NOBLE AND IGNOBLE:

LIFE AT THE RESTORATION COURT

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May 25, 1660 was a lovely spring day; the sun was bright and warm. It seemed a good omen for England--and for Charles Stuart. After years of hardship, intrigue, and blasted hopes, after more than a decade in exile from cromwellian, revolutionay England, he was returning to his people as a symbol of monarchy, of tradition, of stability, and of peace. The speeches made that afternoon, honoring the young king, held an undertone of thankful relief; the uncertainty and the chaos of the preceeding years were over and a new era had begun.

Perhaps Englishmen everywhere were happy, perhaps not--the mood of a nation is impossible to guage. But the traditional upper classes, especially their younger members, were relieved that Cromwell and the Revolution were gone. The Restoration was like some royal footman opening the doors of Whitehall to the surging influx of a new age and Lord and Baronet entered to seek the inner sanctuary..

Whitehall, the London residence of the Stuarts, crouched uncomfortably against the feculent Thames Estuary, where "It lay for nearly a mile beside the river, a warren of galleries, apartments and gardens, the home not only of the King, but of the ministers of state, servants high and low, courtiers, chaplains, ladies and all the gilded army which encompassed the English throne." [1] Within this "vast nest of chambers and offices" a man could devote himeself to business, pleasure, or gossip.[2] Here, Charles made love to his mistresses or glowered over his chemistry, treaties were made and broken, courtiers strolled, imparting to avid listeners the latest Court scandal.

For the first time in a generation English court life was vibrant and exciting, and the Restoration court at Whitehall became a symbol of aristocratic exuberance and decadence. Spas and sports, games and gambling, cards galore, a constant search for romance were its general themes, and the highest attribute was to be witty in

the play. It did not matter so much whether you won or lost, so long as you did it with elan.

Take dancing for example, In earlier days dancing had usually been a solemn affair requiring as much gravity as grace. The slow convolutions of formal twirls and bows now changed to the wild exuberance of a reel. As an evening of dancing progressed, even the footmen might take part in the pandemonium, while the strumming beat of fiddles exulted over the cooling tones of the wind instruments.[3] As dancing now required less and less training, more people enjoyed it. Music became a keynote of the Restoration and the guitar became a fashionable instrument for exquisite courtiers.[4]

Somewhere below dancing in popularity was the theater. Two elegant playhouses opened, the King's House and the Duke's House, "whose audiences were drawn chiefly from the Court and the smart young folk of the western faubourgs." [5] A usual plot revolved around sensual, earthy love, but Samuel Pepys, the diarist and inveterate theater-goer, saw a number of Shakespeare's and even Ben Johnson's works. At times a play's real worth was unimportant, however, because it was a duty of a gallant to be seen as well as to see. There must have been occasions when more action was going on in the audience than on stage. During performances oranges were sold to spectators by vendors like Orange Moll, and one of pleasanter pastimes of the audience seems to have been teasing her and pinching her bottom. Talking during plays was also common. Pepys described how he was once so fascinated with a coy by-play in the galleries that he "lost the pleasure of the play wholly." [6] A subsidiary of the theater were increasingly popular marionette shows. Charles II one day scandalized traditionalists by charging admission to one such performance given at the palace.[7]

After a play the noble audience normally returned to other amusements. If an affair of the heart was not in progress, evening might be spent in gaming. They might play hazard, verghese, tick-tack, tric-trac, draughts, Irish backgammon, shovelboard, or billiards. But card games were most popular. There was cribbage, a two-handed game, easily used for romancing, and basset so expensive it was played

primarily by royalty. There was angel-beast and langitroo and gleek and ombre and whist. The "Groom Porter's," named for the official in charge of the royal gaming tables, was the major center of fashionable gaming, for it was known as a relatively honest oasis in an age of gross cheating. Gambling in fact permeated every aspect of life. Charles II raced his yachts on the Thames and frequently bet on the results;[8] men sometimes wagered on whether they could seduce this or that lady.

Another diversion required a junket to Bath or Tunbridge. The warm water was supposed to invigorate tired bodies, and, if taken internally, to lift the spirits. Close to the spa at Tunbridge Wells were bowling greens and shaded walks for those who did not care to try the sulpherous waters. Catherine of Braganza, the Queen, came here originally to cure her sterility,[9] but she created a vogue, and all classes of people rushed to the soothing springs where they dressed themselves in awkward outfits before immersion. An observer related how "the Ladyes goes into the bath with garments made of a fine yellow canvas, which is stiff and made large with great sleeves like a parsons gown, the water fills it up so that its borne off that your shape is not seen . . . the Gentlemen have drawers and wastcoates of that same sort of canvas." [10]

Not all the court's amusements were so sedentary. Some tried outdoor sports like quiet coach rides round and round the Ring in Hyde Park, or indoor tussles like pillow fights. There was a game called pall mall similar to croquet usually played on the Mall itself, and others like bowls and nine-pins. Ice skating from Holland became popular, and soon courtiers could be seen gliding across the ice of the Park's lagoons. Tennis was also fashionable. Charles II once lost four and a half pounds playing it,[11] and in 1679 he nearly died of a chill following a match.[12] While hawking declined in popularity,[13] hunting was still sport for the social elite. To make sure it remained a pastime strictly of the upper classes, the government passed a law in 1671, limiting hunting to the nobility and the very wealthy.[14] Fox hunting became a fad because so many deer were exterminated during the Civil Wars, but the commonest of hunts was the hare-chase.[15]

Pleasure was the keystone to the period, and of all diversions and amusements

romance ranked highest. Charles II, the most notorious court lover, married very early in his reign, but Catherine was not the most ravishing of creatures, and Charles II had an eye for beauty. He described his wife thus: "her face is not so exact as to be caled a beuty though her eyes are excellent good, and not anything in her face that in the last degree can shoque one."[16] Evelyn, a contemporary diarist, saw her in somewhat the same way, noting that "She was yet of the handsomest countenance of all the rest (of her entourage), and though less of stature, prettily shaped, languishing and excellent eyes, her teeth a little too far out; for the rest lovely enough." [17] In an age when royalty was normally described in terms of polite exaggeration, this was indeed damnation by faint praise. The story told by some historians that Charles II spent his first night on English soil in the arms of Lady Castlemaine is probably aprocryphal, but Charles did devote more time to her than to his unfortunate wife. At first Catherine, who had fallen deeply in love with her dashing husband, was miserable and angry when he strayed, but eventually became inured to the situation. In fact Lady Castlemaine was more possessive. One day, when this coutesan discovered the King was dallying with an actress named Moll Davis, she became so infuriated she decided to revenge herself on her philandering lover and encouraged advances from one of her many admirers.[18] In spite of all she could do, however, she could not control the nocturnal proclivites of her royal swain.

It is impossible to list all of Charles's loves: suffice it to say the numbers are a strong indication the king had a healthy constitution, and the very variety is proof he was no snob. Nell Gwynn, "the indiscreetest and wildest creature that ever was in a court," was literally a prostitute.[19] She had had so many lovers that she was cheerfully able to call the King, "Charles the third," since she had already enjoyed two previous gentlemen with that name.[20]

Charles's peccadillos were expensive. When he first approached Nell Gwynn as a prospective royal mistress, she asked for F500 a year. Charles refused. But within four years she accumulated F60,000 from the royal coffers.[21] This type of relationship was not even necessarily terminal, for long after the bloom of youth

had faded from a painted cheek, a courtesan might well expect a handsome income from her still-indulgent royal paramour.[22]

The Caroline Court took its cue from the Stuarts. A friend advised Francis North, a sober lawyer, to "keep a whore," because "he was ill looked upon for want of doing so." [23] Even the virginal ladies-in-waiting to Catherine of Braganza "learnt to kiss and look freely up and down." [24] Sir William Temple wrote an interesting letter to an acquaintance visiting England and forced to endure crowded lodging.

> I believe the Crowd is so great at present in every House, that you will hardly find an opportunity of making Love to your Landlady: But, Sir, you must have a little Patience, and not think of succeeding in all Amours, at the rate you did with Mademoiselle Isabella; besides, if you remember, it cost you dear enough then, by the Fright you were in, of losing your great Diamond. Love, like other things is good for nothing when one makes too much haste in it; and our English Ladies don't care that Men should be over violent in beginning this Game, for fear they should be so in concluding it.[25]

At times striving for romance must have gotton out of hand, for one afternoon Charles II found young Jack Churchill in a compromising position with the Duchess of Cleveland, one of the royal favorites. Poor Churchill was so frightened on seeing his king that he leapt from the window without his pants.[26]

Yet, despite the gaming and the loving, a certain ceremoniousness structured court life. The rituals of the coronation were permeated with stiff tradition, and sometimes, when Charles had public business outside Whitehall, he was preceded by kettle-drums and trumpets.[27] Probably the commonest display of royalty was the noon meal through which Charles was forced to suffer. He dined in state, sitting alone at the Great Table, while the Lords of the Household (men like the octogenarian Thomas Howard, earl of Berkshire) served him.[28] Here he was on display to the massed galleries which crowded in Whitehall to see their king masticate his dinner.

The Restoration brought with it the winds of change already rustling the chateaux of France, and court etiquette could be quite rigid.[29] Antoine de Courtin, a French emissary in early Restoration days, wrote a handbook on French etiquette which became a rage in English higher circles. Earlier etiquette books had devoted

much space to what it was making a man "noble;" Courtin gave practical advice--the specific act to perform at a particular moment.

Some rules seem not only strict but rather strange. Let us imagine you wish to enter the house of a superior. You knock softly, but only once. And after the footman lets you inside and escorts you to your superior's chamber, you scratch at the door with the little finger of your left hand. If you find you have to wait until the great man arrives and you are standing in a room where a picture of him glares down on you, whip off your hat and face the wall where the picture hangs. When you finally meet the great lord and he has something he wishes to hand you, do not be so boorish as merely to take it from him. Instead, take off your glove, kiss your own hand, and then and only then you may receive it. Perhaps he may allow you to sit, but you must be sure you do not directly face him - turn slightly askew instead.

Some other rules appear to be more diplomacy than etiquette, and they indicate at least a few of Courtin's readers were quite unprepared for social contact. For instance, you should not fall asleep while someone else is talking. You should also not "pull him by the buttons, bandstrings or belt, and worst of all punch him on the stomach."[30] Never say things which might make other uncomfortable - like "Good God, how ill-favourdly you look!" - or, to a lady who wishes to be thought of as young, "Lord, Madam, what a while it is since I had the honour to know your Ladyship first!" Be especially sure to forego sentences like, "I knew her (so and so) well, she is fat and swarthy, like your Ladyship."[31]

Most etiquette is acclimated to its own society, so it is important to recognize that Courtin was writing for French readers. The kind of "civility" common at the court of Charles II had been polished in Burgundy in the fifteenth century, had wended its way to the Spanish Court in the next century, had meandered to the Bourbon Court of France, and finally, with the return of Charles II to England, had become entrenched there. Each different nation took only the basic skeleton and added its own national heritage. In Spain court etiquette was so formal it took years for a courtier to prepare himself to be presented at court. The French

were quite contemptuous of this rigid Hapsburg etiquette, and they added a definite gallican flavor loosening it considerable. Charles II, imbued on the continent with this type of deportment, diluted it even more with his own natural affability. The Anglo-French etiquette of the Restoration Court was freer than in many other countries of Europe, due as much to the personality of the English sovereign as to the ideals of the English upper classes.

England imported more than etiquette from Paris and Versailles. And English courter's clothing styles were of course based upon their king's, and Charles dressed in the French manner. It was a day when the clothing one wore was often more important than character or intelligence. Antoine de Courtin insisted that one must <u>always</u> dress according to fashion, for "to the sovereignty of the fashion, all reason and fancy must submit." [32] Many extravagant baroque styles glittering the court of Louis XIV started to appear in England. Mrs. Pepys began to wear a small black patch on her cheek; soon she was wearing two or three at a time. Her husband also emulated the latest fashion, and though at first he only hesitantly dressed himself in a periwig, he soon grew quite fond of them.[33]

An amusing incident occurred once when Charles II decided to reduce general expenses. Since England was at war with France, it seemed both prudent and patriotic to boycott French fashions. He required his court to dress in "a long cassocke close to the body, or black cloth, and pinked with white silke under it, and a coat over it, and the legs ruffled with black riband like a pigeon's leg." [34] But when Louis XIV retaliated and dressed his own footmen in apparel like that of the English courtiers, the anger of the English court was awesome. They accused the French king of being the greatest blackguard in history.[35] Significantly, English fashions soon returned to their old ways.

Did members of the court ever speculate about their own nature or the supernatural? Were courtiers ever tortured by self-consciousness as were humanists like Petrarch or Donne? When the day-to-day round of entertainment palled into drudgery, did Buckingham or Castlemaine ever analyze their lives and confound their existence with pangs of guilt? Probably not. Some courtiers of course were torn

between Christian ideals and the "outer man," but the written record of the court shows little evidence of genuine and profound self-analysis. Great and moving questions bemusing humanistic philosophers in a Christian world did not cast much shadow across the lusty Caroline court; religious piety was not its common characteristic. The ideal courtier of even Gilbert Burnet, a man of older more sedate manners, was "decent even in his vices, for he always kept up the forms of religion." Keeping up "forms of religion" is hardly real devotion. And Pepys, fairly uncontaminated by the sensuality of the court, who almost always went to church on a Sunday to listen to the preachings of Mr. Mills, could not forebear sleeping during the sermon.[37] If Pepys succombed to the ravages of a Saturday night, it is not surprising to discover that Charles II occasionally drowsed in church. Once, during what must have been a particularly dreary sermon, the preacher asked a nobleman to stop snoring during the lesson, because "you snore so loud you will wake the king."[38] Charles II, though nominal leader of the Anglican Church, was not terribly impressed by religion. He once told someone that "he could not think God would make a man miserable only for taking a little pleasure out of the way."[39]

To the puritanical spirit of men like Burnet and even Pepys the extravagant behavior of the courtiers seemed more like decadence than exuberance. Pepys' Diary is filled with disparaging remarks about the Court. During the early days of the Restoration Pepys, the young bureaucrat, could not seem to slake his curiosity of this brillant society, but by 1666 he had grown more accustomed to it and was ready to pronounce it "A sad, vicious, negligent Court."[40] Others felt the same. One day after a conversation with a friend, the Treasurer of the duke of York, Pepys wrote, "I had some discourse with Povy, who is mightily discontented I find about his disappointments at Court, and says of all places, if there be Hell, it is here. No faith, no truth, no love, nor any agreement between man and wife, nor friends."[41]

To a man of strict morality and pride, the court might well be deplorable. To rise at court one not only had to be pleasant but also be prepared to cajole one's betters by any means at hand--even pimping. The ability to flatter was a necessary characteristic of a good courtier. One of the easiest routes to position

lay in royal recognition, and what simpler way of attaining this end could be found than in fawning unctuousness? Lord Halifax bitterly remarked that "The Court may be said to be a company of well-bred fashionable Beggars. A Man who will rise at Court must begin by creeping on all fours; a Place at Court, like a Place in Heaven, is to be got by being much on one's knees."[42]

The Restoration Court, as a recognizable and decipherable entity, began to lose its character in the autumn years of Charles's reign. Somewhere in the agony of half-forgotton hopes or in the chilly realization of advancing age, Charles II and his court began to grow past their young and careless days, but they left a wafting aroma of romance. Yet, in many ways they were not that different from other Englishmen, for the "puritanical" instinct was becoming outmoded everywhere in an age beginning to turn its back on Old Testament postulates to grasp more readily the offerings of a fruitful commerce and a rapidly changing society. Both courtier and layman wanted riches, fame, and power, and the courtier had striven to achieve his ambitions in his own way.

The court of Charles II was not an evil or even a decadent community. Few there could be called depraved, and fewer still were cruel or sadistic. There is, on the other hand, nothing particularly admirable about most of them. Some made contributions to thought or culture; some were brave and noble; some were even outstanding in their own way. The great majority, however were only interested in the veneer of life; to enjoy themselves seemed the only criterion of their existence.

But even after all the sorry episodes are taken into account, after all the sins are engraved on the balance sheet of history, it must be said that the members of the Restoration Court were more thoughtless than bad. There is something appealing about this epoch--something like an exuberant, if slightly naughty, little boy.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Arthur Bryant, Charles II (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1931). p. 103.

[2]Quoted by John Beresford, Gossip of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), p. 135, from Besant's Survey of London North of the Thames.

[3]William Connor Sydney, Social Life in England (London: Ward and Downey, 1892), pp. 377-381. Also, Samuel Pepys, The Diary of Samuel Pepys, edited by O. F. Morshead (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), pp. 73-74, 188.

[4]Sydney, p. 384.

[5]Bryant, p. 141.

[6]Pepys, p. 368.

[7]Sydney, p. 369.

[8]Philip Cowburn, "Charles II's Yachts," History Today, XII (April, 1962), p. 259.

[9]Celia Fiennes, The Journeys of Celia Fiennes, edited by Christopher Morris (London: Cresset Press, 1949), p. xxvii.

[10]Ibid., p. 19.

[11]Bryant, p. 420.

[12]Ibid., p. 292.

[13]Gladys Scott Thomson, Life in a Noble Household, 1641-1700 (London: Jonathon Cape, 1937), p. 227.

[14]Chester Kirby, "The English Game Law System," American Historical Review, XXXVIII (January, 1933), p. 241.

[15]Georgw Macaulay Trevelyan, Illustrated English Social History, (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1950), II, 138.

[16]C. R. Boxer, "The Anglo-Portuguese Marriage Treaty of 1661," History Today, XI (August, 1961), p. 550.

[17]Quoted in Sydney, p. 377.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

[19] Gilbert Burnet, *History of My Own Times,* edited by Osmund Airy from the edition of M.J. Routh (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1897), I, 474.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 475.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Bryant, p. 201. It is interesting that at the same time that women like Lady Castlemaine were parading themselves in their finest jewelry, Whitehall found itself short on linen, and the ostensible reason for this was that the grooms were filching them to settle arrears. Pepys, p. 420.

[23] Quoted in John Harold Wilson, *The Court Wits of the Restoration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 26n.

[24] Pepys, p. 114.

[25] Sir William Temple, *Letters* (London: Jonathan Swift, 1700), I, p. 16-17.

[26] Burnet, I, 475. This immorality, however, had to come to an end sooner or later. It even began to subside somewhat during the reign of Charles II. Finally, in 1689 William of Orange ordered the bishops to preach against immoral conduct, and in 1692 several men were organized into the "Society of the Reformation of Manners." Mary Bateson, "Social Life," *The Building of Britain and the Empire,* edited by H.D. Traill and J.S. Mann (London: The Waverly Book Company, 1909), IV, 807-08.

[27] Pepys, p. 436.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 315.

[29] There are a number of arguments concerning the real character of Restoration class restrictions. David Ogg, *England in the Reign of Charles II* (2nd ed. ; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), I, 138-39, believes that etiquette was loose. A very persuasive if somewhat incomplete essay which takes the opposite tack is -G.N. Clark's "The Social Foundations of States," *The New Cambridge Modern History* ed. F.L. Carsten (Cambridge: The University Press, 1961), V, 176-97.

[30] Antoine de Courtin, *The Rules of Civility: or Certain ways of Deportment amongst all persons of quality upon several occasions* (rev. ed. ; London:

R. Chifwell, T. Sawbridge, G. Wells and R. Bently, 1685), p. 1. This book is supposedly an educational pamphlet for the son of a friend who is about to go from Provence to the French court and who needs directions on how to behave.

[31]Ibid., pp. 62, 41-42, 30.

[32]Ibid., pp. 79-80.

[33]Pepys, p. 56.

[34]Ibid., pp. 348-50.

[35]Ibid., p. 341.

[36]Burnet, I, 170.

[37]Pepys, p. 392.

[38]Quoted in Bryant, p. 106, from Ady's Diary of February 28, 1666.

[39]Burnet, I, 166.

[40]Pepys, p. 356. It is interesting to note that Burnet wrote almost the same thing when he described "the viciousness of the whole court." Burnet, I, 391

[41]Pepys, p. 316. Much of this statement can be put down to the fact that Povy was not receiving the rewards which he thought he deserved.

[42]Quoted in Mary Coate, Social Life in Stuart England (London: Methuen and Company, 1924), pp. 72-73.

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He consideres it merely an example of a certain type of graduate essay. Although he edited it slightly for this issue, it retains much of its original flavor--good and bad. The teacher gave him an A for it, and made the following comments; "Interesting, if unoriginal," "should have used more primary sources;" "good use of footnote form."