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Opening extract from

The Court Painter's Apprentice

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Published by

Catnip Publishing Ltd

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CATNIP BOOKS
Published by Catnip Publishing Ltd
14 Greville Street
London EC1N 8SB

This edition first published 2012
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-84647-123-7

Printed in Poland

www.catnippublishing.co.uk

Prologue

Take a look in a mirror.

What do you see? A nose that's too large, or skin marked with freckles like paint splashes from a brush? Perhaps eyes that seem sunken and dark, an expression of gloom baked hard on the mouth? Whatever you see, staring at your reflection for too long is rarely a comfortable experience for all but the fairest of us. We prefer only fleeting glimpses of ourselves, long enough to brush our hair or wash our faces.

Now, take a closer look.

Wait until you are completely alone and the house is quiet. Focus on your eyes. Let your mind go blank and sink deep into yourself. It takes time but sooner or

later, perhaps only for a second or two, you are suddenly staring at the face of a complete stranger. It's an intense and unsettling experience but it soon passes, and the old, familiar features return. But in that brief moment you have seen a strange part of yourself break away from the whole. Not that tired face you see every morning, but something, someone, you have never set eyes on before.

Don't stay like that for too long; who knows what that would lead to?

Johann

The innkeeper nodded at the window as he placed a mug of ale next to the soup. 'A foul evening, sir,' he said.

'Certainly,' Hugo replied, taking a spoonful of the soup. It was good and hearty, full of meat and vegetables. 'Thank you.'

'You're most welcome. Have you ridden far today, sir?' the innkeeper asked.

'From Bruges,' Hugo replied, happy to pass the time in friendly conversation. 'I have been discussing a new painting at the town hall there.'

The innkeeper nodded thoughtfully, wiping his hands on his apron. 'So, you are an artist?'

'Yes, I have a workshop in Ghent.'

There was a short silence as Hugo ate a little more soup. The inn was a travellers' inn, two miles from the nearest village, and on such a wild night it was almost deserted. Three men sat together in a corner deep in conversation, pipe smoke obscuring their faces from Hugo's failing sight. He had found the inn by chance. As the rain in his face had grown faster, whipping in from the sea across the flat fields, he had sheltered with his horse under a tree and from there he noticed the lights in the windows of a building half a mile further along the road. Now that he was warm once more and enjoying a good meal and company he had no intention of leaving until the next morning. He was not expected at home until tomorrow evening. Better to stay here tonight and surprise his wife, Magdalena, by arriving at lunchtime the next day.

'Ah, the soup is good. Very good indeed,' Hugo said.

The innkeeper smiled politely. 'Thank you. Your room is ready, sir. Tell me when you wish to see it.' Then he walked slowly back behind the counter and began to dry some mugs.

As a child, high up in his father's studio that looked out over the plains of Flanders, Hugo had stared for hours at a mirror, striving for a glimpse of his soul. Now, fifty years later, sitting in this Flemish inn with rain streaming down the windows, he recalled those early days when he first began searching for the true portrait of a person. Not just a simple likeness. Nothing annoyed him more than some merchant's wife squealing: 'It looks just like him!' No, what Hugo had always longed for, more than anything else, was to know that he had painted a true person; to hear the words 'it ***is*** him.' Now he was beginning to slow down, painting no more than two hours a day, early in the morning to catch the light. His eyes grew tired quickly these days, but from time to time he would still hold up his mirror and look for that stranger, as though he were still a boy of ten in his father's studio.

The food, ale and the warmth of the roaring fire had made him sleepy, and Hugo was about to retire to bed when something caught his attention. On a wooden shelf next to his table was a small piece of white paper

propped against the wall. Hugo leant forward to focus his eyes better. On the paper was a drawing - probably charcoal and chalk, he thought - of a man's face. He instantly recognised the large, heavy-set features of the innkeeper.

The drawing was magnificent. There was a confidence in the line and shading which made Hugo think this must be the work of an experienced artist, perhaps someone like himself, passing through the countryside. The skin, even in simple charcoal, had real texture, and the eyes . . ! It was a rare achievement to have created the life that sparkled from those eyes with such a simple tool.

He signalled for the innkeeper to come over. The man approached, wiping his hands on his apron, expecting an order for more ale or soup.

'Sir. I couldn't help but admire this fine drawing of you, here on the shelf.' The innkeeper nodded and smiled. 'It is a portrait drawn by a skilful artist, I believe. Tell me, who drew it?'

The innkeeper's smile broadened as Hugo spoke.

The man stood there, struck dumb for a second or two but clearly delighted. Hugo suddenly realised that maybe he had just complimented the artist himself.

'Surely not a self-portrait? I must say, sir, you draw with such skill . . .'

The innkeeper raised his hand to stop Hugo, laughing quietly. 'I'm sorry. I am so pleased you have noticed the portrait, but I didn't draw it.'

'Then who *did*?' Hugo was intrigued. He knew many artists in Flanders, but the style of this portrait was unique.

'Johann!' The innkeeper turned to the counter as he called. A head appeared round the doorframe to the kitchen beyond, from where the soup had come. But where Hugo expected to see an adult was the face of a boy, no more than eleven years old. He had a happy, open expression and a thick head of dark hair. 'Come, Johann. Come and meet an admirer!'

The boy stepped shyly from behind the counter and approached Hugo's table.

'Well, well. You must be . . .' Hugo began.

'Yes, sir. He is my only son.' The innkeeper placed his arm around Johann's shoulders.

'And you drew this portrait of your father, did you, Johann?' Hugo continued, in a kindly voice. The boy nodded cautiously. 'It is a fine likeness. I suppose you have a good teacher?'

The boy looked a little confused for a moment. 'No, sir. I don't go to school. But I can read and write a little.'

Hugo laughed gently. 'No, no. I mean somebody must have taught you to draw like this. Who was it?'

The innkeeper interrupted. 'He has never been taught, sir. I gave him charcoal as a small child and what little paper I could afford. But no, sir, he has never had a lesson, though he spends hours in his room at practice.'

This was truly incredible. Hugo leaned back in his chair and looked intently at the man and his son but there was no deception in their smiling eyes. After a lifetime of studying faces Hugo would have been able to spot it straightaway. It was at that moment when, suddenly, an idea arrived in his head, fully formed.

Before he'd had time to consider it, he was already speaking his mind.

'Tell me, sir. What plans do you have for your son and his talents?'

The innkeeper looked embarrassed. 'I had always thought he would follow me in my trade and take over the inn one day.'

'And his drawing?' Hugo asked.

The innkeeper hesitated before speaking. 'Well, I'm sure *you* do well, sir. But for Johann I don't think there is much money to be gained in drawing pictures.'

How wrong he was! Hugo knew that with such a talent, and a few years training in oils, there was a great future for the boy.

'Tell me, Johann. Do you love to draw?' Hugo asked.

Johann's eyes suddenly burned with passion, his voice clearer and bolder as he answered. 'I do, sir. It makes me happy. I feel so alive when I'm drawing, but calm too . . . and a little sad sometimes. I can't explain . . .' Johann's voice trailed away as his eyes were drawn to the fire.

Hugo got up, moved his chair along and pulled two

more around the table. 'Come, sit with me. Let's talk about painting.' The innkeeper and his son looked at each other briefly, and sat down. 'You know, Johann, I've painted so many portraits I can scarcely remember them all!'

Johann smiled at Hugo. 'Who have you painted?' he asked eagerly.

'Merchants, rich families, guildsmen, court officials, princes even. Twenty years ago I was Court Painter to the Emperor in Brussels, no less.'

Johann's dark eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. 'The Emperor?' he whispered.

'Yes, the Emperor,' Hugo laughed and ruffled Johann's hair.

The innkeeper laughed, too. 'Well, we are in good company here, eh, Johann?' he said.

Johann smiled and nodded, hoping for more information about this painter.

Hugo took a sip of his ale and then continued. 'I still paint portraits from time to time but I leave most of the background detail to my assistants these days. I

am too old, and my eyesight is fading fast. My children are all grown up and have gone to find their own way in the world. You know, it's funny. Not one of them had the slightest interest in painting.' Hugo sighed briefly looking at the rain streaming down the window, then picked up Johann's drawing of his father. 'But then, it's really not something that can be forced.' He looked a little longer at the drawing before turning to Johann's father. 'I have a proposition for you.'

And so it was that Hugo offered to take Johann as an apprentice at his workshop in Ghent. This was Hugo's chance to pass on all his experience and skill to someone who he suspected would care more about his art than money.

At first the innkeeper remained quiet and listened thoughtfully. But when Hugo described the life that Johann might one day lead, thirty miles away in Ghent, he hurried off to fetch his wife.

Whilst the boy's father was gone, Hugo talked to Johann quietly. 'You have been blessed with a rare gift, Johann. I can help you to use it wisely . . . if you

want me to, that is? But learn one thing here and now, before anything else. An artist must hold up a mirror to the world. Many artists will paint what they are asked to paint, by whoever commissions them. They are happy to change what they see to suit the merchants and burghers who pay them. But to me those painters are just workmen - as happy to paint a shop sign as a portrait. Truth is more important, Johann. Be true to what you see.'

Johann listened politely, but really he didn't understand what Hugo was talking about. All he knew was that his life was changing quickly, all in the course of one stormy winter evening.

Johann's mother wept softly as a plan was worked out between Hugo and her husband. The whole family was to be brought to Ghent in two weeks to meet Hugo and his wife in their home. Once there they could reassure themselves that Johann's future would be both safe and happy.

'The apprenticeship will be for three years,' Hugo explained. 'Johann can visit you every second Sunday. I

will pay his guild fees and he can begin in the workshop preparing the panels and the paints. When I have time he will draw and learn to paint with me, as long as he is still happy in my house. I will teach him all I know. And mark my words! One day he may be a famous painter. What do you say, Johann?'

Johann looked at his mother and father. They smiled sadly and nodded to him, for they knew this was an opportunity which they would all be fools to miss. He looked back at Hugo.

'Thank you, sir. I would be happy to accept your generous invitation.'