

NELL GWYN by  
Cecil Chesterton





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LOGAN, CANADA

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NELL GWYN BY CECIL  
CHESTERTON



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NELL GWYN  
BY CECIL CHESTERTON

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CHAPTER FIRST                      THE  
ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

The life of Nelly truly shown  
From Cole-yard or Celler to the throne.

Sir GEORGE ETHEREGE.

“ The Lady of Pleasure. ”

# THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

## CHAPTER FIRST OF THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

OF THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN WE HAVE little information that can be called definite and historical. As is usually the case with personalities that strike and fascinate the imagination of mankind, what is unknown is amply filled in and overgrown by legends. Enthusiastic Welshmen have claimed for her descent from an ancient Welsh family, outlawed for its Nationalist politics and fallen upon evil days. Stories, some probably founded on fact, others purely imaginary, are told in abundance concerning her birth and upbringing. Indeed the process of myth-making is not yet over. Modern novelists still take her for their heroine, and boldly endow her with an unkind husband or an inconstant lover before her appearance on the stage—that is to say at the ripe age of thirteen!

Nell's own testimony to her early history is racy and vivid if plain-spoken.

“ I have but been one man's mistress,” she said in the course of a quarrel with Beck Marshall, “ though I was brought up in a

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

brothel to fill strong water to the gentlemen; and you are a mistress to three or four, though a praying Presbyter's daughter."

Apart from this striking fragment of autobiography we know very little for certain about Nell's early years.

Nell was born, according to a horoscope of her, which has been preserved, on February 2nd, 1650—the year that witnessed her future lover's first dreary experience of Kingship among the Covenanters of Scotland. The place of her birth is uncertain. One tradition assigns it to the Pipe Well Lane, Hereford, where her great-grandson, a bishop of that diocese, put up a tablet to her memory, another to Cole Yard in the purlieu of Drury Lane. There is no possibility of certainty on the point, but I am inclined to accept the Hereford version. Both traditions are strong and continuous, and can be traced back to within a short period of her death. They are therefore both probably founded on some truth. Now there is a clear reason why Nell's name should be associated with Drury Lane, for it was there that she undoubtedly passed her early years.







NELL GWYN

*Engraved by Spencer, the miniature painted from a picture  
in the possession of Lord Bristol*



## THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

There is no reason that I can see for associating it with Hereford unless she really was born there. The story, however, of her running away to London as a child seems just the sort of romantic gloss which would be put upon the truth, and it is not easily squared with the other known facts. More probably her parents migrated to London when she was a baby.

The same doubt that hangs about her birth-place hangs also about the person of her father. But it seems increasingly certain that he was a broken-down soldier named Captain Thomas Gwyn, and not, as has sometimes been asserted, a fruiterer of Covent Garden. Plenty of old soldiers who had served on the losing side in the Civil Wars were at and before the Restoration wandering about in a state of acute distress, and the surroundings of Nell's early youth suggest rather the bohemian blackguardism of a destitute adventurer than the more respectable poverty of a small trader. This hypothesis would also help to explain and perhaps lend colour to the vague tradition that undoubtedly existed in her own life time that she came of a

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noble Welsh family. To the coat of arms which was found for her when she became the King's favourite and seemed likely to become a peeress I attach no importance. Herald's College, I believe, does such things today for Jew usurers (whose fathers were notoriously pawnbrokers) when they buy their peerages. But the tradition seems to antedate this event and is easily explained if it could be traced back to the loose talk of a needy and dissipated but boastful soldier. Finally there is strong confirmatory evidence in the story of "Rose Gwyn," arrested for theft in 1663, and sent to Newgate but released subsequently because her father "had lost all in the royal cause." Both the age and the situation of this girl makes it probable that she was Nell's sister—afterwards the "Mrs Rose Foster" mentioned in her will. On the other hand nothing could be more natural than that when Nellie had achieved fame and fortune, her enemies, remembering that she had undoubtedly been an orange-girl, should accuse her of being a fruiterer's daughter. The father, whoever he was, is said to have died in prison. Some recollec-

## THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

tion of him and of his fate may well have inspired not only his daughter's bequests for the relief of debtors, but her share in the foundation of Chelsea Hospital.

Nell's mother lived till 1679, long enough to see her daughter at the height of her prosperity, and more is known of her though not much to her credit. A good mother she can hardly have been, or she would have saved her daughter at whatever cost from the vile surroundings into which, when only a child, she was forced.

Cole Yard was a tiny poverty-stricken court leading out of Drury Lane near the Holborn end and almost exactly corresponding in position to the short street now called Mechlin Street. Here Nell and her mother seem to have lived during her childhood. It was a district peopled by what are now sometimes called the submerged, who were herded in its rickety houses, very much as, after two centuries and a half of "progress," such people are herded in such places to-day. But wretched as it looked, Cole Yard was doubtless a lively enough place in its way, and multitudes of dirty and ragged children

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

played together in these purlieus as they do still. We can picture Nell a little red-haired imp, pretty and impudent, with a dirty face and hardly any clothes, but with a brave heart, a quick tongue, and the happy forgetfulness of childhood. One imagines her always foremost whether in games or rows, and perhaps already beginning to break childish hearts. Anyhow, it was among such scenes, running about the little squalid alleys, dancing, perhaps, to street music and playing those queer games of the gutter, some of which have lasted from her time to ours, and were, even in her time, so old that no man could guess their origin, that Nell passed her most impressionable years. The mark of that life never left her. She came to be first a famous actress and afterwards a King's mistress; but to the end of her life she was at bottom the gamin of Drury Lane.

Doubtless she learned in Cole Yard many things that we would rather our own children did not know at her age, and words came readily to her young lips (as they did afterwards when she was at Court) which would shock the children of the rich. But





## THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

her first surroundings were far less horrible than those which were now to encompass her.

There lived at this time in Lewknor Lane, a scandalous thoroughfare a stone's throw from Cole Yard, an infamous woman named Madame Ross. Her establishment was of the kind indicated in the repartee which I have already quoted. The woman indeed practised the foulest department of her foul trade, for it was her principal business to buy, kidnap or entrap young girls whom she trained for her own purposes. It seems to have been in this inferno that little Nellie served her apprenticeship, and her young eyes and ears must have been constantly familiarised with sights and sounds from which decent grown men might well shrink. The wonder is that she came out of such a place at such an age with so much womanhood about her, with healthy instincts and an unbroken spirit.

It was Madame Ross's custom to make a little money out of her girls while they were waiting for worse things, and it was from her house that Nell first went out to sell oranges in the pit of the King's Theatre, Drury Lane.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

The orange-sellers were a great feature of the theatre in the days of Charles II. They stood in front of the pit with their backs to the stage and cried their wares in the intervals of the performance. Often the young men in the pit chaffed them and they were expected to chaff back. Their profits were considerable, for it was thought disgraceful for a gentleman to haggle about prices, and a pretty girl with a ready tongue could generally make her own terms.

One cannot doubt that the new surroundings into which she was introduced delighted Nell. The glitter, the gaiety, the open admiration of her customers, the fun of chaffing with them must have been a new life to the child brought up in an environment at the best sordid and at the worst loathsome. She had gifts both of beauty and of wit that must have made her the most successful orange-girl of her age.

Nell Gwyn was now in her fifteenth year, but her upbringing may be supposed to have made her older than her age in experience and character. She was small but exquisitely graceful, with a supple figure fitted for

## THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

the dances in which she afterwards excelled, and tiny feet which seem more than anything else to have moved in after years the admiration of her royal lover. She had a pretty mocking face and luxuriant red hair. But it was when she laughed that she was supremely captivating. At such moments she would throw her head back and narrow her eyes till they became all but invisible. One seems to see her so after about with some gallant, her tiny figure shaking with merriment, her white teeth gleaming and her eyes closed—capturing all hearts.

Nellie's quick tongue stood her in good stead also. She had not only a ready natural wit, but that rich humour which the populace, and especially the populace of London, still display. One wishes that some of her repartees had been preserved; they were doubtless racy, if some of them were probably unprintable. Anyhow in the sharp passages of arms that passed between the orange-women and the gilded youths of 1664 Nell's voice we may be sure was not silent.

To this period of Nell's life belongs a pretty story which one would like to suppose

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true—the story of her first love. It will be found in “Notes and Queries” and purports to be told in Nellie’s own words. Her first lover, she told someone at Court, was a link-boy. “God knows what has become of him, but when I last saw him he said he would humbly love me to his dying day. He used to say that I must have been a lord’s daughter for my beauty, and that I ought to ride in my coach and behaved to me as if I did. He, poor boy, would light me and my mother home when we had sold our oranges to our lodgings in Lewknor’s Lane, as if we had been ladies of the land. He said he never felt easy for the evening till he had asked me how I did ; then he went gaily about his work, and if he saw us housed at night he slept like a prince. I shall never forget when he came flushing and stammering, and drew out of his pocket a pair of worsted stockings which he bought for my naked feet. It was bitter cold weather and I had chill-blains which made me hobble about till I cried ; and what does poor Richard do but work hard like a horse and buy me those worsted stockings. My mother bade him put them







MRS ELEANOR GWYNN



## THE ORIGIN OF NELL GWYN

on ; and so he did, and his warm tears fell on my chill-blains, and he said he should be the happiest lord on earth if the stockings did me any good.

The language hardly reads like Nells', but the story itself may be hers for all that.

She soon began to attract attention—and attention more valuable to her than that of link-boys or young men about town. Charles Hart was rapidly becoming the leading actor of the age. Except Betterton at the Duke's House he could hardly be said to have a peer. Charles II. himself, an excellent judge of acting, declared that "Hart might teach any king on earth how to comport himself." He had been a major in Rupert's Horse during the Civil War, and according to Malone he was the grand-nephew of William Shakespeare. In the days of Charles I. he had distinguished himself in women's parts then acted by boys. He was now equally triumphant in the presentation of masculine characters, whether heroic or humorous. He was the best "Cassio" and afterwards the best "Othello" that that generation had seen. It was he and his colleague,

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Lacy the premier comedian, who seem first to have noted the latent dramatic genius of the orange-girl. Probably they listened to her from time to time as she invited customers for her wares or scored off some unlucky amateur wit, and had realised with the instinct of artists that she was a born comedian.

Hart resolved to train her for the stage and did so. At a later date when men like Rochester and Etherege were looking round for any dirt that came to hand to throw at Nell, they contrived to insinuate the suggestion that he exacted a price for his assistance. There is absolutely no shadow of evidence to support such a charge. Nellie was still only a child, and there is no reason for thinking that Hart was a blackguard—though Rochester and Etherege may perhaps have judged him by themselves. Moreover there is no need to search for such a motive. Hart was a histrionic genius himself and knew genius when he saw it. He knew very well that Nell's fame would well repay any time and labour he spent on her.

Etherege indeed tried an alternative slander. The person responsible for Nell's pro-

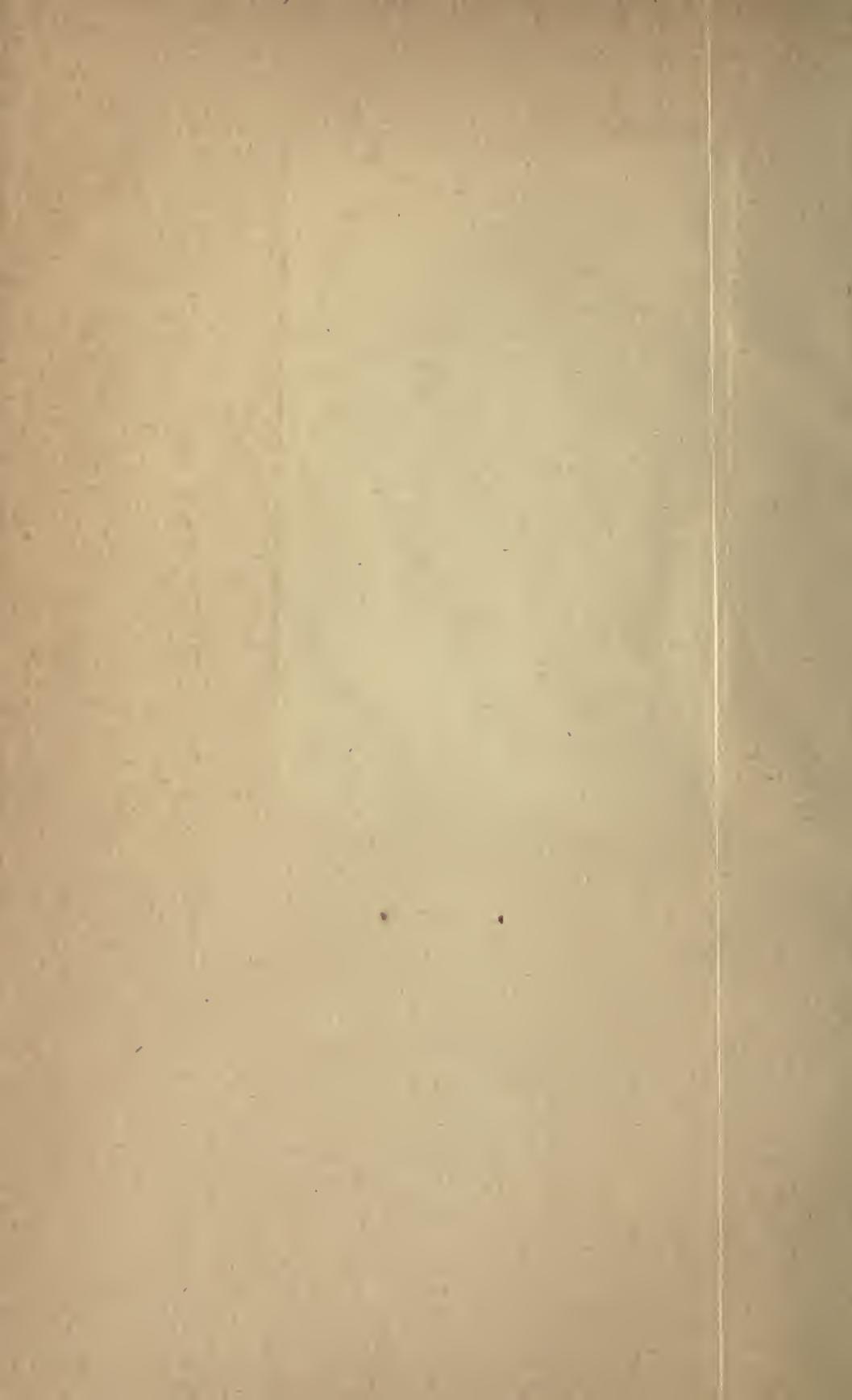
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motion was, he alleged, a man named Dungan, and, of course, he did it in return for her favours. Here again there is an entire absence of evidence. Whether this Dungan, or Duncan as he is sometimes called, even existed, and had any share in the promotion of her fortunes, it is impossible to say. If he had any such share it is conceivable that he may have been a patron of the house and an admirer of the pretty and amusing orange-girl, and that he may have directed Hart's attention to her talents. But it is all conjecture.

What is certain is that Hart trained Nellie for the stage and that Nellie fully justified the selection. A very short time after she first looked across the footlights she was playing star parts and was probably the most popular actress in England.









MRS ELLEN GWYNN

*Painted by Sir Peter Lely; engraved by R. H. Cook*







CHAPTER SECOND                      OF  
THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

And the women do very well, but above all little Nelly.  
—“Pepys' Diary,” Dec. 8th, 1666.

## CHAPTER SECOND OF THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

THE STAGE UPON WHICH NELL NOW TOOK HER place had just re-arisen in renewed splendour after years of savage persecution. The conversion of Constantine can hardly have been a greater event to the Christians than the Restoration was to the players. From of old the Puritans had declared war on them, and they had replied to the incessant denunciations of their enemies with incessant gibes. Before the Civil War Prynne had written and published his famous "Histriomastix" to prove, as his sub-title has it, that "Stage Plays are sinful, heathenish, lewd, ungodly spectacles and most pernicious corruptions, condemned in all ages as intolerable mischiefs to Churches and Republicks, to the manners, minds and souls of men, and that the profession of Play-Poets, of Stage Players, together with the perusing, acting and frequenting of Stage Plays are unlawful, infamous and mis-becoming Christians." When Prynne's party rose to supreme power in the State they lost no time in putting his theories into practice. The Long Parliament passed at

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the beginning of 1647 an ordinance decreeing "That all Stage Galleries, Seats and Boxes shall be pulled down by the Warrant of two Justices of the Peace, and that all Actors of Plays for the time to come shall be publicly whipped, and all Spectators of Plays for every offence shall pay Five Shillings." Nor was this law suffered to remain a dead letter. When in the winter of 1648 a company of actors attempted a strictly private performance at the Cockpit near Lincoln's Inn, they were interrupted by soldiers who broke up their theatre, confiscated their properties, and haled them off for condign punishment. After the accession of Cromwell there was a slight, but a very slight, relaxation of the ferocity of persecution. Private performances at gentlemen's houses some miles from London were usually connived at. But, though he himself was disposed to a measure of contemptuous tolerance, the Protector dared not offend the soldiers upon whom alone his power reposed, and the soldiers hated the play-house as much as they hated the mass-house. Some players contrived by bribing the respons-

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ible officers to act for a few days in London at the sign of the "Red Bull," but their performances were continually interrupted by armed "saints" and had to be discontinued. In fact an actor who followed his calling during the Puritan regime did so at his peril—the peril of being assailed, beaten, hailed before lowering justices, imprisoned, pilloried, flogged at the cart's tail, having his tongue bored through with a red hot iron, and being subject to other humane punishments such as the champions of our civil and religious liberties loved to inflict.

At the Restoration the drama arose from its prostration, and arose clothed more gorgeously than it had ever been before. All classes turned to the theatre with an appetite whetted by over fifteen years of abstinence. Another cause increased their enthusiasm. The men who were responsible for the suppression of the play-houses were no more bitterly hated than any rulers of England have been before or since. The play was taken as the symbol of all the genial and humane side of life which these gloomy devil-worshippers had sought to trample un-

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der foot ; the play-house became the rallying point of the great Anti-Puritan reaction, and in every comedy taunts and invectives against the Puritans were uttered with a peculiar zest and received with rapturous applause.

Never was any theatre so magnificently patronised. The Court, the aristocracy, the professions, the populace, vied with each other in supporting it. The King sometimes paid the whole cost of a production out of his own pocket. The rich and noble regularly presented the actors with their own best coats and waistcoats as soon as they were just a little too worn to be shown in St James's or the Mall. The middle and lower orders crowded the houses every night. Pepys was a sober and industrious civil servant, by no means especially a man of pleasure ; the number of times he appears by his Diary to have gone to the theatre is enough to make a modern manager's mouth water.

Two changes of a marked character distinguished the new theatre from those that had preceded the Civil War, the presence of







NELL GWYN

*Painted by S. Harding; engraved by Shenstone*



## THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

scenery and the performance of women's parts by women.

To the stage as Shakespeare knew it, the plain deal boards, the inscriptions "The Forest of Arden," etc., the single raised gallery that served without alteration for Juliet's balcony, for Mark Antony's rostrum, and the battlements upon which the Ghost walked, succeeded set pieces nearly as elaborate as those of our own time. Fine costumes also came into fashion, though curiously enough, it never seems to have occurred to the management to make the costumes suggestive of the persons represented. When Charles Hart acted a Mexican or Mogul Emperor he made up as like Charles II. as possible, and Nell doubtless acted the Roman Maiden Valeria in the very latest Restoration fashions.

The other change more important as far as our heroine is concerned was the presence for the first time of women on the stage. In Italy and France the custom was a generation old, and in the reign of Charles I. a French company had come over with their women—an event which so increased the an-

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ger and terror of poor Prynne that he seems to have felt that there was nothing for it now but thunderbolts! But it was only after the Restoration that the new system became acclimatised here. Mistress Hughes is said to have been the first Englishwoman to appear on the stage.

Along with the new theatre there had arisen a new drama. The masterpieces of the old dramatists—"the giant race before the flood" as Dryden called them—were indeed treated with no great reverence. The "Tempest" was turned into an opera, and "Romeo and Juliet" was given a happy ending (played on alternate nights with the tragic one!) to please the new generation. Pepys, an enthusiastic playgoer, calls "A Midsummer Night's Dream" the "most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life."

But if the Restoration theatre was generally blind to the glories of the past it had glories of its own to boast of. Already the many-sided greatness of Dryden and the rich humour of Wicherly were enlisted in the service of the new drama. Sir George Etherege, though an intolerable cad, was

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an admirable play-wright. 'It only required the genius of Congreve to complete the achievement of the age.

For the peculiar qualities of the new drama Nell's peculiar genius was perfectly fitted. All her talent was for comedy and for the sort of comedy that the Restoration loved—the comedy of pure high spirits, full of breathless action, baffling intrigue and dialogue blazing with feminine wit. She hated tragic parts, and by common consent did them badly. Pepys, who grows wild with enthusiasm over her "mad"—or as we should say farcical—impersonations, never mentions her in a serious rôle without remarking that she does it "most basely." She seems to have been quite aware of her own limitations, and several of the epilogues written for her by Dryden and others express her dislike of acting characters unsuitable to her. In the speaking of prologues and epilogues she was considered to surpass all competitors and the task was soon assigned to her as a matter of course. The keen sense of fun, the humorous impudence which were at her command, must have enormously

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

increased the point and effect of these compositions.

It is a commonplace that an actor is condemned to do without the posthumous fame which other artistes expect. We can only judge of Nell's talents by the effect produced on her contemporaries. Yet the impressions of different people are so alike that we can form a pretty good guess as to what she was like on the stage. Fortunately our own time has produced a woman of genius whom most of the descriptions of her art would almost exactly suit. Anyone who has watched with an admiration that in vain seeks expression in words the inimitable artistry of Miss Marie Lloyd may perhaps form some idea of what sort of genius it was that made Nell for so long the idol of London.

Nell's promotion from the arena to the stage must have meant an enormous change in her mode of life. It made her free of that strange society which has existed unbroken from her days to ours, and which men call "Bohemia." We have in "Pepys' Diary" many glimpses of her life at this period, and

## THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

vividly suggest the type of life which hundreds of her profession are still living.

The stage of her day was rich in brilliant men and women. The veteran Betterton who was already at the head of his profession before the Civil War was at the Duke's House. At the King's House (which was also Nellie's) were Mohun and Hart, both of whom had fought in the royal cause. The latter, a younger man, was fast overtaking the former in fame and popular favour. At the Duke's was Mol Davis, who enjoyed for a brief time the favour of the King and the furious jealousy of Lady Castlemaine. At the King's Nell's principal comrades were Peg Hughes, whose charms soothed and fascinated the old age of Prince Rupert, Knipp, who seems to have been Nell's special friend and whose attractions were sometimes too much for the virtue of Mr Samuel Pepys, and the two Marshalls, reputed to be the daughters of the great Presbyterian divine of that name who preached the funeral sermon of John Hampden. It seems clear from later research that this relationship, on which is based Nell's retort which I have already quo-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

ted, must have been imaginary. Old Marshall died in 1655 and his known daughters can be accounted for. Unless (as one would be unwilling to believe) the reverend gentleman strayed into devious ways, Ann and Beck Marshall can hardly have been among them. But those who on that ground dismiss Pepys' account of the exchange of insults as apocryphal know little of stage-land. Pepys had the story from Knipp who probably heard the repartee delivered. Anyone who knows the world in which Nell and Beck Marshall moved will realise that such a tale once started would spread through the green-rooms like wild-fire, and that the contradictions of the sisters themselves would in no way impede its circulation—even if they did contradict it! As a matter of fact it would be quite in keeping with probability to suppose that they started it.

It is in company with Beck Marshall that Pepys gives us our first glimpses of Nellie. In April 1665 the Clerk of the Acts visited the Duke's theatre to see Lord Orrery's "Mustapha." The two girls had come from the King's to see the performance at the

## THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

rival house, and, according to Mr Pepys, "all the pleasure of the play was the King and my Lady Castlemaine were there; and pretty witty Nell at the King's House and the younger Marshall sat next us; which pleased me mightily." Nell seems to have had to the end of her life a keen appetite for the theatre, enjoying it not only as a performer but as a spectator. Later in his Diary Pepys again mentions her in this connection. "We sat in an upper box and the jade Nell came and sat in the next box; a bold merry slut who lay laughing there upon people: and with a comrade of hers of the Duke's House, that came in to see the play." One sees Nell thus lying, laughing against her companion, with her eyes screwed up till they became invisible.

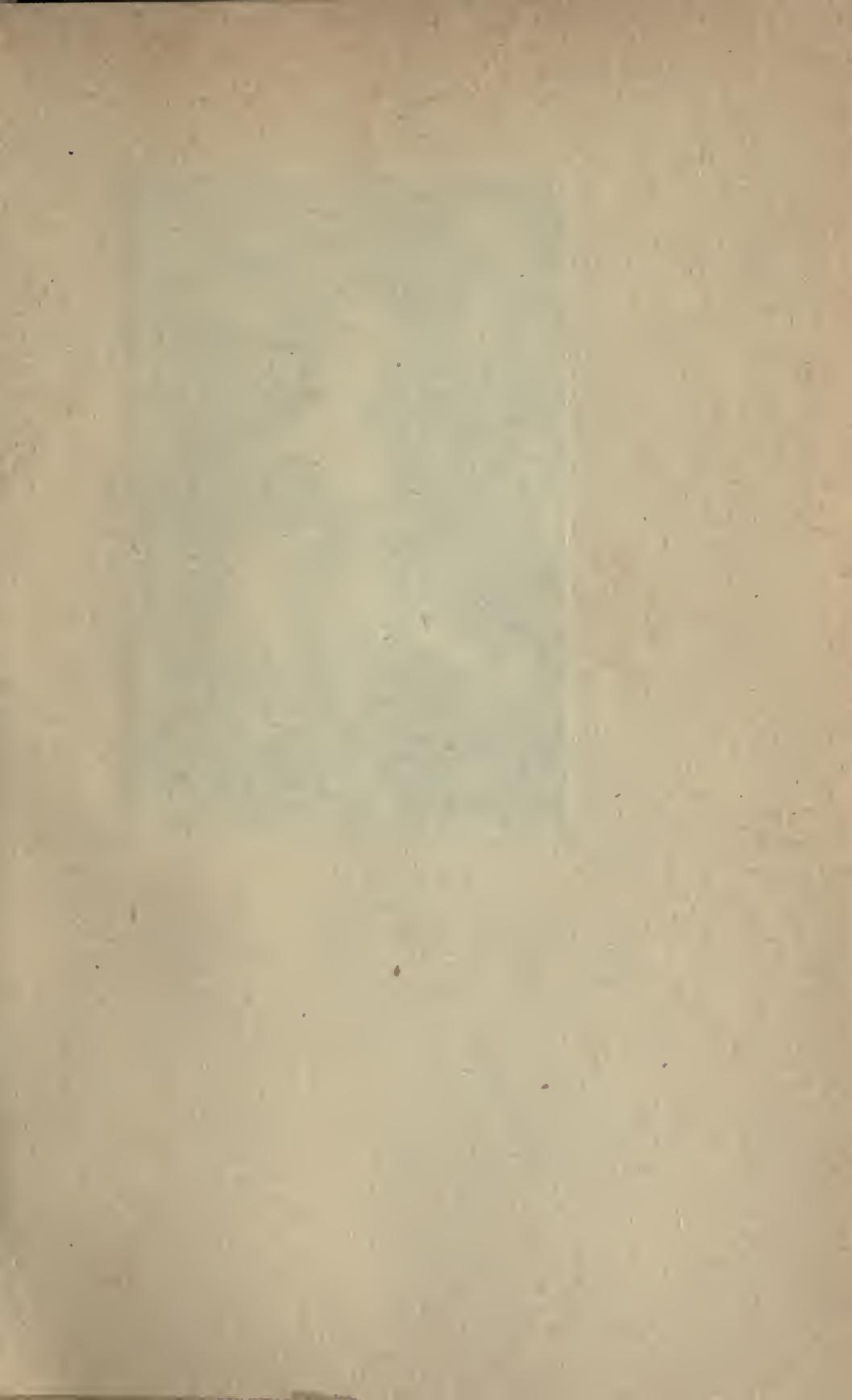
Another pretty episode is narrated by Pepys shortly afterwards. He and his wife went behind the scenes after a performance of "The Humerous Lieutenant," "and Knipp took us all in and brought to us Nelly, a most pretty woman who acted the great part Coelia to-day very fine, and did it pretty well. I kissed her, and so did my wife; and a mighty

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

pretty soul she is." One likes Mrs Pepys for that kiss ; and one is glad that Nell never troubled her husband's domestic conscience as her friend Knipp occasionally did.

Two other little miniatures from the same vivid pen will help to suggest the world in which Nellie moved as it was then, and as, with few variations, it is to-day :—

“ To the King's House and there going in met with Knipp and she took us up into the tireing rooms ; and to the women's shift where Nell was dressing herself and was all unready, and is very pretty, prettier than I thought. And into the scene-room and there sat down and she gave us fruit ; and here I read the questions to Knipp, while she answered me through all her part of ' Flora's Figgarys,' which was acted to-day. But, Lord ! to see how they were both painted would make a man mad and did make me loath them ; and what base company of men comes among them and how lewdly they talk ! And how poor the men are in clothes and yet what a show they make on the stage by candle-light is very observable. But to see how Nell cursed for having so few people in







LA BELLE STUART

DUCHESS OF RICHMOND

*Painted by Sir Peter Lely; engraved by John Ogborne*



## THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

the pit was strange ; the other house carrying away all the people at the new play, and it is said nowadays to have generally most company, as being better players.”

And here is another glimpse of Nell behind the scenes :—

“To the King’s House where going in for Knipp the play being done, I did see Beck Marshall come dressed off the stage and look mighty fine and pretty and noble ; and also Nell in her boy’s clothes, mighty pretty. But Lord ! their confidence, and how many men do hover about them as soon as they come off the stage, and how confident they are in their talk !”

Leave out the names and the mention of “candles” and might not either of these have been written yesterday as a description of scenes to be witnessed every day in the same neighbourhood ! We all know the paint, the fruit, the intolerable men, the jealous recriminations and confident talk of the actresses.

Professional success had lifted Nell out of the degradations of Lewknor Lane and Cole Yard. She had taken up her abode at the

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

fashionable end of Drury Lane—the Strand end—opposite the great May-pole which the Puritans (in obedience to the principles of civil and religious liberty) had hewn down, but which had been set up again amid universal rejoicings at the Restoration. Here it was that Pepys saw her on May Day 1667 “standing at her lodgings’ door in her smock sleeves and bodice” watching and chattering with the dancing milkmaids. Few visions could be more characteristic. She herself was a girl of the people, and I daresay that on previous May Days she had contrived to slip off from Madame Ross’s to join in the merry-making. Now that she was a great actress and the admired of nobles and poets she did the same. Poor Nellie had her faults, but neither snobbery nor priggery were among them.

These years were probably the happiest, as they were certainly the most honourable of Nell’s life. Though still in her ’teens she was already an actress of established fame, the idol alike of the crowd and of the best critics. She had tasted success, and success had not spoilt her. Her days were doubtless

## THE STAGE IN THOSE DAYS

days of hard work, but days also of solid artistic achievement. She was earning good money, and giving good work for it. The social life of the green-room was just such as suited her taste for fun and excitement, nor is there any reason to think that up to this time at any rate it had done her any harm. Whatever judgments we may choose to pass upon her subsequent career, it is only fair to remember that, brought up in the worst possible way, she had raised herself from the gutter to a high professional position, not by prostituting her beauty, but by working hard and successfully at an art which she loved, and in which her own merit alone made her pre-eminent.







CHAPTER THIRD                      MY  
Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

Mr Pierce tells us what troubles me, that my Lord Buckhurst got Nell away from the King's House. . . . Poor girl, I pity her; but more the loss of her at the King's House.—“Pepys' Diary,” July 13-14th, 1667.







NELL GWYN



## CHAPTER THIRD MY Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

NELL MADE HER FIRST APPEARANCE IN A CONSIDERABLE part—at least the first of which we have any record—as “Cydarea” in Dryden’s “Indian Emperor.” Dryden was the great prop of the King’s Theatre in those days, and it was in his plays that the young actress scored most of her pronounced triumphs.

One would like to know more of the relations between the brilliant comedian and the greatest poet of that age. The friendship between them, though apparently strictly platonic, seems to have been a very genuine one. Dryden admired her genius, wrote parts expressly for her, and always selected her to recite his prologues and epilogues. In at least one case he even went so far as to devise an anti-climax to one of his own tragedies (the worst of them, to be sure!) in order to bring out her comedic talent.

In “Tyrannic Love” Nell acted a Roman maiden, Valeria, who is (like nearly all the other characters) slain in the last act. The bearers enter to carry away her body when she suddenly jumps up, exclaiming :

# THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

Hold, are you mad, you damned, confounded dog ?

I am to rise and speak the Epilogue !  
And she goes on to recite lines, written by Dryden, but doubtless inspired by herself, expressing her disgust at having to play a tragic part. The part of "Florimel" in "Secret Love" was purposely planned for Nellie, and anyone who reads that admirable comedy, which is by far the best that Dryden ever wrote, can realise how perfectly it must have fitted her.

The dialogues of Florimel and Celadon are almost as good as those of Beatrice and Benedict. Nell doubtless put all her humour and vivacity into them.

*Cel.* Then I hope you'll give me leave to bestow a faithful heart elsewhere.

*Flo.* But if you would have me you must bespeak it, for I am sure you have no one ready made.

*Cel.* What say you, shall I marry Flavia ?

*Flo.* No, she'll be too cunning for you.

*Cel.* What say you, to Olinda then? She's tall and fair and bonny.

*Flo.* And Foolish and Apish and Fickle.

## Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

*Cel.* But Sabina there's pretty and young and loving and innocent.

*Flo.* And dwarfish and childish and fond and flippant; if you marry her sister, you will get May Poles, and if you marry her you will get Fairies to dance round them.

Again in arranging their marriage—

*Cel.* When I have been at play you shall never ask me what money I have lost.

*Flo.* When I have been abroad, you shall never inquire who treated me.

*Cel. Item,* I will have liberty to sleep all night without your interrupting my repose for any evil design whatsoever.

*Flo. Item,* Then you shall bid me good-night before you sleep.

*Cel.* Provided always that whatever liberties we take with other people we continue honest to one another.

*Flo.* As far as will consist with a pleasant life.

It is pleasant to remember that Nell never forgot her friendship for the poet, and when she was a power at Court did much to secure recognition for him from the King.

But we are now approaching the time

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

when Nellie's theatrical career was to be interrupted by an adventure of a warmer kind.

Of the reckless young patricians of the Restoration, at once the wildest and the most interesting was perhaps Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, who afterwards became the magnificent Earl of Dorset. No man, except perhaps his intimate friend Sir Charles Sedley, so outran the licentiousness of the age. To the watchmen, constables, and magistrates of London he was a standing terror. He was tried for robbery on one occasion and narrowly escaped being tried for murder on another. Some of his actions seemed like those of a madman. At one time he and Sedley took to running about the streets at night with practically nothing on. One evening, when the two had been carousing together at the "Cock" tavern, Sedley stripped himself naked, appeared on the balcony, and addressed to the crowd an extravagant oration full of wit and obscenity, till he had to retire under a hail of vegetables.

Yet Buckhurst, even before age had comparatively sobered him, was immensely po-

## Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

pular. Rochester, who was also a libertine, but neither such a maniac nor so nice a man, could not understand why nobody seemed to think any the worse of Buckhurst for anything he did. "He may do what he will," he said, "he is never in the wrong." The fact seems to be that he was a man not only of great personal charm but of real kindness and generosity. Moreover, there was another side to his character that contrasts almost startlingly with the side which his Bow Street revels exhibited. Rake and madcap as he was, he loved literature and learning as passionately as he loved wine and women. His taste was excellent, and his verdict was said to have decided the fate of many books and plays. He wrote brilliantly himself, and both his satires and lyrics are still well worth reading. When he came into his father's title and estates he became the most munificent patron of letters that England has ever known, and nearly every poet of the age owed something to his splendid bounty.

Buckhurst loved the theatre in both capacities, as a man of taste and as a man of pleasure. He criticised plays and ran after

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

actresses. He would sit gorgeously apparelled in the auditorium, his keen handsome face intent under his long elaborately curled perriwig, tasting every epigram as an epicure tastes wine, following and praising or blaming every turn of the action. And then he would pass round behind the scenes to keep some assignation with the newest and prettiest recruit of the green-room. Betty Morris was the first object of his affections, but somewhere about the beginning of 1667 he turned his attention to Nell Gwyn, with whom he was soon head-over-ears in love.

It is not surprising that Nell yielded to him. She was young and full of life and spirits, and he was gallant, handsome, and amusing. It should be observed that Nell's love-affairs were never with mere fops and men-about-town such as doubtless continually dangled round her,—men who had nothing but their money and their vices to recommend them. She was not so built that she could suffer the attentions of fools or bores, and men of this kind, when they approached her, generally got their knuckles rapped. Both Charles Sackville and Charles

## Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

Stuart were men of intellect and character, men whose society must have been worth having for its own sake.

As to when this remarkable love-affair began, and by what steps it reached its climax we have no record. In the spring of 1667 it was already the talk of the town and the green-room that Buckhurst was Nellie's lover. But the young lord was not satisfied with this casual relationship. In June he persuaded Nell to return her parts and leave the theatre. He took her to Epsom where he and Sedley were living, "and, I hear," says Pepys, "that they keep a merry house!" I have no doubt they did! Merriment was not a quality in which one of the three was likely to be lacking.

Epsom was one of those inland watering-places which multiplied in the latter part of the seventeenth century almost as rapidly as seaside resorts multiplied in the latter part of the nineteenth. It was not yet the scene of those races which have since made it famous; it was to Newmarket that the gentry of 1667 went for their sport. But as a holiday resort it had perhaps no superior ex-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

cept Bath and Tunbridge. As sketched by Shadwell in his amusing comedy "Epsom Wells," it strikes one as not at all unlike a modern fashionable resort, save that it was probably prettier and more countrified, with the houses more scattered, and the trees more plentiful. There was plenty of gaiety always going on there, and all those who made the pursuit of pleasure either a pleasure or a business, from noblemen to fiddlers, came there in crowds.

Here for several months Buckhurst and Nell kept a sort of open house for their Bohemian friends, and probably gave scandal to the graver residents. They fixed their abode a few miles away from the present town nearer to the Wells whose medicinal waters had given the place its vogue. I do not, however, imagine that these waters constituted the ordinary beverage consumed at the "merry house" kept by Buckhurst and Sedley with the assistance of Nell Gwyn. Good wine there was doubtless in abundance, and good wit to be had there, for Nellie was certainly the wittiest woman and Buckhurst and Sedley were reputed the wit-



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NELL GWYN

*A portrait painting by Sir Peter Le'ys*

HANF MARGL COLLECTION



## Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

tiest men (save perhaps the King) in an age when the cultivation of wit had become what Art was to the Greeks and money-making is to modern business men.

Nellie continued to live with Buckhurst for a little over a year. Then she left him and resumed her position on the stage. Of the circumstances under which they parted we know nothing, though the words which Pepys repeats avowedly on hearsay suggest a rather sharp quarrel between them. If there was a quarrel neither party seems to have borne malice. Affectional relations indeed they never resumed, but when they met afterwards at Charles' court they met as good friends. Buckhurst (or Dorset as he had then become) praised Nellie warmly, and the girl seems always to have retained a sort of tenderness for her old lover, whom she called her "Charles the First."

Nell was once more on the boards to the great delight of Mr Pepys, as doubtless of others. But it would seem that this period of her life was not a very happy one. Hart, it is suggested, was angry with her for leaving the theatre, and revenged himself by

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

giving her tragic parts which she disliked and could not act. If he really did this he soon repented it. She appeared once more in her favourite comedic rôles, and soon won back more than her old ascendancy.

Did Charles Hart become her lover about this time ? There is not direct evidence, and the only indirect evidence is Bishop Burnet's statement that Nell said that the King was only her "Charles the Third." Burnet is not always very reliable, but in this case neither his own merits nor party politics are involved, so I am disposed to believe him. If we do so, we must suppose another Charles intervening between Buckhurst and the King. This could hardly be any one but Hart.

The story is not in itself unlikely. Nell probably returned from Epsom angry with Buckhurst, and perhaps yet more angry with herself for having yielded to him. She was, if I am not mistaken, of that type which, while it loves novelty and adventure clings with a certain tenderness to old associations. The splendid funeral which she gave to her dissipated and neglectful old mother and her desire to be buried beside

## Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

her suggest this character. When she found herself back in the green-room, she may have felt and regretted a certain distance between herself and her old companions. We know that Beck Marshall sneered at her about this time as "My Lord Buckhurst's mistress," and I dare say nastier things were said by jealous women and disappointed men in those tiring rooms behind Drury Lane Theatre. They would rankle the more because Nellie, though she could give more than she took in the way of repartee, was, it may be, a little ashamed, herself, of her escapade and its ending. What would be more natural than that she should respond to the affection of a man of her own trade, one of her own comrades, one, moreover, who after all had first made her career possible?

If any such relations ever existed they were short-lived. For Nell was soon to meet a lover whose admiration changed the whole course of her life.

If Nell's hold over the audience at Drury Lane had been even partially lost it was now more than re-established. Never had her acting been more triumphant than when

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

she performed in her favourite part of "Florimel" in 1668. Dryden's "Secret Love," in which that part occurs, is a sort of farcical variation of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night." Nell appeared first as a lively lady of the Court and afterwards as the same lady disguised as a young gallant. In male costume she was irresistible, and her impertinent swagger made the whole audience cry with laughter. It is a brilliant part, as anyone who reads the play can see, and brilliantly did she interpret it. We can see her leaving the stage amid the frantic plaudits of boxes, pit, and galleries. Flowers are thrown to her, and she is called again and again before the curtain. Then she retires behind the scenes, perhaps throws herself into a chair, her eyes dancing with excitement, while her comrades crowd round her, some kissing her and warmly wishing her joy, others perhaps delivering smooth congratulations with a little stab of malice.

Then the word comes to her. Nell is wanted by the most distinguished occupant of the boxes. The enthusiasm of her friends waxes warmer, while some of her rivals

## Lord BUCKHURST'S MISTRESS

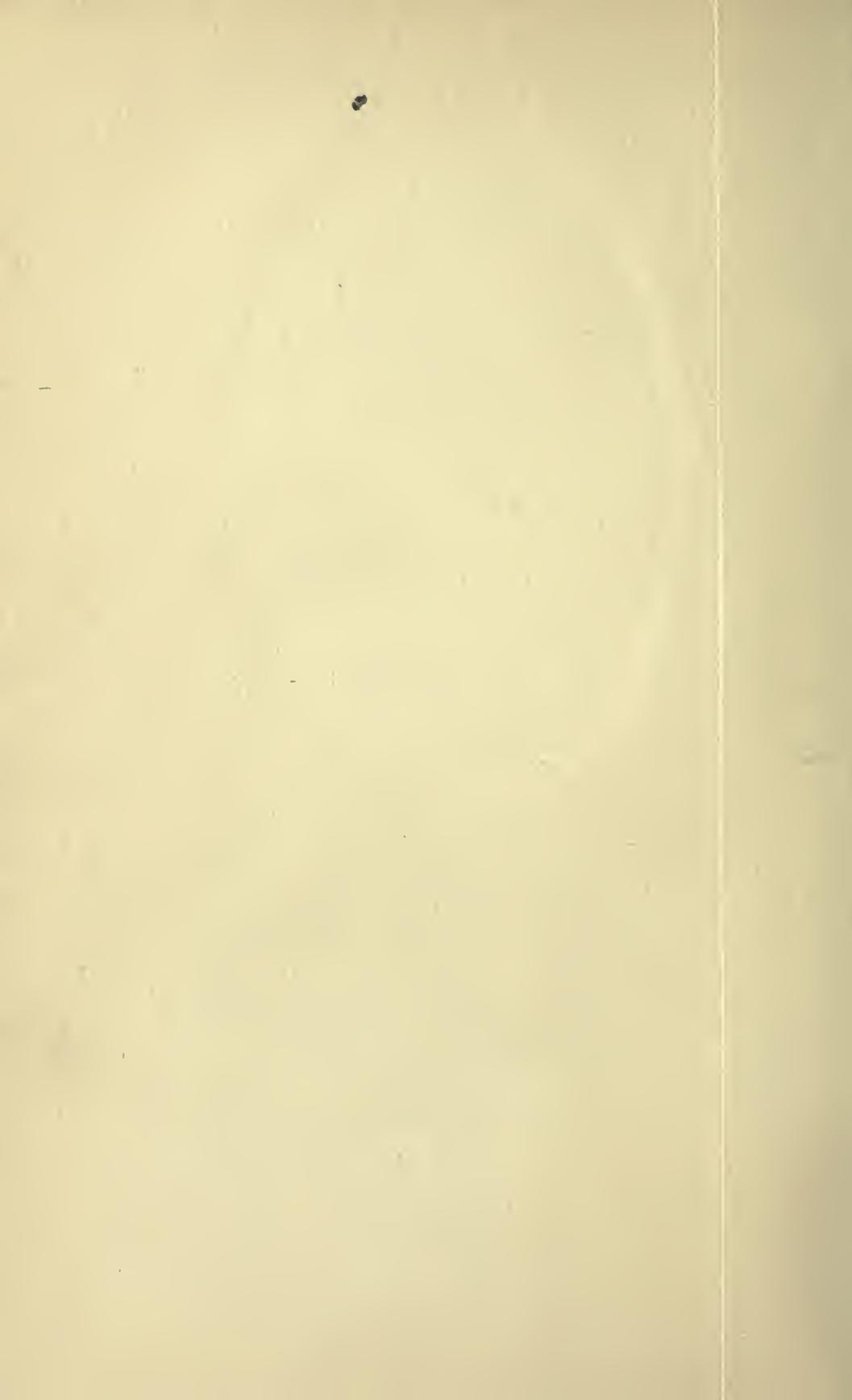
purse their lips and look unutterable things. But Nell goes round to the front.

She enters the best box and drops her curtsy. Then she looks up and sees the man who has sent for her, meeting his eyes with that frank self-confidence which has carried her so far in her career, and is to carry her to heights still unthought of.

The man is examining her intently.

He is a big man about forty, but with a figure still young and vigorous—still the figure of the “tall youth over two yards high” whose detailed description is so carefully given in a certain proclamation published after Worcester fight. Of his face, as it shows darkly under his full black periwig, the first impression is of extreme swarthiness—suggestive of an Italian or a Spaniard. Then she has time to note the features, harsh and ugly yet forceful and possessed of a kind of fascination, the wrinkles of humour round the firm but somewhat sensual mouth ; the deeply cleft chin, and the keen dark eyes in whose depths lurks an unfathomable irony.

It is the King.













DUCHESS OF CLEVELAND

*Painted by W. Wessing; engraved by R. Williams*



CHAPTER FOUR      THE  
FAVOURITE OF THE KING

Granada lost—behold her rights restored  
And Almahide again by Kings adored.

GRANVILLE'S "The Triumph of Beauty."

## CHAPTER FOURTH      THE FAVOURITE OF THE KING

I AM TRYING TO TELL THE STORY OF NELL Gwyn and not of Charles Stuart. Yet this man exercised so profound an influence over her life, and his character is so much misunderstood and misrepresented, that it is necessary to say something about him.

The popular picture of Charles II. is of a good-humoured but worthless loungeur, with some wit but no wisdom. No picture could be more fundamentally false.

First he was no loungeur. His dominant characteristic was a rather restless energy both of body and mind. Whoever said that "his sultana was sauntering" spoke in direct contradiction of the facts. The courtiers who panted to keep up with him when he went for a walk knew better.

He was tall and of powerful physique. His voice was loud, his laugh hearty and even boisterous. He was an indefatigable walker, whose rapid pace was the despair of those who attempted to accompany him. He loved field sports, and especially tennis. Until within a few days of his death he always rose at six in the morning, and, how-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

ever dissipated his nights may have been, he was always as fresh as a lark as he rambled in St James's Park before breakfast, followed by his spaniels and feeding his ducks and peacocks.

He enjoyed working with his hands and mastering the technique of manual trades. In the intervals of politics and pleasure he contrived to thoroughly master the craft of shipbuilding. Physical science, then in its vigorous infancy, interested him intensely, and he was a skilled operator in anatomy and chemistry. His special taste for those departments of research which require manual dexterity is very significant. He would spend hours of his leisure in his laboratory investigating the properties of mercury or dissecting out the organs of a dead animal.

His brain was equally active, and that brain was an astoundingly good one. In pure intellect I incline to think that he surpassed any king that ever sat on the English throne. The brilliance of his wit is proverbial, yet too much has been made of it, for the insistence upon it blinds us to the stronger part of his mental equipment. He was

## FAVOURITE OF THE KING

a keen observer, an acute reasoner, and, in his way, a deep thinker. Nor were his talents for practical affairs less marked. We are much too apt to accept at its face value Rochester's epigram about the king "who never said a foolish thing and never did a wise one," forgetting that when Rochester, and much abler men than Rochester, tried the experiment of pitting their brains in practical affairs against his, they very soon discovered who it was that was doing the foolish thing.

What king, for example, was ever in so desperate a position as Charles when the nation was maddened by the stories of the Popish Plot and the Commons were forcing through the Exclusion Bill? On the one side in that contest was a rich and powerful aristocracy, whose power had been growing steadily for over a century, backed by an angry people. On the other was nothing but the shadow of a crown, stripped of most of its prerogatives, and (what is of more importance) of nearly all its wealth—and the brains of one man. Yet such was the quality of those brains that if you cast forward a

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few years all the King's enemies are under his feet. Shaftesbury has fled to Holland, Essex has died by his own hand, Russell and Sydney by that of the executioner, Buckingham, humiliated and forgiven, has retired from politics with a wasted estate and a disappointed ambition; the populace that had shouted so ferociously for the blood of the Papists is shouting louder for the blood of the Whigs; never, not when Elizabeth rode through the ranks of shouting pikemen at Tilbury, not when Charles himself made his flower-strewn journey from Dover to London, had the institution of the monarchy and the person of the monarch been more universally popular. If Charles had been allowed five more years of life he might have restored real kingship in England; the glorious Revolution might never have occurred, and the oligarchy that made that Revolution might have had to do without the six million acres that they subsequently stole from the English people. To suggest that the man who did this was a fribble, whose best talent was for turning epigrams neatly, is to outrage all historical common-

*William of  
range & Co.*

## FAVOURITE OF THE KING

sense. Not of such a kind was the wisdom that turned to folly the wisdom of Achitophel, "which was if a man enquired of the oracles of God."

Morally, Charles had many fine qualities. He was brave, and, by instinct, he was honest. Of course he told lies; he was a politician. But he never lied to his own soul, and, when he felt he could tell the truth, he was frank to the verge of indecency. He was naturally humane, generous to his friends, placable and even magnanimous to his enemies. If he sometimes struck hard, and even unscrupulously, it was from statecraft, never from mere personal malice. He might have said with Danton that he could find no use for hate.

What then was wrong with this man. Something was wrong with him or the legend that makes of him a vicious voluptuary and trifler would never have arisen. His defects I think, may be summed up in one phrase. He had no roots.

Every human soul ought to have some central loyalty—some one thing at least to which he is tied absolutely by bonds that

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

cannot be broken. Charles, with all his talents and all his virtues, had none.

He was barely in his teens when his father left London and set up his standard in Nottingham. All his life from that day to the day when, at the age of thirty, he returned in triumph to Whitehall was a life of wanderings. He grew up in the most demoralising situation, that of an exiled sovereign, forbidden by his pretensions to settle down to an honourable occupation abroad, and by his situation to take any part in politics at home. The rulers of his country were his enemies, men who had killed his father and put a price on his own head. His wanderings gave him indeed a knowledge of European politics unrivalled among his contemporaries, and there is no reason to doubt that his skilful diplomacy was directed to what he believed to be the interests of England. But it would be expecting impossibilities of human nature to expect him to have been passionately patriotic—to have felt the fatherland, I mean, as the central and inviolable sanctity.

Two other sentiments might have served







NELL GWYN

*Painted by Co. fer: engraved by Earlon.*



## FAVOURITE OF THE KING

to bind him, and it was the tragedy of his life that both were denied him.

In him, as in all the Stuarts, there was a vein of mysticism. He was a naturally religious man. The theory that makes him a sceptic attracted emotionally and æsthetically by Catholicism will not bear examination. He did what very few men in his position would have done. He drew up solely for his own use a careful and reasoned statement of his grounds for thinking the Roman Church divine, and anyone who reads that remarkable statement will perceive how thoroughly his intellect had mastered the essentials of the controversy. He was thoroughly convinced of the truth of his own religion.

But the religion in which he thus sincerely believed he never found it possible to profess. Hence, to save the fundamental honesty of his soul, he took refuge in scoffing—as much as to say: “If I have not my own faith, at least I will not pretend to believe in yours.”

He was a man with strong capacities for affection, and especially for the domestic

es! - one by his wife (Lucy was on staffs.)  
legitimate  
James, Duke of Monmouth

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

affections; and he had no legitimate children. How different might have been the whole story of his life if Catherine of Braganza had borne him a son! But she was childless, and Charles had to lavish on the offspring of his mistresses the tenderness that might have gone to the heir of the English throne. He was fond of children, and to all his irregular progeny he was a kind father; but, I think, it was a secret sword in his heart that he had no child that might bear his name.

Such was Charles Stuart when Nell Gwyn for the first time crossed his path and excited first his interest and afterwards his ardent desire.

How soon the relations between the King and the ex-orange-girl became intimate we shall never know for certain, but rumours were soon flying about the tiring-rooms of Drury Lane and many tongues were busy linking the name of the two together. As early as the first month of 1668, Knipp coming round from behind to sit next her friend Samuel Pepys and entertain him with the chatter and scandal of the green-room told

## FAVOURITE OF THE KING

him that "the King did send several times for Nelly and that she was with him, but what he did she knows not." Doubtless this is only a sample of the gossip that was beginning to be current. Possibly it anticipated the actual event by some months.

Anyhow it was not in Nellie's nature to trouble herself very much about what was being said of her. For a full two years she pursued her ordinary course of life, busying herself with her profession, working hard at her parts and acting them amid rapturous and increasing applause. Whether or no she was yet the King's mistress she was very much her own, and people who suspected her of winning a royal heart had to admit that she was not neglecting her ordinary patrons for the purpose. No period of her life is more full of hard professional work as well-earned professional fame.

The early months of the year 1670 were to be signalised by the production, upon a superb scale, of a new tragedy of Dryden, "The Conquest of Granada." Nell was to appear as Almahide, the maiden whose beauty captivates the Moorish King, and

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

was busily engaged in studying her part. The part itself was a dignified one, and probably neither very grateful nor very suitable to her; but by way of compensation she had a smart prologue to recite which was expected to take the town by storm—for many crowded to the King's House to hear Nellie speak a prologue or an epilogue who cared nothing for the rest of the play, especially if it was a serious one.

Everything was ready, and the first night was eagerly expected when it began to be rumoured that it would have to be postponed. The rumour was confirmed, and the disappointed public soon learnt that the hitch was due to Nellie's inability to perform the part assigned to her. It was felt that no one but she could do justice to the prologue on which both Dryden and the management relied very much for the success of the play, and the production was accordingly put off till the autumn.

Nell had now moved from Drury Lane to Lincoln's Inn Fields, a mark of her still increasing professional success, and, it was sometimes whispered, of royal favour also.

## FAVOURITE OF THE KING

During the latter part of the previous year Charles had been a frequent visitor there as had Nell at Whitehall. But in the spring the King had to leave London for Dover to welcome his sister the Duchess of Orleans who had come over on an unofficial mission from France. The ladies and gentlemen of the Court, of course, went with him; and under other circumstances he might have taken Nell with him to amuse his leisure for he was no stickler for ceremony, and he was undoubtedly becoming very fond of her. But *regnan!* Nellie could not go. She remained quietly in her house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and neither the Court nor the theatre saw her.

In the autumn the King was once more at Whitehall, and the long looked for performance of "The Conquest of Granada" was to take place at last. Nell recited the prologue in a huge hat the size of a cart-wheel, under which her diminutive figure looked exquisitely ludicrous. The whole house was frantic with admiration, and it was noted that among the applauding thousands there was none who laughed louder or clapped more heartily than the King. Both King and com-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

mons might well applaud. Nellie was in her most brilliant form. People noticed that her eyes seemed brighter, and her spirits higher and her impertinence more captivating than was usual even with her. Madly as the house was enjoying her she seemed to be enjoying herself more. It may well be so. For there was perhaps in Nell's heart a happiness passing the happiness of artists—the happiness of one that remembereth no more the anguish for joy that a man is born into the world.

On May 8th, 1670, while the royal train was winding its slow but splendid course from London to Dover, little Nellie, in her bright room overlooking Lincoln's Inn Fields, had borne a son in whose veins the blood of the orange-girl of Lewknor Lane mingled with the Blood Royal of England.











MADAM ELLEN GWINN

*Painted by Verrihell; engraved by J. Becket*



CHAPTER FIFTH                      THE  
FAVOURITE OF THE COURT

Gwyn, the indiscreetest and wildest creature that ever was in a court, yet continued to the end of the King's life in great favour.—BURNET'S "History of My Own Time."

## CHARTER FIFTH                      THE FAVOURITE OF THE COURT

THE PERFORMANCE OF "THE CONQUEST OF Granada " marks the climax and the end of Nell's career as an actress. She did indeed appear once more as "Panthea" in Beaumont and Fletcher's "A King and No King," but this would seem to have been a sort of farewell to her old comrades and admirers. The great change in her life had already taken place.

The King had resolved to take the mother of his child away from the stage and make her his mistress in the sight of all the world. And Nellie consented.

That Nell should have attracted Charles is not at all surprising, for she was pretty and amusing, while the King's passions were vehement and he was little in the habit of restraining them. But the hold that she obtained on him, which lasted to the end of his life, requires somewhat more explanation. She was not the first actress for whom he had conceived a passion. It has already been mentioned that Moll Davis from the Duke's House had previously made a conquest of him. But Moll's empire lasted only a month

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

or two. Nell's was only dissolved by death. Whatever rivals might for a time eclipse her, I doubt if any retained so permanent a place in his real affections as Nell Gwyn; it was her name that was last on his lips when he came to die.

What was the cause of this remarkable attachment? Nell's beauty doubtless served her well; her wit perhaps better. But beauty and wit were common enough at the Court of a King who was an expert in both. I think the root thing that Charles found in Nellie that he could not find elsewhere was the thing he was always looking for—reality.

Nell Gwyn was a woman of the people. There was in her as I have said to the very end a great deal of the street urchin of Drury Lane. This quality she wisely never seems to have tried to eradicate. Mr Granger remarks that "the pert and vivacious prattle of the orange-wench was by degrees refined into such wit as could please Charles II." I can only say that if some of the repartees recorded of her when at Court are specimens of this process, the mind strives in vain to imagine what her "prattle" can have been

## FAVOURITE OF THE COURT

like before it was "refined." In essence their wit is exactly the wit which belongs to the *gamin* to this day—though, of course they belong to an exceptional *gamin*, a *gamin* of genius. Everyone, I hope, knows the delicious passage in "Great Expectations" which records the painful collapse of poor Pip's dignity before the triumphant satire of Trabb's Boy. Such a terror, I fancy, was Nell to the ladies of the Court. She utterly refused to be impressed by their superior gentility and met their attempts to freeze her into silence by criticisms so frank and humorous that their dignity burst like a pricked bubble. She had a startling command of vernacular oaths which she used freely, shocking the Court and amusing the King, and some of her repartees must have made even that fairly free-spoken generation gasp. "Anybody," said her rival Louise de Querouaille, "might know she had been an orange-girl by her swearing." This policy which she adopted probably from sheer instinct and sense of fun succeeded perfectly. Poor Moll Davis, I suspect, tried to be a lady, and Charles, who could easily get real ladies

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

if he wanted them, got bored with her. Nell continued to be frankly plebeian and Charles continued to adore her. Charles, with all his faults, loved the common people as they loved him, and this impossible actress represented the people at his Court much better than any of the politicians.

If Nell was frank with others she was equally frank with herself. There were many excuses for her. She had known want and hardship, bitter struggles and hope deferred, and triumphant as had been her career as an actress, no one knew better than she that a change in the public taste or the decline of her own charms might at any time plunge her back into destitution. She was no common prostitute. She had not sold herself to the first rich man that came along. She was genuinely fond of the King; and having accepted her position, she played the game honourably and remained according to all reliable accounts strictly faithful to him. Nevertheless she was in the emphatic language of the populace, from which she sprang, "a kept woman"; and she knew it.

She showed her honesty by her refusal to

## FAVOURITE OF THE COURT

cover it up with vain words or sentimental special pleading. She seems to have taken a positive pleasure in applying to herself the short Anglo-Saxon word by which the Authorised Version of the Bible describes ladies in her situation. It is said that one day her coachman, found fighting with another man, explained that his opponent had described his mistress by that epithet. Nell laughingly said that she supposed that was very much what she was. "You may be called a whore," replied the man, "but I will not be called a whore's coachman."

There seems to me a touch of bitterness behind the flippancy of some of Nell's references to her position. Surely that temper is to be observed in the tale of her addressing her child affectionately in Charles's presence as "little bastard," and then excusing herself as "she knew not by what other title to call him." The remark, by the way, is said to have obtained for the infant the Dukedom of St Albans.

But if Nell felt any pangs of this kind they did not interfere with the general buoyancy of her spirits. When we criticise the numer-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

ous jests and repartees recorded of her, we must not fail to allow for the personal equation. Some of them are really witty in themselves; others, in cold print, doubtless seem poor enough. But, as spoken by her, they were set off not only by all the arts of a skilled actress but by an irrepressible and irresistible gaiety that was all her own. Anyone who has listened to the talk of a born conversationalist must know how flat stories and jokes often fall when one tries to repeat them. Nell's humour, the delight of all who listened to it, has, I should fancy, suffered a good deal from this cause.

Nell was eventually established by Charles in a fine house on the south side of Pall Mall overlooking the soft trees and lawns and sparkling lakes of St James's Park, a house the freehold of which she is said to have acquired by a more than usually unprintable epigram. It was the King's habit to take an early walk in the park, his favourite spaniels scampering and barking round him. There he would feed his ducks and peacocks and there he would chat with Nellie, she leaning over her garden wall while he stood on the







FRANCES STUART

DUCHESS OF RICHMOND, "LA BELLE STUART"

*After Sir Peter Leys*

HANOVERIAN COLLECTION



## FAVOURITE OF THE COURT

lawn below. It was thus that Sir John Evelyn caught them on March 4th, 1671, and went away, as he tells us, "heartily sorry at the scene."

The girl was now practically in a position to ask and to have, and it must be said to her credit that she was neither rapacious like Barbara Palmer nor did she like Louise de Querouaille make Charles spend money on her senselessly merely to gratify her vanity. She was extravagant indeed, and ran frequently into debt, and must on the whole have cost Charles a good deal, but the amount he spent on her was trivial compared with what Barbara and Louise got out of him. She had a curious fondness for silver ornaments, and a silversmith's bill sent in to her amounting in all to over a thousand pounds is still extant.

Here is part of it:—

Delivered the head of the bedstead weighing 885 ounces 12 lb., and I have received 636 ounces 15 dweight, so that their is over and above of me own silver two hundred forty eight ounces 17 dweight at 7s. 11d. par once (the silver being a dt. worse par once

*nee Villiers  
later  
Countess of  
Castlemain*

*acher*

*into-  
out*

# THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

according the reste) with comes to £98, 10s. 2d.

Other items follow—

Delivered the King's

head weighing . . . 197 ounces 5 dwt.

One figure weighing . . . 445 ounces 15 dwt.

The other figure with the

character weighing . . . 428 ounces 5 dwt.

The slaves, and the rest

belonging unto it,

weighing . . . . . 255 ounces

The two Eagles weighing 169 ounces 10 dwt.

And so on, the total amount of the bill coming to £1135, 3s. 1d.

She was an incorrigible gambler and her basset table was one of the social centres of London. Louise, in the intervals of quarrelling, often won large sums off her.

Burnet in his "History of My Own Times" says on the authority of the Duke of Buckingham that Nell demanded five hundred a year and that the King refused it, but that in four years she got from him sixty thousand pounds. But the whole of Burnet's account of her is obviously prejudiced and spiteful, and some of it is demonstrably false.

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I should place little confidence in Burnet's word when his political partisanship was involved (as it was in an attempt to decry Charles II.) and I should place no confidence at all in Buckingham's word under any circumstances whatsoever. It is not inconceivable that Nell may have stipulated for a provision. She was a practical young woman and no sentimentalist; and she was giving up a good professional career. But to suppose that Charles, among whose vices meanness in money matters has never been counted, refused her is wildly unnatural, and to the figure at which her subsequent gains are estimated no importance need be attached.

In Pall Mall she seems to have kept as "merry" a house as she and Buckhurst kept at Epsom. She loved to get up jolly parties there where the singing and carousing lasted often till the small hours of the morning. In these revels the most prominent politicians of the day were delighted to take part, as were Charles and his brother. An amusing story was told by Boman the singer to Colley Cibber of how he, Boman, when a

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young man, went to Nell's house to sing to the royal brothers. The King expressed his delight at the singing, and Nell, with characteristic good-nature to a fellow "pro," told Charles that she hoped he would make the performers a handsome present. The King felt in his pockets, found he had no money, and asked James if he had any. James was apparently almost equally bereft. "Od's fish!" Nell exclaimed, mimicking the King's favourite oath, "what company have I got into!"

By the mass of the people, Nell was enthusiastically beloved. She was one of themselves: they had learned to call her "Our Nelly" when she was on the stage, and when she became the King's mistress they continued so to call her. She was free-handed and generous almost to excess, and no one who could appeal to her pity went empty away. On one occasion she saw a clergyman being led away to prison for debt. She stopped her coach and paid for his liberty on the spot. She forgot none of her old friends. Dryden was amply rewarded for his share in bringing out her young genius. Otway,

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Lee and Butler are known to have been helped by her in their poverty.

But what perhaps even more endeared her to the masses was the absence in her of what is now popularly called "side"—I must apologise for the slang, but there is no other word that exactly expresses what I mean. She helped her old comrades, but she never patronised them. With her very servants, as the anecdote I have quoted concerning her coachman suggests, she was on terms of what struck most people as almost indecent familiarity. She never forgot and never attempted to conceal the fact that she was herself one of the populace.

An attempt characteristic of the senseless sort of modern scepticism has been made to dispute the story of her connection with the foundation of Chelsea Hospital. The tradition in favour of the view that she induced Charles to found it is about as strong as a tradition could be. It was certainly believed in her own time. For over a century the old soldiers used to solemnly toast her as their benefactress. An inn close to the hospital bore her name and an inscription com-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

memorative of her act. Nothing can be adduced on the other side save the silence of official documents. As if any official document would be likely to contain the statement that the King had taken the step at the request of his mistress ! It has been stated that Evelyn attributes the first suggestion to Sir Stephen Fox. He does not. His words are these—"Dined with Sir Stephen Fox, who proposed to me the purchasing of Chelsea College, which His Majesty had some time since given to our Society (*i.e.* the Royal Society) and *would now purchase it again* to build an hospital or infirmary for soldiers there." Evelyn's language clearly indicates that the initiative came from Charles, and there is nothing in his testimony contradictory of the strong tradition which points to Nell as the originator of the project.

In the year 1679 Nell lost her old mother. It would seem that for some time she lived with her daughter in Pall Mall, for the tradesmen's bills, which have been preserved, mention "plasters" and "cordials" for old Mrs Gywn" as well as "cordial juleps"

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for "Master Charles," *i.e.* the future Duke of St Albans. Later Nell seems to have established her mother elsewhere, perhaps in Leicester Square, where we have records of a house being settled upon her, which she never seems to have inhabited, perhaps again in the little cottage at Chelsea with which tradition associates her name. The old lady was drowned, falling accidentally into the water near the Neat Houses, Chelsea, probably in the neighbourhood that we now call Millbank. Unkind persons hinted that she was not too sober when this casualty befell her.

She was buried in St Martin's-in-the-Fields where Nell herself was to lie, and given a magnificent funeral at her daughter's expense. Rochester makes this the subject of some of his sharpest taunts against Nell:—

Nor was her mother's funeral less her care;  
No cost, no velvet did her daughter spare;  
Fine gilded 'Scutcheons did the Herse enrich  
To celebrate this Martyr of the Ditch;  
Burnt brandy did in flaming Brimmers flow,  
Drank at her funeral, while her well-pleased  
shade

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

Rejoiced even in the sober fields below  
At all the Drunkenness her Death had made.

But many, I fancy, will not feel less kindly to Nell because she remembered her tie with the womb that bore her and the breast that gave her suck. Under all her Bohemianism Nell was, like nine women out of ten, at heart domestic. She was a daughter and a mother. Those plasters for old Mrs Gwyn and juleps for Master Charles probably meant to her more than the triumphs of art or the pomp and splendour of kings.













CHAPTER SIXTH                      NELL  
GWYN AMONG HER RIVALS

“ He visits his Clevelands, his Nells and his Carwells.”

## CHAPTER SIXTH                      NELL GWYN AMONG HER RIVALS

NELL WAS OF COURSE BY NO MEANS THE ONLY person who stood at this time in the same relation to King Charles. His infidelities are notorious; indeed they form for most people the principal tradition of his character. But such a view of him is superficial, and the estimate of him founded on it is subtly but definitely false.

It is not likely that at the best Charles would ever have been a model of conjugal fidelity. Few kings have been so; and Charles had strong passions and a rather restless temperament. But circumstances were all against him. His marriage was originally a purely diplomatic one. His wife was a swarthy dwarfish woman, narrow and ignorant of the world. Yet I think Charles would have grown to love her if she had been the mother of his children. That tie was lacking between them, and its absence depressed the woman while it drove the man to give free rein to his natural sensuality, with which was curiously mingled a kind of rage for paternity which sometimes made him acknowledge children who were almost certainly not his.

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Charles has been much reproached with his treatment of his wife, and no doubt, inasmuch as a wife is wronged by constant infidelity, he wronged her grievously. At the same time it is fair to remember that in many ways he treated her with a respect, a delicacy and even a tenderness which contrasts strikingly with the treatment meted out by Henry VIII. and by George IV. to wives who had ceased to inspire them with passion. He would not listen to those who were continually urging him to divorce her on the ground of her barrenness. He flew into one of the very few tempestuous rages that are recorded of him when the infamous Oates, instigated by politicians more infamous if possible than himself, tried to connect her name with the alleged Popish Plot against her husband's life. When she was reputed dying, though he was at the time in love (perhaps the only real love of his life) with La Belle Stuart and was credited with a strong desire to make her his wife, he appeared overcome with grief and begged her to live for his sake. Grammot, who tells the story, adds the characteristic comment that

## NELL AMONG HER RIVALS

the King was probably disappointed at her taking him at his word.

The King, so far from being the worst man in his Court, was almost the best—and that is perhaps not saying much for him. There was a good deal that was admirable and even lovable about Charles, but there was nothing admirable or lovable about the society to which Nell was now introduced. Compared with it, the Green Room she had deserted was a school of high and austere morals. The mere sensual excess was the least part of the evil. The whole atmosphere was one of hard, callous impudence without, and of faithless, hopeless Atheism within. The idealism of the Puritan and the idealism of the Catholic had killed each other. The world was in full reaction against the dismal and cruel cult of Calvin, but had no positive faith to oppose to it. It was simply and contentedly godless. When we read of that Court whether described with cynical detachment by Count Hamilton or with a sort of middle-class shame by Pepys, we sometimes find it difficult to believe that we are reading about ordinary civilised Europeans.

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Pepys tells us of a dead child born of a lady-in-waiting and forthwith hurried off to the laboratory to be dissected by the laughing courtiers. And there is a story, a typical one, taken from the pages of Grammont:—

“I went yesterday to Miss Stewart’s after the audience of those damned Muscovites: the King arrived there just before me. . . . The conversation turned upon the extraordinary appearance of the ambassadors. I know not where that fool Crofts had heard that all these Muscovites had handsome wives; and that all their wives had handsome legs. Upon this the King maintained that no woman ever had such handsome legs as Miss Stewart; and she, to prove the truth of his majesty’s assertion, with the greatest ease imaginable, immediately showed her leg above the knee. Some were ready to prostrate themselves in order to adore its beauty; for indeed none can be handsomer; but the Duke alone began to criticise upon it. He contended that it was too slender, and that as for himself he would give nothing for a leg that was not thicker and shorter,







MRS ELYN GUYN

WIFE OF KING CHARLES II.

*Drawn by B. Kneller; engraved by C. Kneller.*



## NELL AMONG HER RIVALS

and concluded by saying that no leg was worth anything without green stockings.”

When we remember that Miss Stewart, afterwards the Duchess of Richmond, was considered rather a modest and refined person compared with the other ladies of the Court, we may form some sort of estimate of what that Court was like.

The arrival of Nell at Court coincided very closely with the widening of the breach between the King and the beautiful termagant Barbara Palmer, who had been for years his most favoured mistress. Her beauty had early enslaved the King, and indeed she had very little but her beauty to recommend her. Of all the women who were associated with Charles she least deserved his affection. She was avaricious and sensual. While living in extravagant luxury on the royal bounty she was systematically unfaithful to her lover, and unfaithful in the worst way, for she was in the habit of rewarding her humble admirers with his money. Jacob Hall, the rope dancer, and even Nellie's friend, Charles Hart, were suspected

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of being among her pensioners, and her gifts undoubtedly helped to lay the foundations of the wealth, the eminence, and the infamy of the first Duke of Marlborough. It is pleasant to remember that Charles, finding the two together, observed to Churchill, "I forgive you, Sir, for I know you do but earn your bread."

Yet all this did not prevent her from being as perfect a virago of jealousy as the most virtuous wife could have been. She made poor Charles's life a burden to him by her continual tantrums. Nell's arrival on the scene naturally did not tend to smooth matters. Barbara Palmer was the opposite of Nell in every way. She was a lady of good birth, the daughter and heir of a peer; Nell had passed from a back alley to the stage of Drury Lane. She was avaricious; Nell was generous to a fault. She was hypocritical; Nell was honest. Above all she had no trace of humour in her composition. Nell was bubbling over with it. Barbara passionately reproached the King with his "depraved taste" for "that pitiful strolling actress." Nell expressed herself about her rival in language

alliers; 1st  
uncle to George,  
Duke of  
Suckingham

## NELL AMONG HER RIVALS

equally contemptuous, though both freer and more amusing.

The King was rapidly tiring of his old love and small blame to him. But he was too good-natured a man to sever an old connection harshly. The tactful Grammont has, by his own account, the credit of having found the way out. Barbara's husband had, as the price of his complacency in his wife's shame, been created Lord Castlemaine, but the arrogant mistress wanted a peerage in her own right, and Charles was ready to grant this with an ample provision if he could be allowed in return a little peace. So Barbara became Duchess of Cleveland, the children whom Charles acknowledged were made peers, and the field was left clear for Nellie.

Not quite clear, however, for a new rival appeared in the field, a rival much more formidable than Lady Castlemaine could ever have been.

It will be remembered that while Nellie was immediately expecting her first child in Lincoln's Inn, the King had set out for Dover to meet his sister the Duchess of Or-

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leans, who was the sister-in-law of Louis the Fourteenth.

Outwardly the meeting was merely the affectionate welcome of a sister by a brother. In fact it was the turning-point in the complex but eminently patient and skilful diplomacy of the King, for it was the occasion of the signing of the momentous secret treaty of Dover which broke up the "Triple Bond" and reverted to the Cromwellian policy of close alliance with France.

It was also the occasion upon which the King's eyes first fell on Louise de Querouaille.

This woman came over with the Duchess of Orleans as her principal attendant. Her face was of that type of beauty that we call infantile—"of a childish, simple, and baby face"—as Evelyn calls her. Her figure was supple and graceful, her movements languorous. She had some wit and much charm, and was well calculated to appeal to Charles. Charles looked at her, and desired her ardently. He pressed his sister to remain with a vehemence which most people attributed to something more than brotherly affection.

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The Duchess was, however, obliged to return to France, and she took her pretty lady-in-waiting with her.

A year later she died, and Louise returned to England to become the King's mistress.

Louise de Querouaille was, like Nellie, kind-hearted, and, like Nellie, genuinely fond of Charles. Though her fidelity to him was not as much above suspicion as Nell's, there seems no good evidence that her relations with other men ever went beyond flirtation, and so bitterly was she hated that, had such evidence been procurable, we should almost certainly have known of it. But here the resemblance between the two ends.

Louise really was, though Nell stoutly refused to believe it, of a very ancient and noble family, and was inordinately proud of the fact. She had passed her youth at the superb court of Louis, and her manners had all the grace and refinement for which that Court was famed. Though not avaricious like Barbara Palmer, her vanity produced all the effects of avarice; she loved to make Charles spend enormous sums on her whims for the

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mere pleasure of proving her power over him.

Her objects were not wholly personal. There can be no doubt that Louis sent her over as a sort of unofficial diplomatist and spy at the English Court. It was to be her task to influence Charles in favour of France, and to keep the French Embassy informed as to the leanings of his mind and the various influences favourable or hostile to France that were being brought to bear on him.

It was necessary both to her vanity and to her political ambition that she alone should have possession of the King's heart, should be admitted to his confidence or be able to influence him. To this Nell Gwyn with her bullet-headed honesty, her cockney wit and her strong hold on the King's affections was an obstacle.

The clash between the two was inevitable. It began as soon as Louise arrived in England and it continued till Charles' death. It was not indeed incessant. Neither of the two women was what is popularly called a "cat." Nell was good-humoured and by nature magnanimous, and Louise, though

## NELL AMONG HER RIVALS

her malice had probably deeper roots, knew too well what became her dignity to engage continually in unseemly wrangling. The two rivals frequently met on friendly terms, played cards together, lost large sums to each other, and maintained an amicable exterior. But their hostility was deep and ineradicable.

The pride of birth which was so prominent a feature of Louise de Querouaille's character often laid her open to the shafts of Nellie's satire. When the Prince de Rohan, the head of that great Armorican house which figures so largely in French history from the Reformation to the Revolution, died, Louise appeared at Court in mourning, claiming apparently with truth, that he was her kinsman. Next day Nell also appeared shrouded in deepest black. When asked the reason, she replied that the Cham of Tartary was dead. "And what," Louise was unwise enough to ask, "is the Cham of Tartary to you?" Nell replied that he was, curiously enough, exactly the same relation to her as the Prince de Rohan was to Mademoiselle de Querouaille.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

One of the acutest observers of that age has left on record her impressions of the contrast between the two mistresses, "Kerouaille," writes Madame de Sevigné, "has failed at no point; she wished to be the King's mistress, and she is so. But she did not expect to find in her way a young actress whose charms enslave the King. She cannot detach him for a moment from this woman. He divides his money, his time, and his health between the two. The actress is as proud as the Duchess, mocks her, jeers at her, defies her, often steals the King from her, and boasts of his preference for herself. She is young, reckless, bold and quick-witted. She sings, dances and plies her trade with a whole heart. . . . Her attitude is this—this Duchess sets up to be a great lady; everybody at the French Court is her relation; she goes into mourning whenever a grand person there dies. Very well! if she is all that, why is she what she is? As for me, I never pretended to be anything else. The King keeps me; and I am faithful to him. He has given me a child which he ought to acknowledge, and he will acknowledge it for he is as fond of me as of her."







MADAM GWIN



## NELL AMONG HER RIVALS

That is perhaps no unfair statement of Nell's point of view.

Popular feeling was altogether on the side of Nellie. She was English. She was Protestant, though, perhaps, her religious training under the saintly influence of Madame Ross may have been somewhat neglected. She was one of themselves and never felt ashamed of it. "Madame Carwell," as our ancestors called her, was, on the other hand, as bitterly hated as Nell was enthusiastically loved. She was a Papist; she was a Frenchwoman and was suspected as being something very like a French spy. She was believed to be always influencing the King in an anti-national direction, and for all his misdeeds public and private she was made answerable. The very silver-smiths who were employed on the rich gifts which the King loved to heap upon her grumbled at their work, and expressed the wish "that it were for Madame Ellen."

Personally I fancy that both Louise herself and the people who denounced her enormously exaggerated her influence on the King. The foreign policy of Charles was tor-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

tuous in its details, but its main object was simple enough. It was to keep the French alliance while enhancing its value with Louise by continually appearing to be about to abandon it. This policy he adopted before he ever saw Louise, and he continued to pursue it till his death, nor do I see the smallest reason to think that he ever swerved from it for man or woman. We have plenty of evidence that he was always irritated when Louise tried to draw him into talking politics. She was his mistress, not his Foreign Secretary.

But the public was in a mood at once fierce and credulous. A storm of popular indignation fanned by the politicians and raised to the point of madness by the lies of Oates broke upon the Court. "Madame Carwell," the Popish mistress, was naturally a mark for attack. Oates in one of his wild and contradictory stories accused her of being an accomplice in the "Plot," and but for the Royal protection she would certainly have paid for her intrigues with her head.

One story, illustrative of the popular temper as well as extremely characteristic of

## NELL AMONG HER RIVALS

Nell, belongs to this period. The King in 1681 summoned a Parliament at Oxford and went thither to meet it accompanied by his two mistresses. One day Nellie was driving in the Royal coach when it was stopped by an angry mob, who, mistaking her for her rival, began to hoot and pelt her. But Nell was accustomed by her trade to face a popular audience in every mood, and there was never in her any trace of fear. She put her pretty impudent face out of the coach-window and cried to the yelling, scrambling rabble, "Pray, good people, be civil; I am the Protestant —!" The crowd with laughter and cheers opened a lane for her coach to pass.

Nell herself had no politics except a general sympathy with the populace and a strong desire to help her personal friends. The nation made her a sort of heroine—their "Protestant Nell," but she never seems to have lent herself to the intrigues of the Opposition. James, the best hated man in England at that time, she liked even before she had cause to be grateful to him. Monmouth, then the Protestant hero, though at one time she

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consented to intercede for him, she disliked and despised, and she expressed very freely to his face her just opinion of that worthless fellow. Monmouth angrily called her "an ill-bred woman." "Am I worse bred," she retorted, "than Lucy Walters?"

Monmouth's  
mother.

Such was the life that Nell was living at Court when an event happened which profoundly changed its course and made her and her rival companions in misfortune.



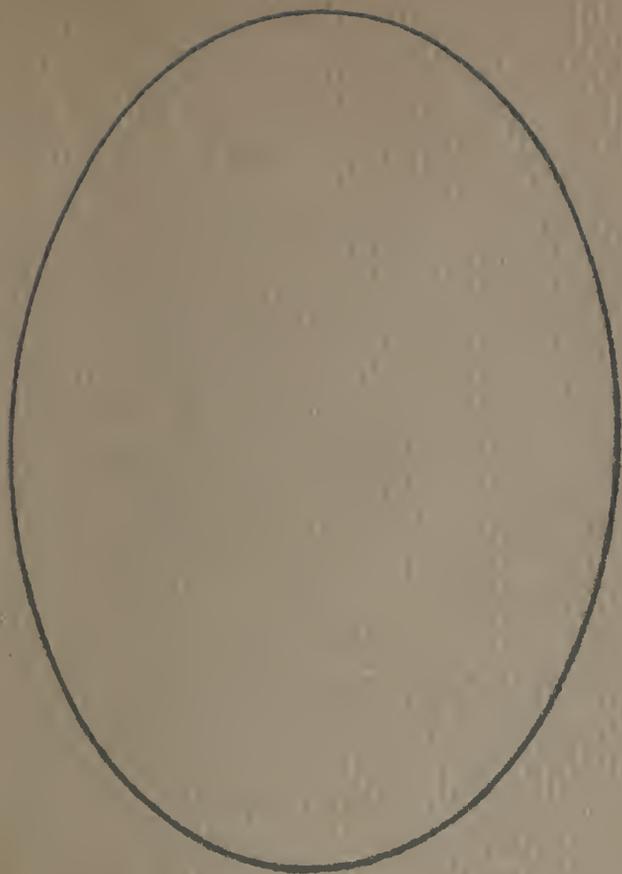


CHAPTER SEVEN DO NOT  
LET POOR NELLIE STARVE

“I fear, gentlemen, I have been an unconscionable time dying.”—Dying words of Charles II.







MADAM ELLEN GWINN

*Engraved by P. Tempest*



## CHAPTER SEVEN DO NOT LET POOR NELLIE STARVE

CHARLES II. STANDS IN POPULAR HISTORY primarily as a profligate, nor can it be said that his reputation in this respect is undeserved. Yet it may fairly be urged that he owes it in great measure to a characteristic which is on the whole creditable to him. He was not the first or the last king that had mistresses. But he drew the attention of all the world to his frailties by heaping honours on them and their illegitimate children, until, as a grumbler said, it seemed "there would soon be a House of Lords constituted out of the Blood Royal."

We have seen how Barbara Palmer became Duchess of Cleveland and her sons Dukes of Grafton, of Southampton, and of Northumberland. A similar honour was bestowed on Louise de Querouaille who was created Duchess of Portsmouth, her son receiving the title of Duke of Richmond. Monmouth owed his dukedom to the same cause, though his relationship to Charles is more than doubtful.

Nell's first child was created Duke of St Albans, and his descendants still hold the rank and estates which Charles bestowed on

*Charles mar  
certificates  
Lucy Wall  
had been  
at Delft  
Holland*

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

him. Rather more than a year later she bore him a second son, christened James in compliment to the Duke of York (the first was called Charles after his father) and raised to the peerage as Lord Bronckton, but he died while still a child. Nell herself remained Madame Gwyn, and was perhaps the more loved by the people that she was still a commoner.

To have made Nell a peeress would have been a very startling act. It must be remembered that there was a wide difference in social status between her and the other mistresses. Barbara Palmer was the daughter of a peer and the wife of a peer. Louise de Querouaille belonged to one of the noblest houses of Brittany. Their elevation, therefore, though it might scandalise public opinion, did not outrage the feelings of the existing nobles. Those feelings were very strong. The dignity and power which a peerage conferred were highly esteemed and jealously guarded; these honours were not then sold by politicians like so much butter as they are to-day. To have made the orange girl a peeress would have been an affront

## DO NOT LET NELL STARVE

to something much stronger than the moral sentiment of the middle classes; it would have been an affront to the idea of aristocracy.

Charles probably knew all this very well; and it is no shame to him if he hesitated. But at last his affection for Nell, and perhaps that queer sense of fair-play that was strong in him, made him resolve that she should share in the honours bestowed on Barbara and Louise. A patent was prepared creating her Countess of Greenwich.

Had she ever received her new title I doubt if it would have made much difference. Barbara Palmer might be remembered as the Duchess of Cleveland, and Louise du Querouaille as Duchess of Portsmouth, but Nell Gwyn would always have been Nell Gwyn, the orange-girl, the actress, the woman of the people.

Nell never got her peerage. Before the preliminaries were completed the man who would have granted it to her was dead.

Nothing in Charles's extraordinary life was so dramatic, so full of colour and picturesqueness as his death.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

On Sunday, the first of February 1685, Whitehall was crowded with a motley assembly come to pay their respects to the King. Nell was there surrounded by men who loved to listen to her caustic and impudent humour. Portsmouth was there also and Cleveland, who, though her power was gone, still haunted the Court, and a third concubine whose history is perhaps the strangest of all, Hortenzia de Mazarin, the niece of the great Cardinal, whom Charles in exile had vainly importuned to become his wife, and who, now that his fortunes had mended and hers were ruined, had consented to become his mistress. Page boys sang love songs to the soft accompaniment of lutes and viols. Groups of men and women sat winning and losing piles of gold round the basset table. Choice wines flowed freely.

But Charles, who was wont to be the centre of the merriment, was gloomy and obviously out of sorts. He had no appetite and complained that he did not feel well. But no one imagined that his affection was serious.

When, however, he rose early next morn-

## DO NOT LET NELL STARVE

ing, he was clearly very ill. As he was being dressed his speech failed him, he reeled and would have fallen had not a courtier supported him. A surgeon opened a vein, but he did not recover consciousness.

It was February the 2nd—Nell's birthday—and through all that day her lover hung between life and death. His sufferings must have been terrible, and they were intensified by the remedies applied by his doctors, who tortured him as ferociously as any heretic was ever tortured by an inquisition. He endured these torments with a stoicism which gives the lie to those who would make of him an effeminate voluptuary. Neither the utmost power of agony nor the immediate presence of death had power to break down his iron courage.

The mistresses were of course forbidden to approach the sick-bed of the dying King. Nell had to retire to that fine house in Pall Mall, and, looking over that garden, down which she had so often run to greet Charles in his morning walks, to give herself up to an agony of grief. So she passed her birthday.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

The alternations of hope and fear were over. It was known that Charles was to die.

It was at this moment that Louise de Querouaille performed the noblest action of her life. She was one of the few who knew the truth about Charles's secret religious convictions. Forbidden by the scorn of men to approach her dying lover she went at the risk of her own life (for it was death at that time for a Catholic to proselytise, and "Madame Carwell" was the last to expect mercy) to the French embassy. She begged Barillon to remind James that his brother would want a priest. I think at that moment even Nell would have forgiven her everything.

The royal chamber was full of the great dignitaries of Church and State. Sancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was there, and Ken, the Bishop of Bath and Wells. Ken is one of the saints of Anglicanism; many years before he had boldly risked the royal displeasure by refusing to admit Nell to his prebendary at Winchester. Charles, who liked courage and honesty wherever he saw it, liked Ken and made him a bishop. "Who shall have Bath and Wells," he said, "but

## DO NOT LET NELL STARVE

the little black fellow that would not give poor Nellie a lodging." Ken was as bold now as then. He reminded the King of his many sins, begged him to be reconciled to the Church and to receive the sacraments.

Charles was suffering, but he rallied all the power of his wit and readiness. He was quite resolved to be polite to the bishops—that was his point of honour—but he was equally resolved not to take the sacrament from their hands.

At last James, after a whispered consultation with his brother, cleared the room. The great nobles and the highly-placed prelates of the Established Church trooped out. A little door opened on the other side of the royal chamber. It was the door through which Chiffinch, the King's confidential servant, had been accustomed to introduce his mistresses; Nell herself had probably often entered by that door. But the figure that now came through it was a very different one. A little poor, ragged, outlawed, almost illiterate Catholic priest named Father Huddleston, who had saved Charles's life after Worcester, came now to save his soul.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

Charles confessed and was absolved, and received the sacrament after the Roman fashion. The little priest withdrew, the doors were opened, and once more the great and noble could enter. It was then that Charles made his famous apology for having been "an unconscionable time dying." His wife sent her excuses and wished his forgiveness. "She asks my pardon, poor woman," he said, "I ask hers with all my heart." His sons were brought to him, to receive his blessing, and among them Nell's child, the little Duke of St Albans, now a boy of fifteen.

But Nell herself remained in her sumptuous house in Pall Mall, lonely, miserable, and apparently forgotten.

She was not forgotten.

Charles's speech was failing; he was sinking into a kind of stupor. But at the last he seemed to be trying to speak and James bent down to catch his words. They came haltingly from lips that could hardly frame them :

"Do not let poor Nellie starve."

Before the end the man remembered her.



Faint, illegible text, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side of the page. The text is arranged in several paragraphs, but the characters are too light and blurry to be transcribed accurately.



NEIL GWYN WITH CHILDREN







CHAPTER EIGHT THE END  
OF A KING'S FAVOURITE

“ I am resolved to grow fat and look young till forty and then slip out of the world with the first wrinkle and the reputation of five and twenty.”—“Florimel” in DRYDEN’S “ Secret Love ” (Nell’s favourite part).

## CHAPTER EIGHT THE END OF A KING'S FAVOURITE

THE DEATH OF CHARLES WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY have cut Nellie to the heart even had it made no difference to her personal fortunes. In point of fact it meant for the moment her utter ruin. She had never counted money; She had spent freely on herself and on others, debt never troubled her, and she incurred it recklessly. We have two instances while the King yet lived of intimations that no more of her orders would be honoured. When he died, the security on which her tradesmen counted died with him, for no one knew whether James would pay. The whole crowd of her creditors descended on her like vultures each eager to be before the rest. She sold most of her jewellery, including the magnificent diamond necklace which she had bought a year or two before from Peg Hughes. She pawned her plate. Some of it is still in the vaults of Child's Bank where it was taken as security. Much was melted down. "The bill is very dear," wrote Nell, "to boil the plate, but necessity hath no law."

All this could not save her. In the Spring of 1685 she was declared an outlaw for her

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

unpaid bills and she was in hourly danger of being thrown into prison. It seemed that the wheel of her life would swing full circle, and that she, who had risen from Cole Yard to Drury Lane and from Drury Lane to Pall Mall, who had become a king's mistress and a peer's mother, was destined to sink to Cole Yard again.

She wrote to James ; and James had not forgotten his brother's dying words. He paid out of the secret service £729, 2s. 3d. to satisfy the debts for which she was outlawed. In the course of the next year £1000 was placed to her credit from the same source and £1500 was settled on her for life. Later, Betswood Park in Nottinghamshire was given her, the King paying off the mortgage. That estate still remains part of the hereditary property of the Dukes of St Albans.

It would be interesting to know whether there was ever any truth in the rumour which at this time became prevalent as to Nell's intention of joining the Roman Church. Evelyn alludes to this rumour rather contemptuously:

“Dryden, the famous play-writer, and his

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two sons and Mrs Nelly (Miss to the late King) were said to go to Mass; such prose-lytes are no great loss to the Church."

Now it is certain that Nellie died a Protestant, was buried according to Protestant forms, and had her funeral sermon preached at her own request by that eminently Protestant dignitary, Dr Tenison. Moreover, in her will she is made to speak of Roman Catholics as "those who differ from me in religion." But it does not follow that the story is entirely without foundation. We know that Evelyn was right about Dryden, and he may well have been right about Nell. James had been a good friend to her and he was zealous to make converts. It is quite likely that he persuaded Nell to go to Mass and to listen to the instructions of Catholic priests. If she afterwards drew back, it was not, I suspect, from any difficulty about Theology, but from that queerly tenacious loyalty to old associations which was a marked characteristic of her, as it is of the English populace from which she sprang.

Nell was still a young woman, but she had not long to live. In the prophetic words

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which she had spoken so long ago when her acting of "Florimel" first caught the eye of Charles, she was "to look young till forty and then slip out of the world with the first wrinkle." Indeed she did not live so long. She had barely passed her thirty-sixth birthday, the second anniversary of that sad birthday she had spent in Pall Mall while Charles was lingering in his last agony, when she was struck down by an illness which within a year carried her off.

Of Nell's last illness and death we know very little. It is not even certain where she was living, but it would probably have been in Pall Mall, for she was visited by Dr Lower the physician, who was a Londoner, and Dr Tenison, whose cure was St Martin's-in-the Fields. It seems almost certain that her son, now approaching manhood, was with her.

We can only gather something of her thoughts when she looked back steadily across her life, and prepared herself for the end that she knew to be near by the will which she drew up at this time. It is in some ways a remarkable document and well deserves study.







NELL GWYN

*Painted by H. Gascar*



## END OF KING'S FAVOURITE

First, after commending her soul to God and her body to the earth, she leaves all her property to her "dear natural son, his Grace the Duke of St Albans, and to the heirs of his body." She appoints as her executors Lord Rochester (not, of course, John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, who lampooned her, but Lawrence Hyde, to whom she seems to have been a good friend in the days of his early political struggles and whom Charles afterwards made a peer), Lord Pembroke, who had as a youth many years before drawn his sword at the theatre to avenge an insult offered to her, Sir Robert Sawyer, the ablest barrister of the day, and the Hon. Henry Sidney who afterwards bore a principal part in effecting the Revolution of 1689—a remarkable set of executors for one who had once cried oranges in front of the pit at Drury Lane.

Then follows the codicil which contains her requests to her son; it is worth printing in full:—

1. I desire I may be buried in the Chancel of St Martin's in-the-Fields.

2. That Dr Tenison may preach my funeral sermon.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

3. That there may be a decent pulpit cloth and cushion given to St Martin's-in-the-Fields.

4. That he (her son) would give One hundred pounds for the use of the poor of the said St Martin's and St James's, Westminster, to be given into the hands of the said Dr Tenison to be disposed at his discretion for taking any poor debtors of the said Parish out of prison, and for clothes this winter and other necessaries as he shall find most fit.

5. That for showing my charity to those who differ from me in religion, I desire that Fifty pounds may be put into the hands of Dr Tenison and Mr Warner who, taking to them any two persons of the Roman religion, may dispose of it for the use of the poor of that religion inhabiting in the Parish of St James's aforesaid.

6. That Mrs Rose Forster (her sister) may have Two hundred pounds given her, any time within a year after my decease.

7. That Jo my portermay have Ten pounds given him.

8. That my present nurses may have Ten

## END OF KING'S FAVOURITE

pounds each and mourning besides their wages due to them.

9. That my present servants may have mourning each and a year's wages besides their wages due.

10. That the Lady Fairborne may have Fifty pounds given her to buy a ring.

11. That my kinsman Mr Cholmly may have One hundred pounds given him within a year after this date.

12. That his Grace would please to lay out Twenty pounds yearly for the releasing of poor debtors out of prison every Christmas day.

13. That Mr John Warner may have Fifty pounds given him to buy a ring.

14. That the Lady Hollyman may have a pension of Ten shillings per week continued to her during the said Lady's life.

The language is of course not Nell's. She herself could barely write and the "E.G." scrawled at the end of her letters is all that remains of her caligraphy. But the bequests are undoubtedly hers and the whole document is instinct with her personality. It has often been quoted as evidence of her kind-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

ness of heart. It does show that quality, but it also shows another quality, rarer and perhaps more important. It shows real *sympathy* with the poor. And by sympathy I do not mean merely benevolence; I mean sympathy in the literal sense—a capacity for feeling *with* the poor and not merely *for* them. Nell was not only sorry for people whose shoes pinched them; she knew *where* the shoe pinched.

Note the repeated injunctions as to getting debtors out of prisons. No mere benevolent rich man would ever have thought of such a form of charity. Nellie thought of it because she *knew*. Her own father is said to have died in a debtor's prison. In the world in which her childhood was passed arrest for debt was probably the standing terror for the poor as distraint for rent is to-day. So that when I read that some philanthropist is leaving money to a hospital or a soup-kitchen it leaves me quite cold. When I find a philanthropist leaving money to pay out the bailiffs for people whose rent is unpaid I shall think him fit to rank with Nell as an example of practical charity.

## END OF KING'S FAVOURITE

Some interest attaches to the clause which sets apart some of the money expressly for the Catholic poor. Probably Nell knew many destitute Catholic families in the slums round Drury Lane where she was brought up, and she doubtless also knew how strong at that time was the prejudice against them and how small would be their chance of getting anything if the money were left unreservedly in Protestant hands. The priggish phrase about her "charity to those who differ from her in religion" is certainly her lawyer's, but the real humanity which forgets everything but the brotherhood and sisterhood of poverty is Nell's.

Among the poor who partook of her bounty her name was long remembered. Long after the last of those who had ever seen her face were dead, it remained the custom when alms were distributed at the Savoy Chapel to place near the door a plate with an orange. Learned men speculated as to the origin of this strange custom. They did not know that it was done in honour of the orange-girl, who in the days of her greatness had not forgotten the poor in their need.

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

Nell lingered on into the autumn. On November 14th she had an apoplectic seizure. Before evening she died.

Her funeral was not especially sumptuous. It cost £375 which was advanced by James for the purpose. But the Londoners remembered "their Nelly" and flocked in thousands to take farewell of her. The church was packed with the weeping populace, and there were few even among those who had never seen her face whose hearts were not moved when Nell was laid beside her old mother under the stones of St Martin's-in-the-Fields.

Dr Tenison preached her funeral sermon. We have no record of what he said; very likely the picture he drew of her would strike us as rather pale and tomb-stonish. All the same, it was brave of him to preach at all, and he did not escape without censure. Years afterwards, when he became a bishop, someone approached Queen Mary and represented to her the scandal that would ensue if the eulogist of Nell Gwyn received such an honour, Mary replied in a manner which did her credit. "I have heard as much and this is a sign that the poor unfortunate wo-

## END OF KING'S FAVOURITE

man died penitent, for, if I have read a man's heart through his looks, had she not made a truly pious end, the doctor could never have been induced to speak well of her." It may well have been so. Nell was not one of the ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance. But whether the disreputable orange-wench needed repentance more than the pious princess who stepped to a throne over her father's broken heart, I will not attempt to decide. Nell, I think, would have acted differently.

. . . . .

In English history Nell Gwyn has, properly speaking, no place. She was not one of those courtesans who have swayed the counsels of Kings or plunged nations in war. Had she never lived, the course of public events would hardly have been altered by a hair's-breadth. Yet the world would have missed something. It would have missed a figure very striking, very picturesque, and, when all is said, very lovable.

I have not in this book attempted in any way to white-wash Nell. I have not pretended that she was not—what she fre-

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

quently called herself. Neither have I tried to claim superior merit for her on that account after the modern fashion—to paint her as a super-woman, a wild and wonderful soul that could not be expected to submit to the moral conventions of lesser men and women. Had I done so I should have been trifling not only with the common and permanent moral sense of mankind (which moderns think doesn't matter) but with my subject. No one was less likely than Nell to be imposed upon by that kind of evil sophistry.

No, let us state poor Nell's sins plainly (as I have stated them), weigh them fairly, and allow for them. There will remain, if I mistake not, a sufficient balance of solid human virtue to cover them all.

Of her qualities I should place first her loyalty. Extraordinary as were the vicissitudes of her fortune, rapid and dazzling as was her rise from the gutter to the palace, she never seems to have willingly broken one tie with her past. She neither forgot her old friends nor turned against them nor patronised them; she simply remained their friend and helped them when she could,







NELL GWYN

*Painted by Sir Peter Lely; copied by J. Uwins  
engraved by T. Smeaton*



## END OF KING'S FAVOURITE

frankly, as she would under other circumstances have asked them to help her. She apparently had her mother, a drunken old orange-woman, to live with her for some time in Pall Mall under the windows of a Royal palace. Look, not at the eulogies of her, but at the lampoons on her, and notice how continually Rochester and Etherege harp upon this characteristic of hers, which seemed to them to prove her to be by nature of the gutter. It really proved a very rare and very noble quality of the soul. For the temptation to the silent betrayal of old ties with humble folk is one of the subtlest of temptations and one of the easiest to yield to. Nell never yielded to it. Look at her will, as I have quoted it above, and note how her sister, her "kinsman Mr Cholmley," the nurses who had nursed her in her illness, her servants, all those with whom she had contracted any tie are remembered.

Her second quality was truth. She was frank with herself and with others. Her very coarseness had that honesty about it ; it was a sort of humorous protest for veracity. So the populace from which she came still use

## THE STORY OF NELL GWYN

foul words for foul things, and so retain the honesty of their souls as against the intellectuals who by continually using smooth words for foul things grow to think them fair.

Finally she had charity in the original and noble sense of that word, a sense almost lost by corrupt and hypocritical use. I do not merely mean that she was good-natured or that she was fond of her friends. I mean that she was so made that she was full of a great pity for human suffering and a real and personal love for men and women as such. There is anger in her, but never spite or bitterness. She despised Monmouth, but she consented to intercede for him with Charles. If there was anyone on earth she hated it was Louise de Querouaille; yet, if Louise had sought her aid in trouble, I feel very sure that she would not have gone away empty. Her heart was always open to the simple appeal of humanity.

Such were the qualities of Nell Gwyn. It is not surprising that they made her beloved by the populace, for they are the qualities of the populace from whom she sprang. They

## END OF KING'S FAVOURITE

also have loyalty ; they grip the past with a thousand roots. They also love truth and hunger for it, though the rich and the powerful and the intellectuals would give them over to strong delusion that they might believe a lie. They also (and especially the English) have charity, not the cold official charity that curses him that gives and him that takes, but the reckless, indiscriminate charity, giving for the mere blessedness of giving, that was the glory of the great saint and that belonged also to this woman

“that was a sinner.”



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