

NELL GWYN

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In 1649, Charles I was executed. The following year, the Commonwealth Parliament introduced an Act to suppress the abominable sins of incest, adultery and fornication.

Nell Gwyn was therefore born when prostitution and infidelity were outlawed, when such offenders and adulterers were indelibly marked as sex offenders.

She was born on Saturday, 2 February 1650. It is believed that her father was Thomas Gwine an antecedent of a respected family in Wales. Thomas married Eleanour Smith and had two daughters, Rose, who was born in 1648, and Eleanour whom we know as Nell.

Thomas was thought to be a captain in the King's army and was, therefore, a royalist. But with the execution of the king, he and his wife were regarded as enemies. It is believed that they lived in Coal Yard Alley off Drury Lane which was then in Middlesex. Great building plans were instituted at this time and when Nell was eight the 'West End' came into being with splendid houses, such as those in Pall Mall for those of noble birth.

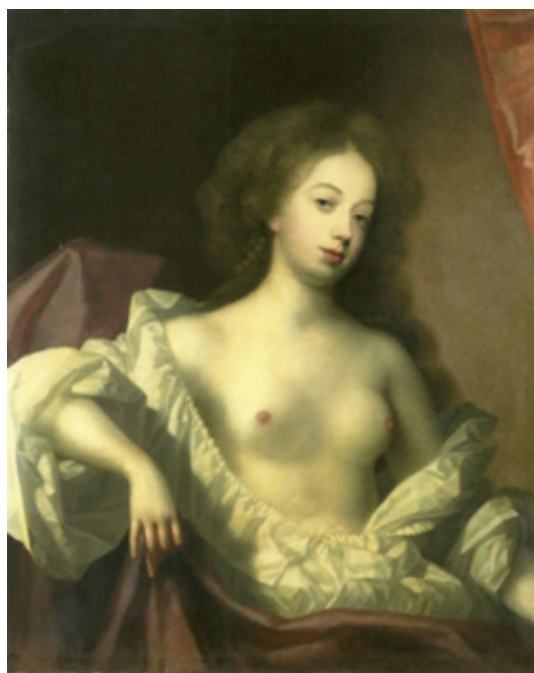
Coal Yard Alley was not a pleasant place. The area was overcrowded, the roads were narrow and often dark where sewage and pestilence reigned. The air was always polluted with smells and with the smoke of coal fires as well as the smoke of furnaces from brewers and dyers. There were traffic jams in those days and other inconveniences.

Charles II was born in May 1630 and took the throne on 28 May 1660. He had a serious addiction to sex. In 1645, he was apparently seduced by Christabelle Wyndham. The following year, Lucy Walter became his mistress and on 9 April 1640, their son was born who was to become the Duke of Monmouth. In the year of his succession to the throne, Charles took a married woman Barbara Palmer (nee Villiers) to be his mistress and they had a daughter, Anne, the following year. The husband, Roger Palmer, became a noble and told not to object to his wife being a mistress of the king, and Barbara became Lady Castlemaine.

The king was a rake and a libertine. He took no notice of the Act of Parliament to suppress illicit sex. He opened the Kings Theatre and other theatres. Although he had had several mistresses, he married Catherine of Branganza on 21 May 1662.

Nell, like many children, was fascinated with the king regarding him as a celebrity and someone to be worshipped. There are many women all over the world who fancy British princes and would love to become a mistress to one or more of them.

In 1662, illiterate Nell had a lover, a Mr Duncan, who was described as a merchant. He was a regular customer at Madam Ross's bawdy house. Duncan provided Nell with rooms at the Cock and Pie Tavern and bought her clothes and other luxuries.



By 1663, when Nell was only thirteen, she became the mistress of both Charles Hart, an actor, and John Lacy, another actor who specialised in comedy. She was a child prostitute and these two actors were guilty of underage sex. She was now an orange seller in a theatre run by one Thomas Killigrew. She once said that she was brought up in a bawdy house and that is why she was a whore. Her new lodgings were at the Cat and Fiddle in Lewkenor's Lane.

Was she more sinned against than sinned to quote from King Lear.

The next woman to captivate the king was Frances Stuart. Actually she was merely a girl of fifteen. She was French and a lady in waiting to the Queen. She was said to be the prettiest girl in the world and her beauty still lives on as does her reputation as La Belle Stuart.

By July 1667 Nell had become the mistress of both Lord Buckhurst and Sir Charles Sedley. Both were members of a group known as 'The Wits'. Buckhurst was violent and foul-mouthed. Sedley was known as 'Little Sid' and the author of some plays and poetry some of which Henry Purcell put to music. Sedley was also objectionable. Both these men, along with Sir Thomas Ogle, were involved in a drunken prank in Covent Garden one evening when they were shouting pornographic verse from a balcony. A crowd gathered. Sedley stripped and urinated on the crowd who threw bricks at him. Sedley was fined £500 but this was not the first prank or the last which they engineered.

As it has been made obvious the king was promiscuous and this example was followed by his Court. These were days of extreme permissiveness and gross immorality.

The Royal Court moved to Tunbridge Wells in 1667 and the king took another mistress, Mall Davis, another actress. She was a child actress in 1662 and, therefore, still very young.

The year 1667 was a momentous one. The king made a treaty with Louis XIV of France making two Catholic nations against Protestant Holland. But the interest here was not so much the treaty, but because Charles wanted sex with Louise Rene de Penancoet de Keroualle who, at one time destined to be the mistress of Louis XIV. Louise became a maid-of-honour to Henriette-Anne, the king's sister as did Mlle de la Valliere to whom the king now gave preference.

The Dutch under Admiral Michael De Ruyter attacked shipping in the Thames. For many years there had been commercial rivalry between the Dutch and England which was considered likely to escalate into war. In fact, earlier in the summer of 1650, war had broken out between the Commonwealth of England and the Dutch. Charles II, not yet king for another eight years, offered support to the Dutch against the Commonwealth of England obviously with the view that the defeat of the Commonwealth would re-institute the monarchy with him as a king.

Charles was a Catholic and the English Commonwealth was Protestant, had links with the minority of Dutch Calvinists. Nonetheless, Charles had neither army nor ships of any significance to render any service to the Dutch to defeat the English Commonwealth. Consequently, Charles began to bitterly dislike the Dutch and when William III of the House of Orange (born 1650) indicated that he would pursue his rightful claim to the English throne, being of the Stuart succession by marriage. Charles II was determined to thwart the House of Orange.

Charles also hated the Scots because of their Presbyterianism. He also antagonised the Irish with unfair land settlements and yet the Southern Irish were Catholic as was the king. But Charles's Catholicism was neither spiritual nor religious but political, the politics of power. When people today assert that religion is the cause of many wars the facts are that it is power-politics which is the cause of most wars. True religion is peaceful, the 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you', and the policy of leaving at peace with everyone as far as it is possible. True religion is honouring God and all men.

And the Irish in Northern Ireland were converting to Protestantism influenced by the Scottish Covenanters.

All through centuries of history, Catholic monarchs have dreaded Protestantism as a political threat.

But to return to 1668, when Nell became the mistress of Charles II. It would appear that he saw her in a play and the story goes that Mall Davies had an appointment with the king one night but Nell spiked her drink with an emetic with immediate and dire consequences.



The king was obsessed with beauty and therefore with Nell. Nell was not respectable. But she had a smart little face, pert breasts and a slim body. Her eyebrows were slightly raised and she usually had a quizzical look. As an actress, she would have no objection to being painted in the nude and there is Sir Peter Lely's famous painting of her lying naked on a bed with her infant son, later to become the Duke of St Albans, playing with the white sheet covering her genitals as though to naughtily whisk it away.

In 1670, Charles met Louise de Keroualle and on 8 May, Nell gave birth to the king's son, Charles, later to be the aforesaid Duke of St Albans. Lady Castlemaine was given a new title, the Duchess of Cleveland and, later that year, was entitled Baroness Nonesuch. Of greater interest is the fact that John Dryden was made Poet Laureate.

Nell Gwyn retired from the stage in 1671 and moved to 79 Pall Mall and, on Christmas Day, she gave birth to James Beauclerk her second son by the king.

Charles II's liaison with Louise de Keroualle resulted in her giving birth to Charles Lennox, another bastard son of the king. This was on 29 July 1672. As with the king's previous lovers, she entered into another affair, this time with the playwright Sir William Wychereley and the following year, 1673, his play, *The Country Wife* was premiered.

The year was momentous since England declared war on Holland and the English were aided by the French and so the Dutch were outnumbered. Parliament passed the Test Act which excluded Roman Catholics from holding any office under the Crown and the king was furious. Every holder of a crown or state office had to take communion in the Church of England.

The king said that all Protestants were moralists and judgmental. But, at times, he had to concede to the decisions of Parliament. The nonsensical tenet of the Divine Right of Kings was fast diminishing. Bunyan was put into prison because he did not have a licence to preach!

The disgust at permissiveness did not deter the King. In 1675, Hortense Mancini, the Duchess of Mazarin, arrived in London and soon became the Kings' mistress.

In 1677, the Popish Plot was hatched. It seems to have originated with Titus Oates an Anglican priest who asserted that Roman Catholics wanted to assassinate the King and to place his brother on the throne. There was a lot of controversy as to the religious position of the said Duke of York. Of course, this was treasonable but the small group of plotters engendered mass hysteria on a grand scale. In



simple terms, the issue was to remove Charles who was a degenerate Catholic in favour of his brother who was said to be a more honourable Catholic. To add to the confusion, the Duke of York's eldest daughter had married William of Orange and thereby established some claim to the British throne. The Duke of York was Catholic but William of Orange was a Protestant. It is the intermarrying of royal houses which has led to many of the conflicts and wars between nations.

Oates and a man named Israel Tongue circulated a vivid account of this alleged assassination plot. Terror struck London and Oates was initially considered a hero for his exposing of this so-called plot. But he went too far and accused the Queen of wanting to poison her husband because of all the affairs he had had, but Oates's treachery was eventually discovered and he was thrown in prison.

But the plotters still continued with this story and many Jesuit priests were brought to trial accused with the Queen of trying to poison the King. They were acquitted and it seems that the King and Queen were drawn together in this adversity.

The Earl of Danby was the king's chief minister and did his utmost to dispel all these assassination plots but since he encouraged the Duke of York's daughter to marry William of Orange and, thereby, to some extent, unify Catholics and Protestants, some suspicion fell on him. He had also recommended closer ties with France for financial reasons of which the king approved. The objection was that Danby's negotiating with France was secret and furtive and without the knowledge of Parliament who now voted to impeach him.

A friend of Nell Gwyn, one Aphra Behn produced his play *The Rover* in 1677. In a previous play of his, Nell, who had only been acting for a few months, displayed her breasts. This sort of sexual display was common in the theatres of the day which is why theatres were so popular with the King and with normal red-blooded men. In Dryden's *The Rival Ladies* of 1664, two women who are disguised as pages narrowly escape being stripped by robbers and, when faced with a duel, escape this by revealing their breasts and therefore their womanhood. The theatre was decadent in those days.

The first of the great English composers, Henry Purcell was appointed organist of Westminster Cathedral in 1677.

By 1678, the persecution of Roman Catholics reached its height. Peter Talbot was the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin and was named as the 'new villain' and all Catholics were the subject of a smear campaign. The Archbishop died in prison that year. It was stated that the King's brother, the Duke of York, had deliberately started the Great Fire of London in 1666 and that Papists ravished Protestant women and their female children committing all sorts of sexual atrocities and bashing out the brains of other Protestants. These stories were apocryphal.

On 29 July 1679, Nell's mother died. It seems that she had become a dipsomaniac and, in a drunken state, fell into a ditch of water and drowned. Some say it was her own fishpond.

Within a year, Nell became seriously ill and her younger son Lord James Beauclerk died. He was nine years old and the cause of his death was never revealed. It was said to be because of a 'bad leg.' Nell thought that Louise had had him poisoned. The king was somewhat distressed and, a year later, gave Nell a present of Burford House, Windsor. Two years later her surviving son was made the Duke of St Albans

Charles II must have suffered from venereal disease. Louise had it and saw Dr Frazier the specialist on sexually transmitted diseases. It was also said that Nell's illness was syphilis although it was a stroke following an increase of blood pressure that eventually killed her. Venereal disease accounted for the deaths of many adulterers, fornicators and prostitutes of the time and for over a century to come. The composer, Franz Schubert was a grossly immoral man and died of syphilis.

Over Christmas 1684, Nell gave her usual party and the King was in attendance. He did not join in the dancing and he did not look well. Apparently, he had an ulcerated leg. Despite his profligate lifestyle he still went to chapel presumably believing that God would overlook all his indiscretions and, on one such occasion, on 1 February 1685, after attending chapel he had difficulty speaking and tried to talk about what to give Nell for her birthday. He slept badly and later collapsed. In response to his brother, he asked for a priest who heard his confession and administered the last rites. Five of his illegitimate sons visited him. The queen was greatly distressed at his suffering. He died on 6 February around midday.

Two and half years later on 14 November 1687, Nell died. She had been told that she was dying and had made a will and added a codicil on 18 October. Whether her seventeen year old son, the Duke of St Albans visited her we do not know as he had enlisted in the Imperial Army. Nell, known as the Protestant Whore, was only thirty seven when she died.

Her funeral took place on 17 November at St Martins, which was packed as were the streets. Nell had been very generous and a benefactor to many. Dr Thomas Tenison read from Luke 15 about the lost sheep from the flock of 100 and of the joy in Heaven over one sinner that repents.

Was she more sinned against than a sinner?

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