

# CHAPTER 1

There had been bleak autumn weather for weeks. The smoke from the chimneys, instead of rising up and disappearing, sank down on the dirty streets and mixed with fog and soot, becoming a ghastly black drizzle of such depressing weight that it seemed the sun would never shine again.

Dirt and mud covered the streets so that horses drawing coaches and carts were splashed to their very blinders. Cold damp fog lay everywhere, penetrated everything and seemed to drive out all warmth from clothes and coats and shoes and hands.

People hurried to escape the drizzle and mud, often colliding with their umbrellas. No one apologized and all seemed ill-tempered. At the corners, many slipped in the wet morass, and reaching out for support only managed to pull another pedestrian down.

The sedan-bearers above all had great trouble conveying their human freight undamaged to their destinations, and mumbled swear words to themselves, if the gentleman or the lady who they carried were of too weighty a corpulence.

Those bearers who did not wear numbers showing official registration were probably the servants of the ladies and gentlemen in the chairs, therefore less skilled and more likely to put their masters and mistresses in jeopardy through a sudden slip. Still, the sedan-chairs were preferred to the coaches, because they fitted better through narrow alleyways and allowed them to be carried into their very houses. Thus, neither the shoes nor the coiffures of the ladies or the silken coats of the gentlemen were compromised.

Among the hired servants, scribes, housewives, maids, coal hikers, students, parliamentary clerks, artisans, Thames fishermen, merchant apprentices and pickpockets, the most conspicuous characters were the chimney sweeps, mostly boys, completely black, who lugged along their brushes and bags full of soot, which their masters sold as fertilizer.

The sweeps were small and slim in order to fit through the chimneys. They climbed in from the bottom, and their jobs were done only when their heads emerged at the top. If they did not work fast enough or did not dare climb far enough into the narrow and winding chimneys, their masters encouraged them by lighting a small fire below, which accelerated their efforts in a most desired way.

If the children grew too large, they were no longer employable as sweeps. Yet this rarely occurred because burns, injuries and malignant growths on the boys' testicles, called soot warts, put an early end to their lives, which their masters judged to be a willful impertinence because a replacement now had to be located who was as cheap and willing to work as their dead mates.

In fact, new blood was not hard to find; impoverished or alcoholic parents often sold children as young as four years old for twenty or thirty shillings.

The cold November fog was particularly hard on these skinny little figures, a few girls among them, who had only the old clothes and rags begged from families of the better-off. And if they were not able to avoid the litter-bearers and the other grown-ups, they were cursed, called beggars, dawdlers and felons, and roughly pushed out of the way.

After delivering their soot and perhaps begging food from the house owners, they had to find a dark corner, often the entrance to a basement or an old vault, crept into their soot bags in order to sleep and gather strength for the next day.

The clever ones found sleeping-places away from the bright light of the gas lamps recently erected in some streets, particularly in the city of Westminster, but they had to be wary of the night watchmen patrolling the streets between 9 o'clock at night and sunrise, who checked on all suspicious persons.

The painter Joseph Mallord William Turner, Royal Academician and professor of perspective at the Royal Academy, walked unnoticed through the crowd. He wore a top-hat, and against the vile cold a white woolen muffler, a long dark coat and solid brown boots. He seemed aloof from what went on around him, but in fact was extremely attentive. Seeing the small sweeps with their bags he remembered William Blake's verses:

And so Tom awoke;  
and we rose in the dark,  
and got with our bags  
and our brushes to work.  
Though the morning was cold,  
Tom was happy and warm;  
so if all do their duty  
they need not fear harm.

Strange fellow, this Blake, Turner thought. Poet and painter, crazy, but still an ingenious and independent spirit and a talented engraver. His occupation with the art of engraving led to his overestimation of the line, the drawing, the distinction between figure and object, which was for him almost a question of morality. As a consequence, Blake put less value on color and light and shade.

But truly, is not the indefinite, the impression, the real mirror of life?

Still, he believed Blake's picture *Pity* from '95, a watercolor done in pen and ink, in which all his principles find their expression, showed a peculiar kind of progressiveness, which would be taken up and continued by the painters of future generations, as they would one day understand his, Turner's, differing ideas on the art of painting.

Turner had just come from Coleman Street in the Docklands, where he regularly frequented a brothel. At the same time, he had used the opportunity to collect rent for the flats and houses in Wapping, which he had inherited from the family of his mother. Of course, he could not get rich this way, as for example the big magnate John Russell, who was able to finance his agricultural innovations by the proceeds he received from his possession of Bloomsbury in the middle of London.

Turner loved combining the useful with the pleasant. In the brothel he enjoyed the physical pleasures offered to him as well as the interesting positions the female forms were able to assume during their service.

He rarely left this establishment without having sketched the women, both during their services to him and afterward.

Because he believed that hardly anyone would understand what relief from the bourgeois and hypocritical respectability of the day these visits brought him, if only for a short time, this sketchbook was kept safely under lock and key, and additionally provided with metal clasps in order to make it difficult for unauthorized persons to view the drawings. To achieve this, he did not shy away from spending freely, though normally he had acquired the habit of being economical with his money.

Coming from the brothel that day, he was still amused by the answer a Thames angler had given him in a most engaging Cockney slang after being asked if he had caught any fish. 'Lawd above! No, gov'nor, I 'aven't. There's no need. 'elps me ter get away from da wife fer a few 'aaahrs, innit.'

In this respect the painter had fared better. He had been cautious and not taken a wife at all. Secretly, he had had a relationship with Sarah, the widow of John Danby, the well-known organist and composer, for more than fifteen years, but still could not bring himself to marry her, though she had born him two daughters, Evelina and Georgianna.

Women to him were too mysterious; they had such strange wishes and demanded unspoken understanding, though on the other hand were fond of many words. They were capable of emotional outbursts that devastated his nerves and had even afflicted his mother so greatly that he and his father had had to put her, years ago, into a madhouse. And even his daughters he rarely saw after they had grown up. He had felt unable to cope with the strange physical and mental changes that attended their growth and development.

On the other hand, he loved the female body. It was alluring and exotic and provided him with great physical bliss, but women sooner or later wanted to build a nest and make it the center of their and his lives, and therefore he could not allow a wife to disturb or interfere with his work. So, he chose to stay alone where the center of his existence was his studio.

For the three miles from Wapping to Somerset House where the Royal Academy was located, he had allowed himself a coach. He alighted in front of the house and went in to assure himself that his oil painting *Crossing the Brook* had been properly hung. It was one of the three pictures he was exhibiting at that year's exhibition. Then, as he walked through Bow Street to Oxford Street, observing the street scene around him, it seemed to him, thinking about the painting, that he may have given away too much of himself and his daughters in the picture. Of course, from an artistic point of view there was not much that could be criticized, and the diffuse clarity of the light, the bridge in the middle ground and the surrounding trees were very well represented. Yet the scene might be easy to decode, and the viewer would see that he, Turner, stood in a special relationship to the girls who were crossing. One could sense that Evelina, who had crossed the brook, had become a woman, and that Georgianna, still on the farther bank, was yet a child at the beginning of puberty.

But perhaps he was too sensitive, and people would view the image as the allegory he intended and would see that the chasm before which Evelina finds herself was a

symbol for the narrow path from the familiar present to a still unknown and dark future, the veil and the temptation of the unknown.

Impatient, Turner hastened his pace, and when he reached Oxford Street, despite his usual caution about money, he decided to take a coach again in order to more quickly reach his studio and gallery in Harley Street.

Some months ago, a gentleman from Germany, who was interested in landscape painting, had announced he would be in London and requested the pleasure of a visit. Turner had recommended an inn near his studio in Harley Street for the duration of his stay and had invited him to dinner that day. His father very probably was already preparing it. He had also offered the German the possibility of viewing the paintings in his gallery. As a matter of fact, the painter and his father no longer lived in Harley street, having acquired a house called Sandycombe Lodge upstream on the Thames. Today, however, he had wanted the meal served in his gallery so that his visitor would have adequate time to study his paintings.

## CHAPTER 2

In his room on the second floor of the inn ‘The Old Bell’ near Harley Street, Christian August Silberschlag was preparing for his visit with the famous English landscape painter Joseph Mallord William Turner.

The young man was the grandson of the multi-talented Johann Esaias Silberschlag, royal Prussian Consistory Councilor and Head of the Prussian Building Commission, and as such a Privy Councilor, preacher at the Trinity Church in Berlin, headmaster of the Realschule of Berlin, Member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, the Royal Holland Society of Sciences and Humanities, the Learned Society at Frankfurt on the Oder river and the Berlin Research Society.

This grandfather, who had died in 1791 in peace with God and men, was held very much in honor by his grandson. Christian had been awed by his astounding career and deeply grateful to him for providing for a large part of his education, first at the Royal Realschule in Berlin and then at the Frederick University at Halle, where he studied theology, medicine and mathematics. He had also been given the chance to develop his talent in drawing and painting through private lessons financed by the money his grandfather had left him.

And there was an additional reason why he had loved his grandfather. His father, August Esaias Silberschlag, a member of the Consistory in Magdeburg, who had only recently departed, had been a strict and unforgiving educator, who followed Proverbs 13,24: ‘He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.’ Christian had lived in fear of him and had easily broken into tears. His father had tried to cure the boy’s sensitive nature through additional harshness.

Therefore, it was like redemption for Christian when he was allowed to join his mild and just grandfather in Berlin and live with him and his dear grandmother Katharina Maria while attending Grammar School. Katharina Maria was still alive, and he visited her whenever he could. When his father died, he had shed honest tears because despite the fear and constant indoctrination he was deeply shaken, which he could hardly understand himself.

By a stroke of luck in 1805, at an event in Halle, he came to know Goethe. It happened as follows. Towards the end of the last century the Viennese doctor Franz Joseph Gall had caused a sensation by maintaining he could by means of measuring the human skull recognize and describe the mental and ethical aptitudes of a human being. He undertook a lecture tour through Germany, which led him to Halle. Goethe was very much interested in this field. When Gall began his lectures in the hall of the ‘Crown Prince of Prussia’ inn at the Kleine Klausstrasse, he found among his listeners the famous poet and statesman, who had been summoned by the philologist Friedrich August Wolf, Silberschlag’s academic teacher. Also, among the crowd, of which half were students from the university, was Silberschlag, whom Wolf introduced to Goethe.

Dr. Gall, surrounded by human and animal skulls as well as wax impressions of brains, did not hesitate to demonstrate his scientific findings by resorting to the heads of some of the prominent guests present. Goethe’s skull, he pointed out, was an example

of a particularly beautiful and harmonious head which signified an all-round development of the faculties.

Goethe found this interesting and also very entertaining.

Later, though, referring to Gall's phrenology, he asserted that for assessing a person's talents and abilities, brain anatomy and research on brain development was probably more important than examining the structure of the skull.

Still in Halle Goethe fell ill of a disease of the kidneys, for which he consulted the famous professor of medicine Johann Christian Reil. Reil proved himself worthy of his reputation when after having examined Goethe, he did nothing but allow nature to exercise its healing power. This promptly led to Goethe's recovery. During his illness he stayed in Wolf's house in Maerkerstrasse, where Christian August Silberschlag was a regular member at the dinner table through which Professor Wolf attempted to improve his meager professorial salary by offering meals at modest prices.

It was here that Silberschlag came to be of service to the ill genius. In the mornings he removed Goethe's bedpan with nose turned deferentially aside, and he waited on Goethe when he took his meals lying in bed. Also, he was allowed to read to Goethe and show him his attempts at drawing and painting. One evening the poet asked the young man to sit beside his bed and said:

'You will not be surprised, dear Silberschlag, that I have been observing you a little bit during the days of our acquaintanceship. My knowledge of human nature tells me that you have talents above the ordinary. Without doubt your gifts are in the field of the artistic and not so much in what you are trying to do here at Halle university. In fact, you should go on trying your hand at painting. And here you need and are deserving of promotion.'

At such praise Silberschlag blushed, as he stood there in his knickerbockers, black stockings and low shoes, the shirt collar over his jacket, and said:

'Your Excellency is too good to me. You are giving expression to what I have felt sometimes myself, namely that I am not on the right path here at Halle. All the more so as the classical languages are less to my liking than the modern ones, particularly English, which I have had the chance to begin learning with the help of the excellent Master Koch, in fact a classical scholar but fluent in English and familiar with everything related to it.'

Goethe deliberated for a while and then said: 'What, Silberschlag, are the financial means at your disposal?'

'I inherited enough from my grandfather to be independent for the coming years.'

'Then I will make you the following proposal. You accompany me to Weimar, and there at the Free Drawing School you can study and develop your talent under the guidance of my good friend, the painter and art critic Johann Heinrich Meyer. At the same time, I will take care that you can perfect your English in the house of Charles Gore and his daughters Eliza and Emily. And for all this, dear friend, you will help me to order my collection of paintings and drawings in my house on the Frauenplan and put them into a decent catalog.'

And so it came about that Silberschlag moved to Weimar, settled there for a few years, continued learning English, assisted the genius organizing his collections without daring to charge him anything, and at the same time was able to acquire an artistic education and a more refined taste through his social intercourse with Goethe, his friend Heinrich Meyer and the rest of the Weimar society, which was deeply involved in all matters of art. His talent for creative painting and drawing, however, soon proved to be limited, though he was found to have considerable inclination and skill for copying the works of others.

In September of the year 1810 Silberschlag accompanied Goethe on a trip to Dresden, where they visited the workshop of the painter Caspar David Friedrich, situated near the Elbe river. There when he saw the paintings *The Abbey in the Oakwood* and *The Monk by the Sea*, it came to him as a revelation that this was what painting should be. When the others departed the workshop, he stayed behind, got into conversation with the painter and became quite enthused by the artist's dark, lonesome and melancholic disposition with its transcendental longing for the Beyond. Friedrich too liked the young man and they renewed their friendship one year later when they met during an outing to the Lobdeburg castle near Jena that had been undertaken by Goethe with friends and acquaintances.

Friedrich invited Silberschlag to come to Dresden again and see the fascinating landscape, the varied surroundings, the splendid baroque architecture, the academy, galleries and studios as well as meet an enlightened society and experience the vivid tourist traffic. The difference to Weimar was distinct, because despite all the geniuses present the latter remained a smallish provincial place. And so Silberschlag, whom Goethe was not unwilling to let go after the work on his collections was completed, came to Dresden. Here he lived on what he had inherited and from what he earned through private English lessons, which had come into fashion again when Napoleon's end became imminent. Though Saxony and particularly Dresden had, without hesitation and unnecessary patriotic sentiments, enjoyed Napoleon's favor and had warmed themselves in his imperial sun, the people soon realized which side their bread was buttered on and turned to the new or rather old powers, namely Prussia, Austria, England and Russia.

Silberschlag often visited Friedrich in his poorly equipped flat and obtained a thorough insight into his work and the world of his thought. Talks with the painter Kuegelgen and the physician Carus, who was also a painter, about Friedrich provided him with additional insights as well.

Soon after he had settled down, he got to know the nineteen-year-old Johanna, a delicate but at the same time resolute maiden, daughter of the grocer Bergling in Bautzener Strasse in Dresden-Neustadt. At first Silberschlag could hardly believe that the Neustadt could be home to such a graceful and at the same time mysterious flower of a girl. Johanna was of medium height, had chestnut hair, large brown eyes and a beautiful alto voice.

Her figure, which Silberschlag soon had the opportunity to research in more detail, was slim but sturdy, and her summer dress could hardly hide her beautiful legs and the sweetest little bosom a man could wish for.

Johanna's father was quite willing to let Silberschlag woo his daughter when he discovered that this possible son-in-law associated with quite respectable circles.

So it did not take long for the two young people to be engaged and then, after the proper time, to be married and to move in with Johanna's parents, who had a large house in the Bautzener Strasse and a roomy flat on the second floor, which they hoped would soon see the play of a grandchild.

And Goethe had not forgotten Silberschlag. In the year 1815 the painter and architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel was commissioned by his King to buy at tolerable prices good English land- and seascapes for a new museum. He asked Goethe if he could recommend a reliable and knowledgeable person who he could send to England. Goethe thought of Silberschlag, who now knew much about painting and could speak English well. So Silberschlag was tasked with the honorable job of traveling to England and seek out exemplary works among the famous landscape painters.

In his room in 'The Old Bell', Silberschlag could hardly believe how fortune and coincidence had brought him here. He had traveled to Berlin to meet Schinkel after a tearful—on both sides—farewell and a promise to Johanna that she would get letters from him as often as possible. She on the other hand said she would use his absence in order to complete their household and improve her knowledge of art and music, about which she already had become quite cognizant.

In Berlin he got his instructions and a generous traveling fund from the royal extraordinario, the King's purse for special expenditures.

Schinkel would have liked to go himself, but his work in the Prussian Building Commission took most of his time. Additionally, Chancellor Carl August Fürst von Hardenberg had entrusted him with the task of purchasing a certain collection of pictures in the Rhineland. In addition, he could not speak English.

Initially, Silberschlag was not to buy pictures but to first get an impression of the state of landscape painting in England. What he could do was to acquire options on pictures he thought would be acceptable to the King's new museum.

In preparation of all that and also in order to answer questions his hosts in England might put to him about the state of the art in Germany he had carefully studied the works of the new romantic landscape painters. Thus, he felt well equipped for his job, particularly by his intimate knowledge of the works of his friend Caspar David Friedrich.

So, he had arrived in London that autumn.

'The Old Bell', where for a few days he had now resided, had been built in the last third of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At first it had served as accommodation and eating place for the workers rebuilding that part of London after the great fire of 1666.

It became for Silberschlag a real home to which he could escape from the sometimes disquieting giant London and its penetrating and moist autumn coldness.