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978-1-108-05458-4 - The Life of Mrs Jordan: Including Original Private Correspondence,  
and Numerous Anecdotes of Her Contemporaries: Volume 1

James Boaden

Excerpt

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THE  
**LIFE OF MRS. JORDAN.**

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CHAPTER I.

What is to be expected in these Memoirs—Mrs. Jordan's family theatrical—Irregularity commonly progressive—Mrs. Bland—her story—her husband—her sisters—Ryder first employs the talent of Miss Francis—Daly's *Duenna*—Sketch of his character as a man and a manager—Lieutenant Charles Doyne proposes marriage to Miss Francis—After some deliberation his proposals are declined; by whose advice in particular—Ireland a good school of acting—Mrs. Abington—Miss Francis as an actress, and her own notion of her powers—compared with Mrs. Abington.

**T**HE lady of whom I have undertaken the biography, unquestionably demands such a tribute from the country which she adorned with her talents:

VOL. I.

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and from me particularly, who discharge but a debt to the muse of COMEDY, after having celebrated the two principal favourites of her serious sister.

I assure the reader, that this allusion to any previous works of mine arises from no feeling of vanity; but that he may, from them at least, infer the temper, with which the present work will be written; and rely upon every becoming delicacy in treating the subject. I see the delightful and much-lamented mother affectionately honoured in her children; and, not in the least depending upon *her* merits, I know that they will justify even higher favour (if higher can be shown,) by progressive merits of their own. This declaration is equally removed, I trust, from servility and rudeness; it is the necessary prelude to what must be an impartial narrative, executed in the tone of sincere, yet gentlemanly freedom.

But there would be little interest in such a composition, if the variety of its incidents were to be coloured by any remarkable *elevation* of its subject; it is the diversity of her lot that must render the Life of Mrs. Jordan valuable to the moral-

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ist, and of conspicuous importance to the public in general;—the whole of it justifies the following brief, but unequal summary. She began life in the midst of difficulty and ambiguity;—by her own genius attained all the honours of her profession, and the envy, which, like the shadow, threw them fuller upon the eye;—she lived for a series of years in the bosom of a beloved family, with every accompaniment of splendour; and expired in a foreign land, at a distance from all that she loved; and overwhelmed by disasters, to which she could see no termination but the grave.

The mother of Mrs. Jordan was one of three sisters of a Welsh family of the name of Phillips. Their father, I believe, to have been in orders; but there is little promotion among the Welsh clergy; the scanty provision he could make for his family induced his three daughters to go upon the stage; and we know from unquestionable authority, that they were all respectable in the profession.

Miss Grace Phillips yielded to the addresses of a Mr. Bland, and she went to Ireland along with him, where they were married by a Catholic priest. I presume she continued her profession without

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interruption ; for her husband was a minor, and his father being little disposed to sanction his youthful ardour, and, as a civilian, entirely master of his ground, procured the marriage to be annulled, as one contracted in *nonage*, and void, from the want of parental consent.

I venture, in opposition to the usual statements, to throw the birth of Mrs. Jordan as far back as the year 1762, because I well remember hearing her age stated to have been sixteen in the year 1778, when an old military friend, then on the recruiting service at Cork, saw her there, in the company of which Daly was the manager, who had brought her out the year before. In this unfortunate condition of her parents, Mrs. Jordan was born in the neighbourhood of Waterford, about the year 1762, and was christened, I suppose, Dorothy, though, somewhat romantically, she signed herself, commonly, DORA, when she wrote more than the initial D. of the name.

Irregularity of any kind is commonly progressive, and seldom prosperous. The misfortunes of Mrs. Jordan may be said to have commenced at her very birth, and the hue then impressed upon

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her fate, continued to tinge it to its close ; there was an *ambiguity* in her situation, always productive of annoyance ; and the cultivation and the practice of many virtues, were not always thought to balance the admitted dispensation with some of the forms of life.

To the relations of her husband Mrs. Bland generally seemed to consider herself under a sort of vassalage. She probably expected, that her children might receive benefit by her attention to their feelings ; and the stage-name borne by her daughter was therefore Francis, except when some irritation, usually transient, made her try at least to mortify them by the use of that of Bland.

It is obvious, from the accounts of Wilkinson and Hitchcock, that the three sisters, whom I have already alluded to, were well educated and accomplished women ; and that they were persons of “gentle blood” may reasonably be supposed an advantage in theatrical life : to the higher orders it is a favourite apology—I have observed, that the players whom they patronise are “persons of a respectable family ;” and pleasure itself must be regulated by pride.

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The studies of the stage, it may here be observed, constitute a better education than is commonly derived from the schools. What *other* ladies have under their command, constantly encamped, such “an army of good words” as our actresses? Who, besides them, are so stored with every variety of neat and polished thought? Who else can have equal self-possession, equal address; and above all, who ever approach them in distinct articulation, in voluble or impressive delivery? So great are these advantages, that they have kept very powerful actresses in high reputation for their *wit*, who could scarcely read their parts; and never acquired the orthography, in which they were all of them printed.

We shall not therefore be surprised, that without the possibility of her receiving an expensive education, which her embarrassed parents could not afford, Mrs. Jordan acquired, almost domestically, a very correct diction in her native language, and the power of composing agreeably, in either prose or verse, with little premeditation. When at length it was determined, that she also, with the family bias, should appear upon the stage, Mr. Ryder entrusted

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to her the slight part of Phebe in *As You Like it*;  
quite unconscious of the *real* union that would one  
day take place between her representative and the  
poet's Rosalind:—

“ I'll marry you, if ever I marry woman;  
And I'll be married to-morrow.”

*As You Like it.*

The popularity of Mr. Ryder, as a manager and actor in Dublin, was great and well merited. As a gentleman he was in truth highly cultivated, and his daughter studied the classics, and translated elegantly from the Latin poets. Some of her writings I very recently perused with pleasure. Ryder's company was at the time strong, and he could therefore allot no important, perhaps *adequate*, business to our young aspirant. His rival Daly had more in his power, or promised more; and the celebrated opera of the *Duenna* being pirated, and called the *Governess*, with the characters *reversed*, Miss Francis assumed the male attire in the character of Lopez. She also acted the Romp in the farce so called, and Tomboy sat better upon her than Lopez; and the Master of Horse in Ireland, Capt. Jephson's tragedy of the *Count of Nar-*

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*bonne* being acted at both theatres, Daly gave Miss Francis the interesting part of Adelaide; and she became attractive as an actress in her sixteenth year.

Daly now took her with him to Cork, and here we have some accurate recollections of her by the friend to whom I before alluded, the publication of whose memoirs during the progress of the present work gives me the opportunity of inserting in her life a sketch so lively and authentic. See Mr. P. L. Gordon's *Personal Memoirs*, vol. i. p. 341.

“She had met with great applause, especially in the farce of the *Romp*; and Heaphy, the manager of the Cork theatre, engaged her at twenty shillings per week, along with her father, who was employed as a scene-shifter. The young lady was at this time in her seventeenth year, and though not a regular beauty, she was universally admired, and proved a great attraction. On this account the manager gave her a benefit, but for want of patronage, it proved a complete failure, the expenses of the house being more than her receipts. A party of young men, at the head of which was a Mr. Smith, a banker's clerk, were desirous that their

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favourite should have another benefit, and they called lustily for Heaphy to come on the stage, but he would not appear. The young Pats were, however, determined to carry their point, and being joined by the pit, they proceeded to tear up the benches, and to attack the orchestra, who, to drown the clamour, had begun fiddling. This was alarming, and the acting manager, O'Keefe, Heaphy's son-in-law, at length judged it prudent to make his appearance, when a spokesman delivered, in an appropriate harangue, the desire of the audience that Miss Phillips should have a free benefit.—O'Keefe remonstrated, stating that the season had been unprofitable to the manager; but this excuse was not admitted, and he was compelled to yield to the wishes of the public—*alias* a score of wild bucks, of which I made one.

“The benefit was fixed for an early evening and our *débutante* had an audience that produced above forty pounds; an immense sum in her eyes, we may easily suppose, as it was probably the first money she ever had. Her popularity increased before the season closed. Henderson and I met at a supper party, to which Miss Phillips had also

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been invited. This celebrated actor complimented her in the most flattering manner on her talents, advising her to study her profession, and to assume a higher walk in comedy, than playing Romps ; and success, he said, would be certain. On her return to Dublin, her salary was raised to three guineas a week."—From Pryse Gordon's *Personal Memoirs*, vol. i. p. 341.

Mrs. Daly, the once celebrated Miss Barsanti, it should here be observed, was extremely tenacious as to the characters to which she had the prescriptive right of *excellence*, as well as situation. She might be the more tenacious, as her husband's attentions were not confined by his *vow*, and his own admiration always accompanied, if it did not precede, that of the public for every lady of merit in his company.

Richard Daly, Esq., Patentee of the Dublin Theatre, was born in the county Galway, and educated at Trinity College ; as a preparation for the course he intended to run through life, he had fought sixteen duels in two years, three with the small-sword, and thirteen with pistols ; and he, I suppose, imagined, like Macbeth, with equal confidence and more