

## Merry Monarch First saw her in Dover

*Contributed by Terry Sutton*

HE FIRST SET EYES on her on a cold rainy day in Dover in May. His desire for her knew no ends and, over the years, she was to become his mistress, a life-long friend, and possibly a French spy.

Charles II was in Dover in May 1670 to meet his sister Henriette Anne, who had just arrived from the royal court of France. They had not seen each other for years and the brother and sister affection was obvious to both the English and the French, as well as to the humble Dover citizens able to watch the scene. But Charles II, for all the joy of welcoming his sister, espied an attractive, baby-faced, lady-in-waiting among her entourage.

Louise de Keroualle was only about 16 but Charles soon had plans for her. At first Henriette Anne, who knew her brother's appetite for women, warned Charles off. She was responsible to the girl's parents and Louise's honour was a sacred trust.

The meeting between the royals was a smokescreen for the signing of the Secret Treaty of Dover, (about which our vice chairman Derek Leach is an expert). French diplomats were not slow to notice where Charles eyes had strayed and, in time, Louise was enticed back to England. She was told that Charles' marriage was on the rocks and, if she played her cards right, she could become the next Queen of England. Charles liked the encouragement she received. Louise was poor and ambitious. She accepted the challenge to visit England and Charles planned that this beautiful girl should get a post as lady-in-waiting to his wife, Queen Catherine. The court watched fascinated as the infatuated king pursued the girl who would not yield to his charms. Bets were laid on both sides of the Channel on how long it would be before Charles bedded her.

The French were delighted. They

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believed they had found someone who could betray England's secrets, learnt through pillow talk. The French ambassador, backed by Louis XIV, put pressure on the girl to surrender her honour for the sake of France. It was even suggested to Louise that the alternative was to become a nun. The outcome was not surprising. With plotting the order of the day, a mock rustic play was organised focusing on a wedding with Louise the bride and Charles the groom. The audience withdrew as the mock married couple retired to bed on their "honeymoon" night. Nine months later Louise gave birth to a son who Charles recognised as his own and created Duke of Richmond.

Over the years Louise's regular visits to Charles' bed was made well worth while. She received gifts worth thousands of pounds, even a pension. She was created Duchess of Portsmouth with the added titles of Countess of Fareham and Baroness Petersfield. Charles' other mistresses were annoyed. Nell Gwynn, with all her cockney sting, regularly took the mickey out of her.

Louise was deeply unpopular in England - not surprising considering her cost to the country - and a writ alleging high treason was offered to the House of Commons. "She's a foreign whore," was the view of those submitting the writ.

Whether Louise ever did betray Charles' secrets is debatable but it is known they remained friends for the rest of his life. She is said to have brought him the greatest happiness. She was there in 1685, outside his bedchamber, the day he died while Queen Caroline collapsed with grief by his bedside. On his deathbed Charles converted to Catholicism and begged his brother to look after Louise and 'not let poor Nelly (Gwynn) starve.' It is recorded Charles had seven official mistresses who provided him with 12 illegitimate children. Lady Castlemain was the mother of five of them, Nell Gwynn of two and Louise of one.

*Sources: Royal Survivor (Stephen Coote)  
Mistresses of Charles II (Brian Masters)  
Evelyn and Pepys' Diaries.*