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978-1-108-06498-9 - Memoirs of Mrs Inchbald: Including Her Familiar Correspondence with the Most Distinguished Persons of Her Time: Volume 2

James Boaden

Excerpt

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MEMOIR

OF

MRS. INCHBALD.

CHAPTER I.

The Priory at Stanmore again—Its amusements; Crambo—There again on Good Friday—Dr. Howley—George Robinson buys her ‘Nature and Art’—More Long Annuities in course—Resumes her five-act comedy, ‘Wives as they Were,’ &c.—Her relations—Excursions with her friendly publisher—Introductions of the Green-room—Lets Mr. Harris have her comedy—He brings it out—Damp thrown upon it—Soon cleared away—Well received; commanded by their Majesties—Long Annuities again—An important conversation—Letter from the Rev. J. Wheeler—Dr. Warren dies—Mrs. Inchbald greatly shocked—Her verses on his loss, to the widow—Deaths of other friends—Mr. Harris’s insult, and his love-letter—Nervous affection—Alarm for her beauty—Calls in Ruspini—Amidst all these serious interests the equipoise of amusements not neglected.

THE time seemed to be come for the production of her second novel, ‘Nature and Art.’ Previously to entering as to terms with her book-

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seller, and the sequent labours of the press, she accepted of a *gaudy* day or two at the Priory; and on Saturday, the 2nd of January, 1796, left Leicester Square for the Marquis of Abercorn's at Stanmore. She found there Lord and Lady George Seymour, Mr. Copley, Mr. Hamilton, (the artists,) Mrs. Kemble, and her musical niece, Miss Sharp. On Sunday the Marchioness went to church; Mrs. Inchbald stayed at home, employed upon her novel. If curiosity should be at all tempted to inquire how a party so distinguished got through the day, we are fortunately in a condition to gratify them. A little more *gold leaf* was really all the difference between them and their humblest neighbours. After dinner they conversed on *religion* and *politics*, and after supper they played at *Crambo*. Now though we are clear that Mrs. Inchbald was not born under a *rhyming* planet, yet there is no reason to question her perfect equality with her noble and well-bred compeers; and perhaps sometimes the pleasant Italian poet might have exclaimed—

“Mirate la *dottrina* che s' asconde
Sotto 'l velame di quei *versi strani*.”

She passed *Good Friday* at the same elegant retirement—the Kembles were both there, and Dr. Howley, (the present Archbishop of Canterbury,) then a young divine, called upon the Marquis, and displayed his powers of mind to their

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great delight. She looks upon Sundays and holidays as at her disposal; but as early as seven o'clock on the following morning is always on her way home, to resume her daily toil. She practised the counsel of her favourite Imogen :

“ Stick to your journal course : the breach of custom
Is breach of all.”

It was on the 11th of January that her steady friend Robinson bought her second novel. He gave her one hundred and fifty pounds for the work, and she does not seem to have considered her commodity as undervalued. Two volumes in twelves, that, at trade price, could not well yield the publisher four shillings per copy, required more than one impression to bring him any profit upon the outlay. To be sure this branch of literature was then greatly underrated; and this would be felt by none so sensibly as the *dramatic* writer; to whom, a lucky farce, (a fortnight's labour perhaps,) by the humour of the times, or the rage for some favourite actor or actress, would produce considerably more than a long-meditated work, the epitome of the author's whole intellect; which yielded him but a trifle, and could never be repeated. We have spoken freely of ‘Nature and Art’ when illustrating the letters of her friend Hardinge. It enabled her to invest £88. 15s. in the Long Annuities, which added five pounds to her yearly income. She had a little before this,

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by converting her stock into annuities, realised one hundred pounds.

A second edition was called for, and she began to prepare for it in May, so that the first had gone off in about six months. Neither Holcroft nor Charles Moore, the doctor's youngest son, were much pleased with 'Nature and Art.' Mr. Twiss, and Mr. Whitfield, Mrs. Mattocks, and her sister Dolly, however, wrote very favorable critiques upon it, and she received a variety of complimentary calls and letters. She now seriously resumed her important object, a five-act comedy. This was entitled 'Wives as they Were, and Maids as they Are.' She had written it with extreme care as to the brilliancy and point of the dialogue; and as to some improbabilities in the structure and progress of the fable, though she had felt them all, she yet thought them within the modern limits of critical indulgence. Indeed she saw, for the most part of her experience, that the *manner* was nearly every thing; and if you could but hit upon the *right* mode, the objectionable in the abstract would pass upon the stage as it does in real life. In October she offered her comedy to Mr. Harris, who returned it to her. But in December Mr. Wroughton called upon her with proposals to receive it at Drury-Lane. The truth was, that the friendly trio of dramatists, Reynolds, Holman, and Morton, were now in possession of the Covent-Garden stage, with 'Fortune's Fool,'

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‘Abroad and at Home,’ and ‘A Cure for the Heart-Ache,’ and really threatened a monopoly; which they did not endanger by the wilful omission of a character for Lewis. “But with the year, seasons return,” as the sublimest of poets has said; and in the year following we shall find the comedy of Mrs. Inchbald acted at Harris’s theatre.

Wroughton was now acting manager of Drury-Lane theatre. Kemble had resigned the situation on account of the irregularities in the house, and indeed there was an interest perpetually thwarting him even in the principle of his management. They would have been glad to detach such a writer as Mrs. Inchbald from Covent-Garden, where a succession of simple coat-and-waistcoat plays, running their one-and-twenty nights to full houses, rendered almost ridiculous the sturdy persistence of the other theatre in more regular, costly and classical exhibitions.

Her health this year does not appear quite so good as usual. She is a good deal troubled with a scorbutic complaint. Her sister Dolly too seems to have required medical aid, and Mrs. Inchbald took her to Dr. Warren on the 7th April. He prescribed, and his fair friend writes on returning home, “I admired him more than ever.” We shall not be surprised to find that she again called upon him in May, and on the subject of her *sister* had much conversation with the good

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doctor. In August, Warren being in the country, she sent for Dr. Pearson, and we suppose, by his permission, took “Ward’s white drop herself.”

Her sister-in-law Simpson naturally excited much of her attention from the loss of her husband; and to render things worse, her son’s military conduct had excited the marked displeasure of his colonel. Upon this subject she very feelingly gave his poor mother accurate intelligence. Her niece, Nancy Hunt, this year married a Mr. Jarrett, which gave her a new connexion in life. Her most respected friend, Sir Thomas Gage, however, died in March: he had greatly distinguished her for a series of years. In August Mrs. Wells was again lodged in Newgate, at which she could express no surprise: from no doubt a variety of causes, the crowd of visitors seems greatly on the increase. Dr. Parr is at the head of the learned, whom, with his two daughters, she formerly met at her friend Mr. Godwin’s.

Her publisher, Robinson, with great gallantry escorted her to different scenes of amusement; in July, with a large party, to see the Tower of London, and then dine at Greenwich. In August he took her in a chaise to Warley Camp: they dined at Brentwood, and at nine in the evening returned to town. On the 2nd of September she accompanied him to Whitehall, where they embarked to visit the Oxford East Indiaman.

Miss Alderson, on the 17th of April, accom-

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panied her to Westminster, to hear a sermon from the Bishop of Rochester, Horsley. Her reading this year consisted of the current works of the day;—‘Mr. Burke and his answerers, Miles and Thelwall;’ ‘Godwin’s Political Justice,’ and ‘Edward Gibbon’s Life.’

The green-room of the theatre this year introduced to her speaking acquaintance Lord Mil-town, who highly complimented her person, youth, and talents. Lord Mountnorris might, perhaps, omit the *youth*, or commute it for youthful *appearance*. She resided through the year in Leicester Square, and her landlord’s daughter, Louisa, waited upon her until the rudeness of her aunt, Mr. Shakespear’s sister, induced her to decline any further attendance from the niece. However, the good woman had some excuse for bad temper; her brother’s debts were become extremely oppressive, and Mrs. Inchbald anticipated some not very distant claim by him upon her kindness.

This was verified in the beginning of the year 1797, when he borrowed ten pounds, and explained his situation to her. Nor did the death of his uncle, which she saw announced in the papers, relieve him to any extent. She speaks of his will as having greatly afflicted his nephew and nieces. In September Mrs. Wells, perhaps very competent authority, told Mrs. Inchbald that her landlord was in the Fleet Prison. His daughter, Louisa, had been permitted to resume her atten-

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dance upon their considerate lodger; who, after some unpleasant detections, was compelled to part from her for *ever*, as at least she writes.

The year 1797 opened favorably, in a dramatic point of view, to Mrs. Inchbald. The overtures from both theatres were renewed for her comedy. Harris, however, had the preference in this competition. He was not given to *lose* the pieces entrusted to him, and he *paid* for them liberally and at sight. Mr. Harris would have thought himself *disgraced* by such conduct as the present times seem to consider fashionable. Though Morton's 'Cure for the Heart-Ache' had met with prodigious success on its first appearance in January, the wary manager had no sooner seen the triumphant arrival of one vessel in the port of safety, than he turned himself to another under a different commander; and on the 25th of that month Mrs. Inchbald read her play of 'Wives as they Were,' &c. in the green-room of Covent-Garden theatre. Some remarks that were then made upon it greatly offended her. However, Mr. Harris's written agreement arriving on the 28th, the play was read again on the 31st. But she had seen something rather unwelcome in the business, and accordingly, with the full power of an author, on the 9th of February she reclaimed her comedy, called back the parts from the performers, and refused to rehearse it on the day following. We cannot be surprised that Mr. Harris should

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now be offended in his turn : however, he knew his fair friend's attachment to the *essential* on such occasions, completed the purchase of the comedy on the 15th, and from that day till its performance on the 4th of March she most commonly attended the rehearsals. She, however, was not in the house on its first performance ; but was relieved, soon after the curtain fell, by congratulatory visits from her affectionate Mrs. Phillips, Sir Charles Bunbury, and many others, on its great success. The next day she says, that she found the piece had many faults, and cut it where it hung in the effect. On the 6th she saw it, and was not pleased ; on the next day, however, Mr. Harris called, and seemed not to have given up his hopes from the play. On the 9th it was performed to a good house, and went off *well*. On the 13th she saw it again, in company with Mrs. Siddons and her family, Mr. Cam and Mr. Lawrence. That gentleman wrote a short but very pleasant letter to her on this occasion, which we were glad to find among her papers.

“ Greek Street.

“ MY DEAR MADAM,

“ Can you, in this hour of triumph, listen to so humble a request as that of an order for the play ?—I am growing economical ; and, as I understand there is a gentleman in this new

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piece,¹ whose system of economy agrees very much with my new thoughts upon the subject, I am unwilling to lose the benefit of the lesson.

“ You must think I am serious when even my mode of taking it is in the true spirit of the science. Dear Madam, ever yours,

“ THOMAS LAWRENCE.”

On the 16th she began to prepare it for the press; and on the 28th of April was surprised to find that it had gone through three editions. In May it was commanded by their Majesties; and she herself, with her sister and Miss Pearce, enjoyed their gracious applause from the boxes.

Of the profits from this comedy she, at three several purchases, invested £427. 10s., for which she got thirty pounds per annum in the Long Annuities. She this year felt something of the pain, which riches occasionally give.—The funds were reported to be in a very unfavorable condition, and the Bank, it was asserted, must shortly break. But though, on such occasions, it was her practice rather to increase the famous basket of guineas in her room, she was not weak enough to run with her property to any foreign security for greater safety.

The reader will, if he be humane, have painfully remembered the expression given by Mrs.

¹ ‘ Wives as they Were, and Maids as they Are.’