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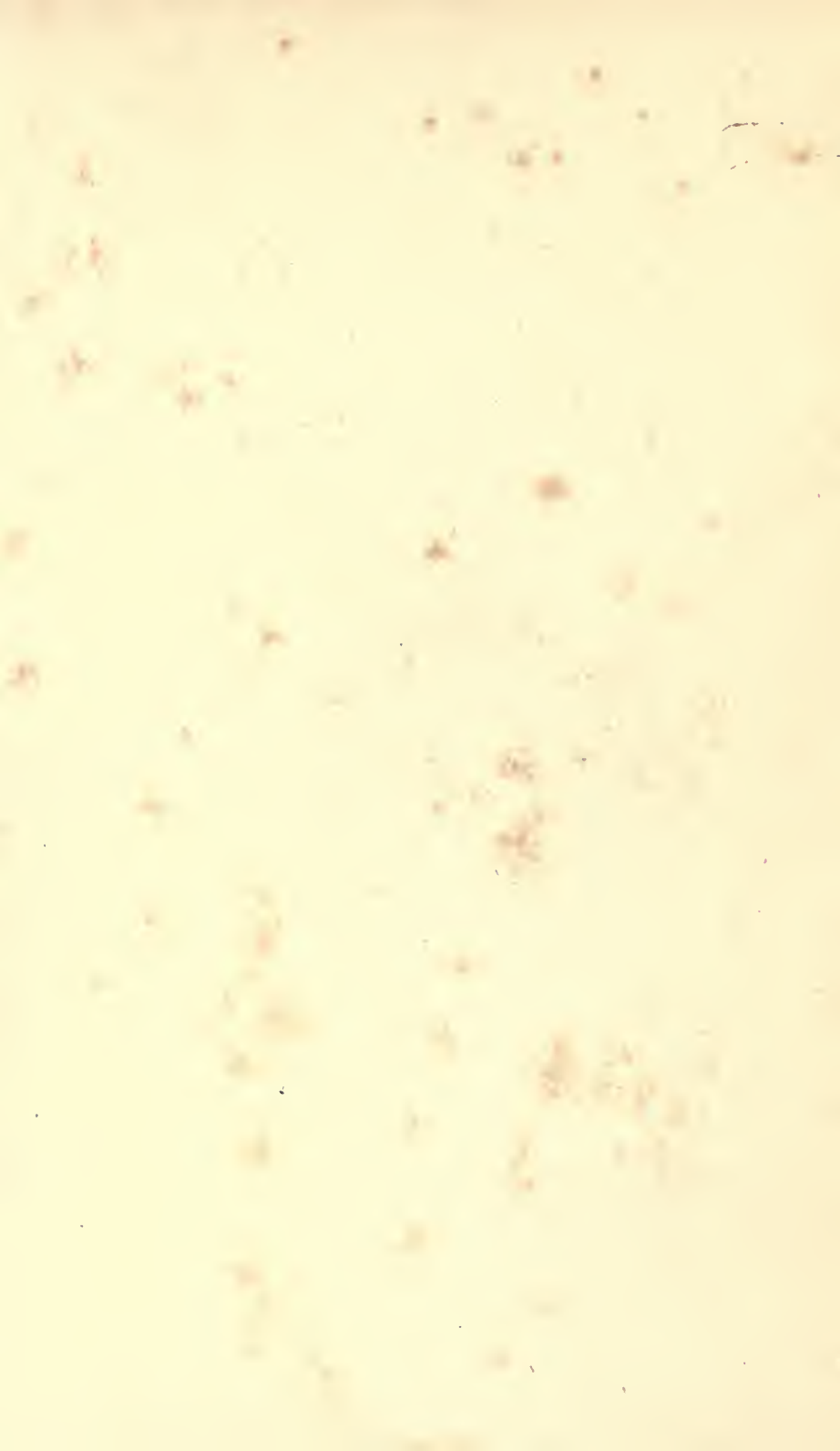


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**SAMUEL FOOTE**



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*Samuel Foote.*  
*after the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds*

# SAMUEL FOOTE

A BIOGRAPHY

*By*

PERCY FITZGERALD, M.A.

“HE WAS A FINE FELLOW IN HIS WAY; AND THE WORLD IS  
REALLY IMPOVERISHED BY HIS SINKING GLORIES: I WOULD REALLY  
HAVE HIS LIFE WRITTEN WITH DILIGENCE.”

DR. JOHNSON

LONDON: CHATTO & WINDUS

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# SAMUEL FOOTE

## CHAPTER I

1720—1740

### THE FAMILY—SCHOOL-DAYS—LIFE AT COLLEGE

It might, perhaps, seem an exaggeration or a surprise were I to say that I am about to introduce to the reader the most remarkable and one of the most gifted persons that ever figured on the English stage. It would indeed be difficult to decide whether he was more remarkable on the stage or off it. No actor has been so successful as dramatist, no actor such a wit or humorist, and, finally, no actor has had so stirring and adventurous a course. He was a gentleman by birth and breeding, yet grew up and was trained in taverns and pothouses. He spent his life mimicking respectable people, making them odious and ridiculous, and thus secured a handsome living—yet was never challenged or chastised. He was said to have run through three large fortunes. There is no story, therefore, more likely to be full of interest and excitement. A restless, energetic personage—perpetually moving to and fro—now in this kingdom, now in that. A strange parti-coloured life indeed, full of contrasts—he was now flourishing, now in straits

—but always contrived to come to the surface. People are very partial to such adventurous careers; we must ever follow with the most intense interest the most vivacious and “incompressible” being of his time—a professed and ever-ready wit, a brilliant writer, an excellent actor, though chiefly in his own pieces. In fact, his play and himself were inseparable.

It is odd that, while everybody with a life worth writing has had his life written, this remarkable and attractive man should have been passed by. My old friend John Forster indeed devoted a *Quarterly Review* paper to a complete account of him and his works, expounded in that rather impressive magisterial tone which is found in most of his writings. But though he was an admirable critic, well schooled, far beyond any that we can boast at the present time, and full of knowledge of the period, one is surprised at the too partial and too indulgent tone in which he deals with Foote’s character and proceedings. One would think he was dealing with one of the respected, well-established, irreproachable personages of that era, such as Garrick or Goldsmith. He overlooks always the turbulent and dramatic—if utterly irresponsible—character of Foote’s course, which seemed to be directed by no principle but the wanton humours of the moment.\*

It is certain that the popular estimate of Foote will have to be revised. He is usually assumed to have been merely a rough jester, a clever dramatist and indifferent actor; he passes across Bozzy’s pleasant stage one in a long procession of performers. It is clear now that he was a great force in the society which he

\* The account, much enlarged, was later included in his agreeable volume of collected essays.

ruled and intimidated for nearly the whole of his career, and that he attracted all eyes. What Mr. Foote said or did or would do was a matter of importance, and he did pretty much as he liked without anyone daring to interfere. This alone was an extraordinary performance and quite unique. Like Johnson, he ruled in every degree of society. He must really be classed, therefore, with the great leading group—with Johnson, Garrick, Goldsmith, Boswell; indeed, one might put him with Garrick and Johnson for his power and directing influence on society. I fancy no one will rise from the perusal of these pages without assenting to this conclusion.

Foote's father was a man of some importance in the town of Truro, and is described as "a very useful magistrate." He was Member of Parliament for Tiverton, Commissioner of the Prize Office, and Receiver of Fines for the Duchy. He died at his country-house on March 12, 1754, when seventy-six years of age, and was buried at St. Clement, Truro. He thus witnessed much of his erratic son's course. The family had another residence at Lambesco, where their ancestors had lived at the time of Charles II. His marriage with Eleanor, only daughter of Sir Edward Goodere, was to further strengthen its importance, and shows that Mr. Foote was an ambitious and pushful man. This lady lived to be eighty-four, and seems to have had but a distressful, chequered life. Her famous son, who was certainly accountable for many of her troubles, was christened at St. Mary's Church, Truro, in January 1720.

Samuel is commonly stated to have been born at the Red Lion in Boscawen Street, at one time the residence of Henry Foote, his relative. But he first

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