

DOROTHY JORDAN.

By J. FITZGERALD MOLLOY.



ONE sultry afternoon in the month of July, 1782, a family consisting of a mother, two daughters and a son, arrived at a small inn at Leeds. They had travelled from Dublin, and by the weariness of their carriage and dishevelment of their dress, bore traces of suffering and fatigue. Moreover their general appearance bespoke poverty, and a nameless air in their movements proclaimed them players. Scarce were they established in the sanded parlour of the inn, when the mother bade fair to establish the surmises her landlord entertained of their calling, by dispatching a note to Mr. Tate Wilkinson, manager of a theatrical company well known to the York district, and then playing in Leeds. After an interval fretfully endured by the family, the great Mr. Wilkinson entered the room with a dignified stride, and the mother went nervously forward to greet him.

In an instant he recognized her as Miss Grace Phillips, who four-and-twenty years before had played Desdemona to his Othello in the Irish capital. This was sufficient claim to his friendship ; in a moment the lady's family was introduced, and she engaged in conversationally connecting the past and present. Much had happened since last they met. Fate had proved kind and cruel to her ; romance had brightened but to darken her days. A young gentleman of position and expectations named Bland, had wooed and won her. They had been privately married, but his father discovering the union had discarded his son. Hopeless and helpless he had gradually degenerated, until he became a scene shifter : then worn by broken health and continual despondency he died. Children that gave proof of theatrical talent had been born of the marriage, more especially Dorothy, who was ushered into existence in the city of Waterford just twenty years previously. She had made her first appearance on the stage as Phœbe, in *As You Like It*, when she was fifteen years old. Her talents being remarkable, Mrs. Bland became anxious they should have an opportunity of recognition in England, and therefore sought an engagement for her from Mr. Wilkinson.

Under his management *The Fair Penitent* was produced, when Miss Francis, the name Mrs. Bland selected for her daughter, played the part of Calista. The curiosity her first appearance created soon deepened to attention, and before the curtain fell admiration was universally expressed. Not satisfied with the conquest commenced by her acting, she desired to complete it by her voice, and therefore gained the manager's consent to her singing "Greenwood Laddie" after the last act. Mr. Wilkinson feared "the absurdity of Calista after her death, jumping forth and singing a ballad" would destroy the favourable impression she had made ; but she knew the extent of her powers, and skipping on the stage, attired in a frock and mob cap, commenced this ballad, which by reason of her sweet voice charmed all hearers. Before leaving Leeds, Mrs. Bland was anxious her daughter should again change her stage name, and consulting with Mr. Wilkinson on the subject, he suggested that of Jordan, the Mrs. being assumed by way of protection against ardent admirers. Having bound herself to remain with Mr. Wilkinson for three years, she was unable to seek her fortune in London until that time had expired. Therefore she played at York, Leeds, Wakefield, Doncaster, Sheffield, and Hull yearly, gaining fuller experience and wider popularity the while. In due time her engagement with Mr. Wilkinson drawing to an end, she resolved to visit the capital. Accordingly on the 2nd of September, 1785, she played at York for the last time, and then left for London with a cheerless prospect of uncertainty and struggle before her.

Fortune, however, smiled upon her, for soon after her arrival, she was, through the influence of William Smith, engaged at a salary of four pounds per week, by King, successor to David Garrick as manager to Drury Lane Theatre. So far she had been successful, but during the days preceding a public trial of her talents, her spirits became terribly depressed. At last the eventful night arrived on which she



MRS. JORDAN AS "THE LAUGHING GIRL." After Cosway.

made her first appearance before a London audience. The *Morning Post* of that day informed its readers "The friends of the new actress who is to appear to-night for the first time, entertain not the most distant apprehension of a failure. From the report of the best judges who have seen her, there is not a possibility that the audience will wish the Jordan of Old Drury at Jericho." Accordingly on the 18th of October, 1785, she appeared as Peggy in *The Country Girl*, a version of Wycherley's *Country Wife*, judiciously altered by David Garrick. The comedy abounded in pleasant incident, the character of Peggy afforded scope for her natural humour. Her pleasant face, rich voice, and fresh style came as a welcome surprise to her audience. The *Morning Post* of the following day devoted an article to the consideration of her performance: "Mrs. Jordan," says the writer, "gave convincing

proofs that she possesses the essential qualities requisite for the character which was allotted to her. She acted and looked the country girl with a judgment and discrimination superior to any other performer on the stage. Nature has endowed her with talents sufficient to combat and excel her competitors in the same walk. Her person and manner are adapted for representing the peculiarities of youthful innocence and frivolity; and her tones of voice are audible and melodious. Mrs. Jordan portrayed the author's ideas with a vivacity and colouring that arrested the attention, and drew reiterated bursts of applause from a polite and crowded audience. If we may be allowed to judge of the lady's genius by the specimens given, she may be pronounced to be very far above mediocrity. Her person is rather of the middle size; her face more agreeable than handsome; and her features intelligent and impressive. Upon the whole we congratulate the public on such a valuable acquisition, that will greatly contribute to the support of the comic muse, and give an importance to the dramatic exertions of Old Drury."

Since she had achieved decided popularity as a humorous actress, Mrs. Jordan was anxious to gauge her powers in the representation of a higher line of comedy, and accordingly appeared as Viola in *Twelfth Night*. On the night of her performance, a brilliant audience, which included the Prince of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland, assembled to greet and subsequently to applaud her. A great authority—gentle Charles Lamb—speaking of her in this character says: "Her voice sank, with her steady melting eye, into the heart. There is no giving an account," he adds, "how she delivered the disguised story of her love for Orsino. It was no set speech that she had foreseen so as to weave it into one harmonious period, line necessarily following line, to make up the music. Yet I have heard it so spoken, or rather read, not without its grace and beauty; but when she had declared her sister's history to be a 'blank,' and that 'she never told her love,' there was a pause, as if her story had ended; and then the image of 'the worm i' the bud' came up as a new suggestion, and the brightened image of 'patience' still following after that, as by some growing, and not mechanical process, thought springing up after thought, I would almost say, as they were watered by her tears."

During her first season she played such various parts as Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Priscilla Tomboy in *The Romp*, Bellario in *Philaster*, Rosa in *Strangers at Home*, Hypolita in *She Would and She Would Not*, Miss Lucy in *The Virgin Unmasked*, and Widow Brady in *The Irish Widow*. Before the year ended, the actress, whose place in the ranks Mrs. Jordan filled, saucy Kitty Clive, made her exit from life's stage. The new player retired into York for the summer months, and returned to London the following autumn; and for many years her performances delighted the town.

Her vivacious temper, winning manner and affectionate nature, attracted many admirers, most favoured among whom was Richard Ford, a City magistrate, the son of one of the proprietors of Drury Lane Theatre. With him Mrs. Jordan consented to live as mistress of his home, and in due time she bore him four children, three daughters and a son. She now figured as a woman of *mode*, rode in her coach, marshalled her servants, and entered polite society. A conviction that she was Ford's wife generally obtained, but was eventually dispelled by her leaving him to become the mistress of the Duke of Clarence.

For a time the popularity long attending her was considerably abated, as the town becoming indignant at her leaving the father of her children, looked coldly on the representations in which she had formerly given unqualified delight. The press hinted at her lack of taste and proper feeling, but public opinion found no means of expression until the evening of the day on which she was advertised to play Matilda in *Richard Cœur de Lion* at the Haymarket Theatre, where the Drury Lane actors played whilst their house was being rebuilt. A vast crowd had assembled to see her in a favourite part; but a few minutes before the curtain drew up, Palmer, one of the company, came before the footlights and said she was suddenly indisposed, therefore the managers entreated the indulgence of their patrons to substitute *High Life Below Stairs* instead of the "historical romance" previously announced. This intelligence was received with murmurs of discontent and looks of displeasure, but no protestations were openly made. However, the play had scarcely begun, when the audience, "who had conversed together on the subject of their disappointment," interrupted the performance and demanded the entertainment should not be changed. Palmer came forward again and stated the managers and performers were anxious to fulfil

their duty, and added they were not informed of Mrs. Jordan's illness until after five o'clock. Then up rose a young gentleman in the pit and declared the house was satisfied the managers meant no imposition, but as *Richard Cœur de Lion* was announced, it should be performed, for Mrs. Jordan's part could be taken by Mrs. Crouch. And that lady complying with the request, she was received with "the most marked respect," and thenceforth all went peacefully to the end.

She was next announced to play Roxalana in *The Sultan*. Public curiosity was excited regarding her reception, and the house crowded at an early hour to witness her triumph or defeat. In due time the play commenced, and when Mrs. Jordan appeared she was greeted with loud applause and violent hissing. Full of nervous apprehension she withdrew, but presently reappeared. Beginning nervously, she rapidly gained courage, and told them in as few words as possible she would deem herself unworthy of their favour if their disapprobation did not seriously affect her. "Since I have had the honour and the happiness to strive here to please you," she continued, "it has been my constant endeavour, by unremitting assiduity, to merit your approbation. I beg leave to assure you, upon my honour, that I have never absented myself one minute from the duties of my profession but from real indisposition. Thus having invariably acted," she concluded, "I consider myself under the public protection." Her words bore electrical effect; the whole house applauded her, the performance was continued with signs of approbation, and she maintained her favour uninterruptedly as long as she continued on the boards.

Besides this public affront, her equivocal position moreover subjected her to many private slights she was powerless to prevent. However, she found some consolation for such slights in the honours paid her by royalty and its followers. She had removed with the duke to Bushy Park House, where she was visited by the Prince of Wales and his royal brothers of York, Cumberland, and Sussex, as well as by various ladies of quality and men of rank. Nay, even their Majesties and the royal princesses desired a more particular opportunity of observing the woman capable of retaining the duke's affection, and therefore resolved to visit the play-house and see her act. Accordingly, Colley Cibber's comedy *She Would and She Would Not* was announced for performance at Drury Lane, Mrs. Jordan taking the part of Hypolita. The unusual occurrence of a royal visit created considerable attention, and soon after the doors opened the house was crowded to excess. And presently George III., attended by a royal escort, and followed by a train of royal coaches, arrived at Drury Lane and entered the theatre. But he had no sooner stepped forward in his box to acknowledge the applause which greeted him, than the loud report of a pistol rang through the house, and immediately his Majesty's presence was obscured from all eyes by a cloud of smoke. Breathless horror fell on all, instantly succeeded by a wild excitement that was scarcely appeased by the calmness sustained by the king, who appeared neither hurt nor alarmed. The shot had been fired from the front row of the pit by James Hatfield, a lunatic, who had formerly been a soldier in the 15th Light Dragoons. Missing his aim, the bullet lodged in the wood-work of the royal box. In the instant succeeding his murderous attempt, he was dragged over the spikes of the orchestra into the music-room, and conveyed from the house. But the people being still agitated, and sorely apprehensive that he was at large, Mrs. Jordan came before the curtain and assured them "he was perfectly secured and properly attended." The house then gradually subsided, and the play commencing, Mrs. Jordan's excellent acting went far towards relieving the painful feeling which had disturbed the house.

In the course of years Mrs. Jordan bore the duke ten children, who resided with their parents at Bushy Park. An account of a *fête* given here on one of the birthdays of his Royal Highness, is described at some length in the *Courier* of Saturday the 23rd of August, 1806. The pleasure grounds were "disposed" for the occasion; bands played on the lawn; the servants were in new liveries; and patent lamps "suspended from a beautiful eagle" illuminated the great hall. About five o'clock the Prince of Wales with his royal brothers of York, Kent, Sussex, and Cambridge arrived, followed by the Lord Chancellor, Earl and Countess of Athlone and daughter, Lord Leicester, Baron Hotham, Baron Eden, the Attorney-General, Colonels Paget and M'Mahon, Sergeant Marshall and others. At seven o'clock the dinner-bell rang, when the Prince of Wales, taking Mrs. Jordan's hand, led her to the dining-room and placed her at the head of the table, he seating himself at her right hand, and the Duke of York sitting at her left. The windows being left open admitted the music of bands

and permitted a view of this edifying spectacle to the people thronging the grounds. The duke's numerous family were introduced before the banquet concluded, and "an infant in arms with a most beautiful white head of hair" was specially admired by the prince. Loyal and loving toasts followed in quick succession, revelry became the order of the hour, and the Duke of Clarence was obliged to extend the hospitality of Bushy Park House for the night to some of his brethren.

But in a little time the happiness Mrs. Jordan enjoyed was wholly destroyed. For her the beginning was at hand of that misery which ended in exile and death. The duke, finding himself in debt and difficulties towards the close of the year 1811, resolved, after a connection of over twenty years, to part from Mrs. Jordan and marry an heiress. Not having the manliness to tell her of his determination, the first intelligence of his design was conveyed her by the Duke of Cumberland, who cordially disliked his royal brother.

Two years had not elapsed before she found herself surrounded by fresh trouble. In the days of her prosperity she had signed bills and bonds for the benefit of one of her sons-in-law, Thomas Alsop, who held a situation in the Ordnance Office; these, with some other debts, amounting in all to two thousand pounds, falling due, she was unable to meet them. And the courage which had so long sustained her, breaking down, she resolved to quit the country until she found means of satisfying her creditors. She made her last appearance on any stage at Covent Garden on the 1st of June 1814, when she played Lady Teazle, a character she had first essayed twelve years previously, when the renowned Thomas King, after a service of fifty-four years, made his farewell bow to the public.

Secretly quitting England she first took up her residence at Boulogne-sur-Mer, then at Versailles, and finally at St. Cloud, where she assumed the name of Johnson and lived in strictest retirement, attended by a faithful servant. The mansion in which she occupied a couple of rooms has been described as large, rambling, and gloomy. Her poorly-furnished and cheerless apartments looked on a forlorn garden overgrown by rank weeds, and planted with melancholy cypress trees. Here in the unbroken silence of wretched days the joyous brightness and happy associations of the past rose up and mocked the bitter misery and wretched loneliness of the present. Surely life's pleasures were as Dead Sea fruit, love's gladness as the glamour of a summer hour. Her affections were discarded, her trust deceived, her children separated from her. Darkness blinded the light of hope, sorrow weighted her heart. Day after day a yearning for some sign or assurance of affection from those she had left expressed itself in her anxiety for letters. If she received a message from the children she loved over well she read it again and again, weeping over the page till the lines were obliterated: if, as was usually the case, the post brought her no tidings from England, she wore her heart out in fretfulness till the slow hours passed and a new day brought fresh hope.

And so her life was spent, and the end was at hand. On the morning of the 3rd of July, 1816, she betrayed unusual impatience for news from those she loved; for many days past no word from them had reached her; and now before the customary hour for delivery, she begged her landlord might ascertain what the mail had brought her. Obedient to her wishes he went his way, and returned speedily. At sound of his footfall on the threshold she rushed forward to meet him with outstretched hands and eager eyes; then seeing he had brought no letters, her arms dropped to her sides, her anxious glance turned to a vacant stare, she tottered and fell back upon a sofa. He hurried to her assistance, but she was already beyond the reach of human aid. For her a new day had dawned.