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in the Years 1777–79: Volume 1

Nathaniel William Wraxall

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS, &c.

LETTER I.

Anecdotes of Frederic the Second, Landgrave of Hesse.—Hanover.—Electress Sophia.—Sophia Dorothea, Princess of Zell, wife to George the First.—Relation of the principal circumstances attending her imprisonment, and the death of Count Konigsmark.—Examination of that transaction.—Particulars of the last illness and death of King George the First.

HANOVER, Sept. 9, 1777.

THE line of inquiry and research which you so warmly recommended to me at my leaving England, is undoubtedly far more interesting as well as important, than the description of palaces and cities. But it is likewise more difficult, and in some respects I might add, more invidious. Kings and ministers are neither

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as accessible as the buildings they inhabit, nor can we wish to speak of them while alive, with the same freedom. “Periculosa loesæ plenum opus Alexæ, historiam sui temporis scribere.” Even Burnet and Clarendon, who wrote of the events of their own times, did not escape the penalty inseparable from such an attempt. I am however, on the other hand, sensible, that it is only from cotemporary authority we can derive the most authentic, as well as curious materials of history. The minute and personal anecdotes of illustrious men soon fade under the touch of time, and are obliterated. In order to be preserved and transmitted to posterity, they must be collected at the moment. The letters which I propose to address to you, from the various courts which I may chance to visit while on the continent, will therefore be directed, though not exclusively, yet in a peculiar manner, to that object. If sometimes, when surveying scenes or countries remote from the common track, I may seem to deviate from my
original

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original design, the digression will only be short.

I shall pass over the time that elapsed between my landing at Calais early in July, and my arrival at this place, as furnishing little towards my present design; and I shall therefore, neither detain you at Antwerp, at the Hague, nor on the Rhine. Remounting that river from Duffeldorf to Mentz, I crossed the dominions of Hesse to Cassel. The Landgrave may be accounted one of the richest, as well as most powerful Princes of the German Empire, after the temporal Electors: only the Dukes of Wirtemberg and of Mecklenburg Schwerin; among the Princes of the second order, can contest with him in extent of territory, in revenues, and in political importance.

Frederic the Second, reigning Landgrave of Hesse Cassel, is at this time about fifty-seven years of age, of a middle size inclining to robust, and of a manly figure. Over his uniform he usually wears the

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Order

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Order of the Garter ; but his treatment of the Landgravine his first wife, who was a daughter of George the Second, did not tend to cement the alliance which he had formed with the King of Great Britain. They were separated from each other during many years. The infelicity of his first nuptials has not however prevented him from contracting a second marriage, as soon as the necessary forms of decorum permitted. Captivated by the attractions of the Princess of Brandenburgh Schwedt, he espoused her about four years ago. She is a collateral descendant of the Prussian House, and is still at this time a very beautiful woman. But the Landgrave seems either not destined or not calculated for matrimonial happiness. They live in a state of alienation and estrangement, in the same palace and capital, without issue, or almost intercourse of any kind.

For this domestic misfortune he consoles himself in the society of Mademoiselle F——, whose personal charms are pointed
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by all the fascinating coquetry of a Parisian education. She was mistress to the Duke de Bouillon, and arrived here only three months since. Two thousand Louis-d'ors were allowed her for the expences of her journey from Paris to Cassel, and her actual establishment falls little short of six thousand pounds a-year. As if all these remunerations were below her merit, she is treated with still more flattering marks of distinction. At the public theatre her box is placed close to the stage, in a conspicuous part of the house. I saw her there last night, when the Landgrave and Landgravine were present at the performance. This contempt of decency, so repugnant to our manners, is not uncommon in the German Courts, and derives a sort of sanction from custom.

Cassel is in many respects a beautiful city, and embellished with some magnificent buildings. Hanover presents the image of departed greatness; palaces without inhabitants, a capital without trade, and an

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Electorate without a Sovereign. It is principally by the recollection of what it was, that Hanover continues to interest an ordinary traveller. To an Englishman it offers many curious subjects of reflection, connected with history. I study the local scenery with pleasure; nor have I been less attentive to collect some of the anecdotes which tradition still preserves relative to the Electoral Family. At the palace of Herenhäusen, yesterday, a grey-headed domestic of fourscore pointed out to me the precise spot in the gardens, where the old Electress Sophia, wife of Ernest Augustus, dropped down and expired. That event happened in the beginning of June 1714, not eight weeks before the death of Queen Anne. “I perfectly remember,” said he to me, “the evening, which was uncommonly serene and fine. The Electress appeared to be in perfect health, notwithstanding her advanced period of life. She had dined in public; and, invited by the beauty of the weather, walked out, accompanied

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“ accompanied by the ladies and principal
 “ persons composing her court. Suddenly,
 “ without any apparent cause or at-
 “ tack, she exclaimed, ‘ It rains ! it rains !’
 “ and running across the garden, she soon
 “ sunk down close to a little alcove about
 “ two hundred yards from the palace,
 “ where in the space of a few minutes she
 “ breathed her last, without pang or ef-
 “ fort.”

Her destiny was a very singular one. The youngest daughter of the exiled and unfortunate Elector Palatine, King of Bohemia ; brought up in adversity and privations ; married to a German Prince of the family of Brunswick, who had then no prospect of becoming the head of his House ; called in the evening of life, by a wonderful concurrence of circumstances, to the English succession, from which she was apparently removed by her birth to an incalculable distance ; surviving that event above thirteen years, and at last carried off by death, at the very moment when she

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must have ascended the British throne: such were the outlines of her history. We know, that though above eighty at the time of her decease, she felt none of the infirmities of age; and that far from regarding with indifference the crown which awaited her, she anticipated with anxiety the accomplishment of so great an expectation. It would have been a singular spectacle to have beheld the grand-daughter of James the First quitting Hanover at more than fourscore years of age, embarking for her new dominions, and assuming the reins of government, at a time when other princes are usually incapacitated for all the functions of royalty.

My researches have however been more particularly directed to another Princess of the Electoral Family, less generally known than Sophia: I mean the wife of George the First, for she was never acknowledged as Queen of England, or even as Electress of Hanover. She is in fact only remembered by some imperfect traditions of her gal-

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lantry and her misfortunes. The greater part of her life was passed in a sort of melancholy sequestration at the Castle of Ahlden in the Duchy of Zell. As only persons of inferior condition were admitted to see her during the residence which she made there, it is very difficult to ascertain with certainty the principal circumstances of her history. Even relative to the charge of infidelity brought against her, it is not easy to support by facts any decided opinion. Her innocence is matter of inference and belief, more than of positive proof. I have conversed with many persons who recollect her death, though scarcely with any who ever saw her. On the nature of her connection with Count Konigsmark, and on the particulars of his *disappearance*, I have in a peculiar manner endeavoured to obtain accurate information. But over this transaction so mysterious a veil has been drawn, that no cotemporary testimony or evidence, on which implicit reliance can be placed, is now to be procured.

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cured. The Court of Hanover, as might naturally be expected, was desirous to suppress as much as possible every thing relative to the Princess and her pretended lover. Even the name of Königsmark was not mentioned without repugnance, till within the last twenty years.

Various portraits of Sophia Dorothea, the wife of George the First, still exist in the palace here at Hanover, as well as in that of Herenhausen. I have studied them with attention ; and if I were compelled to name any person now living, to whom they bear a particular resemblance, I should say it was to the celebrated Mrs. Draper, better known under the name of Sterne's " Eliza ;" but the Princess was unquestionably by far the most beautiful of the two women. In a very capital picture of her, which struck me yesterday at Herenhausen, she appears to be in the bloom of youth. The contour of her face is more round than oval, the features regular, and their expression gay, pleasing, and animated. Her eyes