr Grace himself, who rang me, a few weeks ago, to ask whether I'd consider doing his portrait," Harding matter-of-factly replied. "Naturally, I immediately leaped at the chance with an unequivocal 'Yes!' I mean, I couldn't really refuse him, could I? Not after he'd written so eloquently and eulogistically of a couple of my recent paintings in 'The Arts Review', the previous week. I was flattered, to say the least. A friend of his standing in the art world would not be without its advantages, provided, however, that one could actually secure his friendship."

Andrew Doyle offered the artist a diffident smile. "And do you believe you can?" he asked.

"To some extent I believe I already have," Harding affirmed. "But a lot will obviously depend on what happens when he comes here next week, as promised, and I knuckle down to the arduous task of reproducing, with minor variations, his famous face on canvas. If we can strike-up an interesting conversation in the process, it could well transpire that his faith in my professional abilities will be cemented by a friendship which may well prove to my lasting advantage. It would only take a few more favourable reviews, and perhaps even a book on my work, for me to become internationally famous – of that I'm quite convinced! For his influence in the West, and particularly Britain, is quite considerable – in fact, so considerable that a really good write-up from him in one or other of the more prestigious arts magazines would boost my professional reputation overnight."

"Just as a really bad write-down from him would ruin it," Carol declared with severity from her reclining posture to his right.

"So I'm aware, honey," Harding conceded, frowning slightly. "But the chances of that happening to me are, to say the least, pretty remote."

"Oh, I'm not for one moment suggesting it *would* happen to you," Carol rejoined, gently raising herself on one elbow. "Although it has happened to some people, hasn't it?"

"So I gather," conceded Harding, who was suddenly feeling more than a shade annoyed by his girlfriend's light sarcasm – a sarcasm, alas, with

which he was all-too-well acquainted by now!

"Anyone you personally know?" Andrew asked him.

"No, to tell you the truth, I don't know all that many people in the art world, not even among the artists themselves, because I never go out of my way to establish contact with others," Harding bluntly replied.

"Not unless they're important to you," Carol sarcastically remarked.

Robert Harding had to smile, albeit weakly. "Few of them ever are, at least not in my experience," he rejoined. "But Henry Grace could be. He's one of the few critics with influence and, with a little luck, I may be able to induce him to wield some of that influence on my behalf."

"Particularly if you grant him a special concession," Carol suggested, her attention shifting from the to the canvas and back again, as though to link them. "You need only knock the price down from, say, five-hundred quid to about two-hundred-and-fifty quid to soften him up a bit. He'd almost certainly appreciate the gesture."

A tinge of embarrassment swept across Harding's clean-shaven face, though he quickly did his best to stifle it beneath a little forced laugh. "I *had* thought of that," he confessed, scarcely bothering to look in Carol's direction. "But I don't want to make my desire to win his support too obvious. Besides, he might get offended."

"I rather doubt it," the model murmured through lips which had already broken into an ironic smile. "I expect he'd be only too delighted to learn that you were offering him his portrait at a knock-down rate on the strength of your professional admiration for him. It would be a good way of establishing, if not ...