

AMAZONS IN KENWYN

a drama

in one act

by

Christine Woolf

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Scene: The admittance room of the Poorhouse

Running time: 25 mins. approx.

4F & 1M and a number of workhouse children.

Scene: The reception room of the Union Workhouse, Kenwyn, Truro in 1829. Two girls, now orphans, are committed to the workhouse having been found wandering the quays of Truro. After the freedom of their country life working on their father's farm, they question the heavy-handed discipline of the workhouse and in doing so cause a riot.

CHARACTERS:

Jane Waters *age 17*
Mary Ann Haters *age 15, Jane's sister*
Master of the Poorhouse at Kenwyn.
Mistress of the Poorhouse.
Harris *the Female Attendant.*
A number of Workhouse children

Incident: from the "West Briton" 11th September 1829

'Jane and Mary Ann Waters, sisters, were committed by the Mayor of Truro, to Bodmin gaol, for assaulting the master of the poor-house belonging to the parish of Kenwyn. It appears that these amazons were taken into the poorhouse as paupers, and as is the custom there when girls of doubtful character are received into it, the governor ordered their hair to be cut short. To this they resolutely refused to submit, and, in resisting the operation of the shears on their locks, assaulted the master and a female attendant, threatened the life of the mistress, and filled the whole establishment with confusion and alarm. In the end, they were shorn and delivered over to the discipline of the house of correction in the county, as the only place in which they could be safely trusted.

This play was first performed by Luxulyan Amateur Dramatic Society, Cornwall, on 23 rd February 2011.

It is 1829. We are in the admittance room of a poorhouse in the Kenwyn district of Truro. It is grey, forbidding, and sparsely furnished with two wooden chairs and a table. Steps lead down to the main area from the entrance door, which is on a balustraded upper level. A plain bell rope hangs from heights unseen, dangling at ringing height, on this upper level

Around us we hear the everyday sounds of the poorhouse -feet clattering on bare stone floors; a class of pauper children chants the 23rd Psalm - 'The Lord is my shepherd' in the distance. From another direction, large pans clash in the kitchens. These sounds continue for some time - long enough for us to absorb something of the atmosphere of the poorhouse. The sounds continue, louder when the door is opened, and then diminishing in volume until Jane speaks.

The door is kicked wide open, inwards. On the threshold stands HARRIS. In her grip she has JANE and AMRYANN, pinning their hands behind their backs. She thrusts them into the room, so that Mary Ann falls, and Jane trips over her. Harris slams the door as she goes out, and we hear the key turn in the lock. Slowly, Jane and Mary Ann disentangle themselves. Jane rises and swiftly moves around the room, examining every detail. We feel she is caged. She tries the door and finds it locked. She leans against it. Meanwhile, Mary Ann sits on the floor, chafing her bruised wrists and smoothing her hair. She sobs.

Jane: 'Tes no use you crying, Mary Arm. 'Twill get you nowhere. She's even locked the bloody door. *(Mary Ann continues to weep)*. Come on, maid. What would father say if he popped his head out of one of the windows in the heavenly house, and saw us in this pickle? Why,

"Courage, maids," he'd say, "You're not finished yet. You've five more rows to hoe." And he'd laugh, and wave his old ale mug at us - only it'll be a silver one, I dessay, where he's gone - and we'd hurry to finish in time for supper - the night wind from the sea streaming our hair and cooling our faces.

Mary Ann: And we'd run home over the heather - and we'd wash our hands and faces and comb our hair, and mother would be in from milking. And we'd all sit round for supper in the candlelight - and we were all together. God, Jane, that's how we were only last Summer - who could have guessed that in just a year we'd be trapped in here?

Jane: Well - "Courage maid." We'll have to get out. We'll not stay longer than we can help. If only I could get a message to Tom.

Mary Ann: Tom? What help would he be? Anyway, I dessay he'll have sailed by now. Have you got your comb?

Jane: It's about the only thing I have got. Here you are.

(Mary Ann combs her hair, loosening it from its ribbon)

Still, at least in here I shan't be at Mrs. Pascoe's beck and call. "Jane do this. Jane, come here". Eleven o'clock at night - "Jane, you've forgotten my warming pan." It'd take more than a warming pan to heat the bottom of that scaly old lizard.

Mary Ann: Sooner that, than working for Miss Best. I was supposed to be maid of all work, but you're not when you're taken on by a dress

maker - oh no! I spent most of the day going cross-eyed doing all the plain hemming, while my lady did the fancy bits. She nearly went mad whenever I pricked my finger. "You'll spoil the cloth, Mary Ann," she'd say. "My clients won't accept dirty work". *(Mary Ann smiles)* She didn't know about me getting out in the evenings though. She thought I was up in my room. But I'd be out of the window and over the lincay roof and down onto the quay. How I needed the salt air - and to stretch out. And the fun.

(They smile reminiscently)

We hear the key grating as the door is unlocked. The MASTER of the Poorhouse enters. He carries a book, pen and inkwell, which he places on the table. He surveys Mary Ann who has not moved from her position on the floor. He looks at Jane, and indicates the chair. Jane goes to sit, changes her mind, and stands behind it. He turns to Mary Ann.

Master: Stand, girl.

Mary Ann: Why?