

Book X of THE GEORGIAN SAGA

JEAN PLAIDY WHO IS ALSO VICTORIA HOLT

The Duke  
of Clarence  
had a  
passion for  
the theatre—  
and her  
name was  
Dorothy  
Jordan.

# GODDESS OF THE GREEN ROOM

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Jean Plaidy

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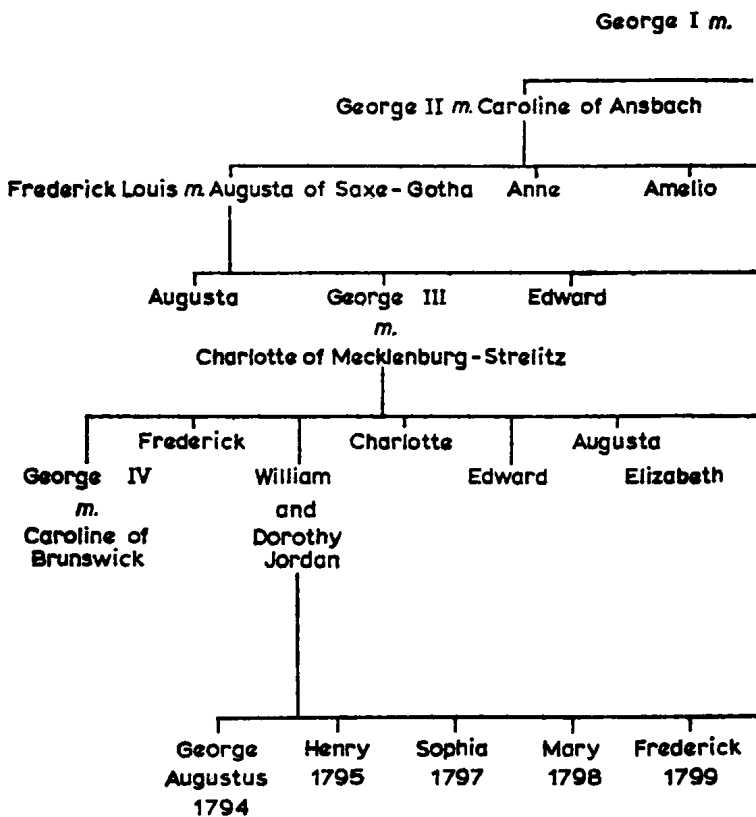
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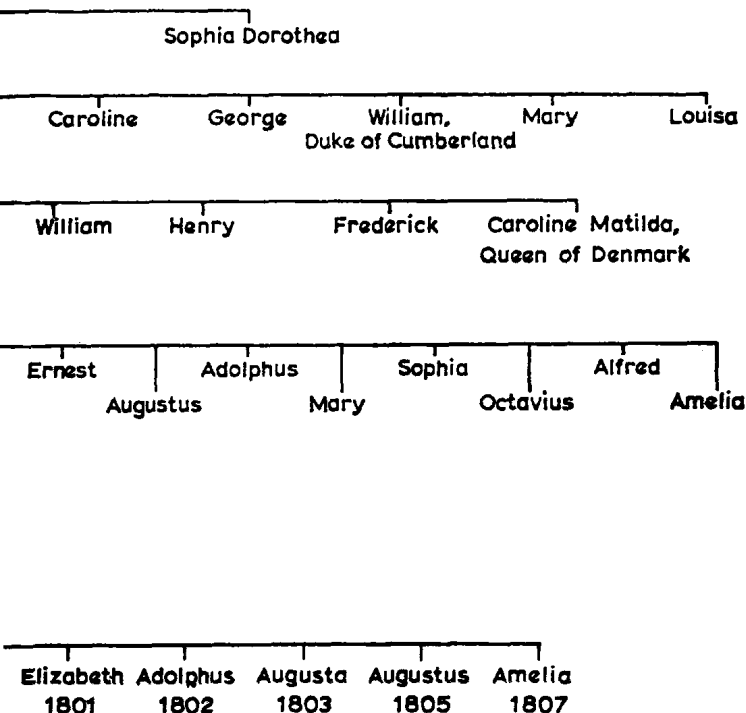
For William's and Dorothy's Great-Granddaughter,

HEBE ELSNA

with admiration for her work,  
gratitude for her friendship  
and love for herself



Sophia Dorothea of Celle



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*Dorothy Jordan*





## Comedy in Crow Street

In a little room in South Great George Street in the city of Dublin two girls were discussing a matter of great importance to them. The elder, handsome and elegant in spite of the poverty of her clothes, was clearly in a state of tense anxiety; the other with the piquant face and the lively expression, was trying to calm her.

'You will do it, Hester,' she was saying. 'Why, it's in the blood. You inherited it all from Mamma.'

'I know,' said Hester, 'but you can't imagine what it's like, Doll, to face an audience for the first time.'

Dorothy was on her feet. 'Oh yes, I can,' she said. 'I've seen enough of it, Heaven knows. I remember when Mamma and Papa were playing their parts and we all had to listen to them. I can smell those tallow candles now. I always used to wonder what would happen if they toppled over and set the boards alight or perhaps caught the curtains.'

'I wish,' said Hester, 'that Papa had not died, and that we had more money.'

'People always wish for more money,' put in Dorothy quickly. 'And don't forget Papa deserted us before he died.'

'But he was kind. He always sent our allowance.'

'I'd rather have done without it, when I remind myself that he had to marry a rich woman to provide it. I'd rather earn my own money.'

'And that won't be much in your milliner's shop.'

'I dare say not to that famous actress, Miss Hester Bland.'

'Don't,' cried Hester. 'It's tempting the fates.'

'Nonsense,' retorted her sister. 'Of course you're going to be a success. Mr Ryder thinks so. Oh, he has great hopes of you. I heard him telling Mamma so. He thinks you are going to bring business to his Crow Street Theatre. Hester, it's a wonderful life, playing parts on a stage. And they have benefit nights which can bring in as much as thirty pounds. One day a manager from London may see you. How would you like to play at Drury Lane or Covent Garden?'

'Stop!' cried Hester. 'I can't bear it. I know I'm going to be a failure.'

'You are not, Hester Bland. The family fortunes are on the rise. No more skimping and screwing.'

'What expressions you use, Dolly!'

'Call me Dorothea, because that is what I am going to call myself when our fortunes are made. When I have a famous sister I shall boast to all the ladies who come into the shop. Try on this confection, Madam. The finest tulle I do assure you and the flowers are made of the best velvet as worn in royal circles. And you are being attended to, Madam, by the sister of the famous actress Miss Hester Bland. You will soon be obliged to travel to London to see her, for Dublin will not be good enough for Miss Hester Bland. Did you know that the King himself has sent for her to play before him in Covent Garden?'

'Oh, Doll, I'm so . . . scared.'

'Everyone is at first. Mamma says you should be if you are going to give a good performance. Do you know, Hester, I don't think I should be scared. I don't think I should care.' She laughed and, rising to her feet, she bowed before an imaginary audience:

*'Dead shepherd; now I find thy saw of might  
Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?'*

'You'd make a tolerable Phoebe.'

'If I were to be a famous actress I'd like a singing part. Well . . .

*'Under the greenwood tree  
Who loves to lie with me*

*And tune his merry note  
Until the sweet bird's throat . . ."*

**'I'm in no mood for songs, Dolly, though I must admit you sing them sweetly enough. But your stockings are falling down and there's a rent in your gown.'**

'I know. But as long as I am neat for the shop what matters it? Allow me to be as untidy as I please at home.'

'You'll be in the theatre tonight?'

'Of course. With the whole family. I expect even little George will be there. You can count on the family's support, Hester.'

'Oh, Dolly, suppose I forget my lines.'

'Let me hear them. Come on.' Dorothy was beginning to act the part Hester was to play that night when their mother came in. Grace Bland had clearly been a beauty in her youth, but that beauty was much faded by years of struggle. There was a perpetual frown between her eyes which always moved Dorothy deeply; she wished that she could earn a great deal of money so that they need not be always wondering how to feed the family. But Hester was going to make their fortunes; and it did not matter which member of the family did it as long as it was done.

'I'm hearing Hester's lines, Mamma,' said Dorothy.

'That's right, dear. She must be word perfect. I remember my first part. Oh, that was years and years ago. But I recall going through agonies.'

'As I am now,' said Hester grimly.

'Never mind. It's all part of the life. When you've played through to the end and the audience applaud . . . then you forget all your qualms and you'll say to yourself: "This is the life for me."'

'Did you say that, Mamma?' asked Dorothy.

**'I did. And I've never regretted it.'**

Was it true? wondered Dorothy. Did she ever, during the difficult years, think of her father's parsonage where life must have been very different from this one for which she had forsaken it. Perhaps there would have been poverty in the parsonage though, for country parsons were often poor. Grace often talked of her girlhood and of life

in a small Welsh village and the three girls—Grace and her sisters—deciding that it was no life for them and they were going to seek fame and fortune on the stage. ‘Our father was horrified, as you can imagine,’ Grace told her daughters. ‘He called us, “strolling players”, but we didn’t care. He said that if we went on the stage we could fend for ourselves . . . and we did.’ They were courageous, Dorothy decided—three girls from the country coming to London to try their luck on the stage; and they had not done badly. Aunt Blanche, though, had tired of it and gone back to Wales where she had married and settled down in the village of Trelethyn; but the other two had stayed on. Aunt Mary now and then played in London, and their own Mamma had acted while she was raising a family; and now that they were deserted and there was no money coming in, they were looking to the stage again, and this time it was Hester who was to make their fortunes, for the little she and Dorothy had been bringing in from the milliner’s shop would not keep them, and something would have to be done. So now that Mr Ryder had offered Hester her chance—because she was Mamma’s daughter of course—they must look to her.

Grace said: ‘Dorothy, do go and tidy yourself. What if Mr Ryder should call. Now, Hester, I’ll take you through your part.’

Grace studied her daughter. She has talent, she thought. This will be the beginning of better things, for she is young and there’s no doubt that audiences like their players young . . . only great performers are allowed to grow old, and these are rare.

She could hear Dorothy, laughing with the boys. They were jumping on the stairs and Dorothy was shouting that she could jump more stairs than any of them. Grace smiled indulgently. Dorothy was a tomboy, not nearly as serious as Hester. It was amazing how lightly she seemed to take all their troubles. It was not as though she did not love them; she was ready to give up every penny she earned for them; it was simply that she could not accept the fact that all was not going well.

Perhaps it was for the best. It had been a hard life but

a happy one until Francis had failed her. Until then everything had been worth while. Why had he done it? she wondered. But of course he had always been weak. In a way that had attracted her. She was thinking now of the day she had first seen him. He had sat in the theatre watching her and the next day he was there again and so it went on until she could not but be aware that the young army captain was interested in more than the play. And they had become lovers; Francis, fearing his father's anger, dared not marry her. He was after all under age, and he came of a family which did not approve of actresses. So they would have to wait until he was older. Like Francis, Grace had no wish to wait until then before they took lodgings together and very soon Hester was about to be born. Grace had not called herself Mrs Bland but Mrs Francis. Poor Francis, he was so much in awe of his father that he was afraid of offending him, which he would most certainly have done if he had given the family's name to an actress.

But it was impossible always to be known as Francis and sometimes she was called Bland and when Judge Bland, Francis's irate father, discovered that his son was living with an actress he let him know that any marriage would mean that Francis would be cut off without a penny.

Poor Francis, what could he do! And Dorothy was on the way by that time.

So they had lived happily enough though Francis had had to resign from the Army. He had little money of his own so it was Grace who provided their main source of income because by that time she was a considerable actress. The children came regularly and Dorothy was followed by Nathaniel and Francis and George.

And so they would have gone on. How many children would they have had by now? But there were troubles in Ireland and the theatre had closed. Grace was once more pregnant and Blanche in Wales invited the family to stay with her for a while until everything returned to normal in Dublin. Francis had not been well and his mother, who had kept in touch with him, wished him to take a trip to the South of France with her in the hope that this would restore him to health. Grace, who was also anxious for his health, advised him to take the opportunity offered; she and

the children would be well taken care of in Wales. And to think, she mused now, that I was never to see Francis again! It was the biggest blow of her life. But she had known he was always weak. She should never have consented to his going. She could not believe it when she received his letter, full of remorse, full of apologies; but that would not keep her and her children—and the new baby had now arrived to swell their numbers.

Francis was penitent, but with him and his mother had travelled a young heiress named Catherine Mahoney; and his mother, with the help of Catherine, had impressed upon him what an excellent match this young heiress would be. Grace knew that he had been disappointed of his inheritance and in view of this he had allowed himself to be persuaded.

Thus was Grace with six children to keep—and there would have been seven but little Lucy had died in Wales—deserted.

Francis was not a callous man—only weak. He had continued to send them an allowance; and what they would have done without it, Grace could not have imagined. They had stayed on in Wales until, with Francis's death, the allowance had stopped. Grace was informed of this by his wife Catherine who told her at the same time that she had no intention of continuing the allowance.

So they had returned to Dublin and Grace now being well into middle-age and not having won that fame, which would have made audiences regard her as ageless, was seeking to launch her eldest daughter on the stage.

It had been disastrous. Even Dorothy must realize this. They would never—any of them—forget that long awaited moment when they had sat on the edge of their seats and waited in the old Crow Street Theatre for Hester to appear. Her name had been on the bills: Mr Ryder's great discovery—the young, beautiful, talented Hester Bland.

Hester came on to the stage; the audience waited, indulgent because she was young and not uncomely; but when she opened her mouth no words came.

'It can't be,' prayed Dorothy. 'Oh, God, let her speak.'

But Hester's fear had overcome her talents. She was

suffering from acute stage fright and had completely forgotten the words she must say. Dorothy was repeating them under her breath, but how could she shout them to Hester in a crowded theatre. 'Please, please,' she prayed. 'Let her remember.'

There was a titter in the audience.

Mr Ryder came on to the stage. He waved Hester aside and she ran into the wings. Grace looked as though she would faint.

A little hitch, explained Mr Ryder. His new actress was unwell. He craved the audience's indulgence. Another actress would play her part.

Dorothy was sure she would never forget those moments: the hiss of conversation, the giggle here and there, the comments on young Miss who thought she could act; it wasn't often they had the chance (the pleasure, thought Dorothy angrily) of seeing such a stage tragedy. She was angry herself; she wanted to go up on that stage and play the part. She could remember most of the lines because she had heard Hester say them so often and she would make up what she did not know.

The family rose and went back stage to collect a numbed and tragic Hester.

She wept all night; she had disgraced them all; she was useless; why had she thought she could act?

Grace said: 'You *can* act. It was just stage fright. We all feel it but somehow we manage to overcome it in the nick of time. You didn't. You'll be better next time.'

'Next time,' cried Hester. 'I'd rather die.'

Then she wept afresh. She would never forget the disgrace; that moment would live with her for the rest of her life.

There was no way of comforting her. The whole family tried; and Grace was wondering whether Hester could get back the job she had had in the milliner's shop which she left to go on the stage.

It was a morning of gloom. Mr Ryder, who was a kindly man and who knew the poverty of the family and knew also that what had happened to Hester did not mean that she was not an actress, called to see them.



He was immediately aware of the deep depression although he did not see Hester; Grace's eyes, however, were red rimmed with tears and sleeplessness.

'Well,' he said, 'it was a bad business, Grace.'

'I can't think how it happened.'

'Easy enough. She's never faced an audience before. What are you going to do?'

'I don't know.'

'Now look here, Grace, there might be some parts for you. You must be a bit out of practice but you could get that back . . . say a small part to begin with. And what about that other girl of yours?'

'Dorothy?'

'I've noticed her. There's something about her.'

'She's a bit of a tomboy.'

'She'll grow up.'

'She's not as good-looking as Hester.'

'By God, are you telling me you're not going to let me try the girl in my theatre?'

'Try her in your theatre! Why, she has never shown any inclination for the stage.'

'Call her in.'

'Good gracious me, I doubt she's fit to be seen.'

'Fit for me to see. I'm not looking for a tidy Miss but an actress.'

'Dorothy an actress!'

'Please may I see her?'

'Dorothy,' called Grace, 'come here.'

She came. Ryder studied her. She had something. What was it? A gamin quality. She might have been an untidy schoolboy except for the fact that she was so dainty. Yes, there was some quality—latent perhaps, but he was sure it was there.

'Hello, Dorothy,' he said. 'Let's hear you play a part. Do you know any?'

Her imperturbability delighted him.

'Phoebe,' she said, 'from *As You Like It*.'

'Good,' he said. 'That'll do.'

To see her strut before him like that was amazing, thought Grace. She did not declaim as an actress would. She played it naturally as though Dorothy Bland was a