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Eclipse

Nicholas Clee

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Prologue

GO TO THE RACES, anywhere in the world, and you'll be watching horses who are relatives of Eclipse. The vast majority of them are descended from Eclipse's male line; if you trace back their ancestry through their fathers, their fathers' fathers, and so on, you come, some twenty generations back, to him. He is the most influential stallion in the history of the Thoroughbred. Two and a half centuries after his imperious, undefeated career, he remains the undisputed paragon of his sport.

The story of this career begins on a spring morning in 1769, at a trial on Epsom Downs. Scorching across the turf towards a small group of spectators is a chestnut with a white blaze. Toiling in his wake is a single rival, who will never catch him – not if they race to the ends of the earth.

Among the witnesses at this awe-inspiring display are two men who, according to the tradition of the Sport of Kings, should not be associated with the horse who will become its greatest exponent. One, Eclipse's owner, is a meat salesman, William Wildman. The second, who wants to own Eclipse, is an Irish adventurer and gambler.

Dennis O'Kelly arrived in London some twenty years earlier, full of energy and optimism and ambition. He has had his ups

and downs, including an affair with a titled lady and a spell in prison, but at last – thanks to his gambling abilities and to the remarkable success of his companion, the leading brothel madam of the day – he is starting to rise in the world.

What Dennis does not know is that certain sections of the establishment will never accept him. What he does know, as with quickening pulse he follows the progress of the speeding chestnut, is that this horse is his destiny.

1



The Chairman

LONDON, 1748. The capital is home to some 650,000 inhabitants, more than 10 per cent of the population of England. What image of Georgian metropolitan life comes to mind? You may have a Canaletto-inspired view of an elegant square. Bewigged men and women with hooped skirts are strolling; there are a few carriages, and perhaps a wagon; the gardens are trim; the houses are stately. Or you may be picturing the London of Hogarth. The street is teeming, and riotous: drunks lie in the gutter, spewing; dogs and pickpockets weave among the crowd; through a window, you can see a prostitute entertaining her client; from the window above, someone is tipping out the contents of a chamber pot.

Both images are truthful.[1] London is a sophisticated city of fashion, an anarchic city of vice, and other cities too. In the West End are the titled, the wealthy, and the ton (the smart set); in the City are the financiers, merchants and craftsmen; prostitutes and theatre folk congregate in Covent Garden; north of Covent Garden, in St Giles's, and in the East End and south of the Thames,

[1] Canaletto's version may be underpopulated, however, as a result of his use of a camera obscura, which failed to capture many moving objects.

are the slums, where an entire family may inhabit one small room, and where disease, alcoholism and crime are rampant. 'If one considers the destruction of all morality, decency and modesty,' wrote Henry Fielding, the author of the exuberant comic novel *Tom Jones*, 'the swearing, whoredom and drunkenness which is eternally carrying on in these houses on the one hand, and the excessive poverty and misery of most of the inhabitants on the other, it seems doubtful whether they are most the objects of detestation or compassion.' Among the native populations of these districts is a substantial admixture of Irish immigrants. A new arrival, with some modest savings and a sunny determination to make a name for himself, is a young man called Dennis O'Kelly.

Dennis was born in about 1725. His father, Andrew, was a smallholder in Tullow, about fifty miles south-west of Dublin. Dennis and his brother, Philip, received little education, and were expected to start earning their livings almost as soon as they entered their teens. (There were also two sisters, who made good marriages.) Philip began a career as a shoemaker. Dennis had grander ambitions. Soon, finding Tullow too small to contain his optimistic energy, he set out for Dublin.

The discovery that Dubliners regarded him as an uneducated yokel barely dented his confidence. Charm, vigour and quick wits would see him through, he felt; and he was right, then and thereafter. A few days after his arrival in the city, he saw a well-dressed woman slip in the street, and rushed to her aid. There was no coach nearby, so Dennis offered his arm to support the woman's walk home, impressing her with his courtesy. She asked Dennis about his circumstances and background. Although he gave as much gloss to his answer as he could, he was heard with a concerned frown. You must be careful, the woman advised him: Dublin is a very wicked place, and a young man such as you might easily fall into bad company.

People who give such warnings are usually the ones you need to avoid. But this woman was to be one of several patronesses

who would ease Dennis's passage through life. She was a widow in her thirties, and the owner of a coffee house, where she hired Dennis as a waiter. Under her tutelage he lost, or learned to disguise, his rough edges, grew accomplished in his job, and graduated to become her lover. There was supplementary income to be earned by defeating the customers at billiards. It was a pleasant arrangement. It could not satisfy Dennis, though. Once he had amassed a fortune of £50 (about £6,500 in today's money, but then a modest annual income for a middle-class provincial household), he said farewell to his mistress and made his way to London.

This account of Dennis O'Kelly's early progress comes from a sketch 'by our ingenious correspondent D.L.' that appeared in *Town & Country* magazine in 1770, just before the end of Eclipse's racing career. It offered the fullest portrait of Dennis until the publication in 1788, a year after his death, of a racy work entitled *The Genuine Memoirs of Dennis O'Kelly, Esq: Commonly Called Count O'Kelly*. The book belonged to a thriving genre of brief lives, hastily produced and written by hacks (the term 'memoirs' applied to biography as well as autobiography). Their tone was often cheerfully defamatory, and entirely suited to portraying the riotous, scandalous, vainglorious Dennis. But while no doubt legendary in spirit, and certainly unreliable in some details, the *Genuine Memoirs* do tell in outline a true story, verifiable from other sources, including primary ones. It must be admitted, however, that the anecdotes of Dennis's adventures in his younger days seem to be the ones for which 'D.L.' and the author of the *Genuine Memoirs* (who sometimes differ) allowed their imaginations the freest rein.

Dennis arrived in the capital with the qualification only of being able to write his own name. He spoke with a strong accent, which the *Genuine Memoirs* characterized as 'the broadest and the most offensive brogue that his nation, perhaps, ever produced', and 'the very reverse of melody'. (Various contemporary chroniclers of Dennis's exploits delighted in representing his speech,

THE

GENUINE MEMOIRS

OF

Dennis O'Kelly, Esq.

COMMOLNY CALLED

COUNT O'KELLY:

Containing many curious and interesting Anecdotes of that CELEBRATED CHARACTER, and his COADJUTORS on the TURF and in the FIELD, with a Variety of authentic, singular, and entertaining MILITIA MANOEUVRES, never before published.

LONDON:

Printed for C. STALKER, STATIONERS-COURT, LUDGATE-HILL.

M DCC LXXXVIII.

With a typo ('commolny') indicating hasty production, The Genuine Memoirs *appeared shortly after Dennis O'Kelly's death and offered a racy portrait, uncompromised by notions of accuracy.*

peppering it with liberal exclamations of 'by Jasus'.) He was five feet eleven inches tall, and muscular, with a rough-hewn handsomeness. He was charming, confident and quick-witted. He believed that he could rise high, and mix with anyone; and, for the enterprising and lucky few, eighteenth-century society accommodated such aspirations. 'Men are every day starting up from obscurity to wealth,' Daniel Defoe wrote. London was a place where, in the opinion of Dr Johnson's biographer James Boswell, 'we may be in some degree whatever character we choose'. Dennis held also a native advantage, according to the coiner of a popular saying: 'Throw an Irishman into the Thames at London Bridge, naked at low-water, and he will come up at Westminster-Bridge, at high water, with a laced coat and a sword.'

In the *Town & Country* version of Dennis's early years in London, he relied immediately on his wits. Dennis, the ingenious D.L. reported, took lodgings on his arrival in London at a guinea a week (a guinea was £1 1s, or £1.05 in decimal coinage), and began to look around for a rich woman to marry. Needing to support himself until the provider of his financial requirements came along, he decided that gambling would earn him a living, and he frequented the tables at the Bedford Coffee House in Covent Garden and other smart venues. In the convivial company of fellow Irish expatriates, he played hazard – a dice game. Very soon, his new friends took all his money.

'By Jasus,' Dennis said to himself, 'this is t'other side of enough – and so poor Dennis must look out for a place again.' ('D.L.' had some fun with this story.) He got a position as captain's servant on a ship bound for Lisbon. Sea journeys were hazardous, but could be lucrative if they delivered their cargoes successfully. Dennis was lucky, and got back to London with sufficient funds to support a second stab at a gambling career. This time he avoided hazard, and his expatriate chums, and stuck to billiards.

Another new friend promoted his marital ambitions, suggesting that they form a partnership to court two sisters, each of

whom had a fortune of £1,000 a year. It was the work of a week. The partners did not want their marriages to be legally binding, so they hired John Wilkinson, a clergyman who specialized in conducting illegal ceremonies at the Savoy Chapel (and who was later transported for the practice). Before the honeymoon was over, Dennis had managed to persuade his friend to entrust his new wealth to him. Then he absconded. He spent time in Scarborough, attended the races at York, and cut a figure in Bath and in other watering-places. It was some time before he returned to London, where he found, to his satisfaction, that his wife – with whom he had no legally binding contract – had become a servant, and that his former friend had emigrated to India. They could not touch him.

However, Dennis again struggled to earn his keep. The genteel façade that was necessary in the gambling profession was expensive to maintain. And he still had a lot to learn. In order to dupe 'pigeons', as suckers or marks were known, he employed a more experienced accomplice, with whom he had to share the proceeds. Before long, Dennis fell into debt again.

Version two of Dennis's story, from the *Genuine Memoirs*, has come to be the more widely accepted. In this one, he made use of his physical prowess. Leaving behind several creditors in Ireland, he made his way to London and found a position as a sedan chairman. Sedan chairs, single-seater carriages conveyed by horizontal poles at the front and back, were the taxis of the day. There were public, licensed ones, carried by the likes of Dennis and his (unnamed) partner; and there were private ones, often elaborately decorated and carried by men who were the antecedents of chauffeurs. The chairs had hinged roofs, allowing the passenger to walk in from the front, and they could be brought into houses, so that the passenger need not be exposed to the elements. Dennis, who was never shy or deferential, took advantage of the access to make himself known above and below stairs: 'Many and oftentimes,' the *Genuine Memoirs* reported, 'has he carried great personages, male



The Covent Garden Morning Frolick *by L. P. Boitard (1747). Betty Careless, a bagnio proprietor (a bagnio was a bathing house, usually a brothel too), travels to work in a sedan chair. Hitching a ride, without a thought for the poor chairmen, is one of her lovers, Captain Montague. Dennis O'Kelly was the 'front legs' of a chair.*

and female, whose secret histories have been familiar to his knowledge.'

The physical burdens were the least of the trials of the job. Chairmen carried their fares through London streets that were irregularly paved, and pockmarked with bumps and holes. There was dust when it was dry, and deep mud when it was wet. The ingredients of the mud included ash, straw, human and animal faeces, and dead cats and dogs. The winters were so fierce that the Thames, albeit a shallower river than it is now, sometimes froze over. Pipes burst, drenching the streets with water that turned rapidly to ice. Illumination was infrequent, as the duty of lighting thoroughfares lay in part with the inhabitants, who were not conscientious; people hired 'link-boys' to light their journeys with firebrands. In daylight, too, it was often hard to see far ahead: London smogs, even before the smoky Victorian era, could reduce visibility to a few feet. There was intense, cacophonous noise: carriages on cobbles; horses' hooves; animals being driven to market; musicians busking; street traders shouting.

The chairmen slalomed through this chaos with the ruthlessness of modern bike messengers. They yelled 'By your leave, sir!', but otherwise were uncompromising: a young French visitor to London, taking his first stroll, failed to respond to the yells quickly enough and was knocked over four times. Chairmen could set a fast pace because the distances were not huge. A slightly later view of the city from Highgate (the print is in the British Library) shows the built-up area extending only a short distance east of St Paul's (by far the most imposing landmark) and no further west than Westminster Abbey. To the north, London began at a line just above Oxford Street, and ended in the south just beyond the Thames. Outside these limits were fields and villages. The chairmen carried their customers mostly within the boundaries of the West End.

Dennis was in St James's when he met his second significant patroness (after the Dublin coffee house owner). Some three

hundred chairs were in competition, but this November day offered plenty of custom: it was the birthday of George II. Horse-drawn coaches could make no progress through the gridlocked streets, and the chairmen were in demand. A lady's driver, frustrated on his journey to the palace (St James's Palace was then the principal royal residence), hailed Dennis from his stalled vehicle. Dennis leaped to the lady's assistance, accompanying her to his chair and scattering the onlookers who had jostled forward to view such a fine personage. He 'acted with such powers and magnanimity, that her ladyship conceived him to be a regeneration of Hercules or Hector, and her opinion was by no means altered when she beheld the powerful elasticity of his muscular motions on the way to the Royal residence. Dennis touched her ladyship's guinea, and bowed in return for a bewitching smile which accompanied it.'[2]

You may conclude that this mock-heroic description is an acknowledgement that the story is preposterous. But the eighteenth century was a period of great social, and sexual, intermingling. In some ways (ways that Dennis would learn about, but never respect), the class structure was rigid; in others, it mattered little. Important men conducted open affairs with prostitutes and other humble women, and from time to time married them. Not so many grand women took humble men as lovers, but a few did. Lady Henrietta Wentworth married her footman. Adventurous sex lives were common. 'Many feminine libertines may be found amongst young women of rank,' observed Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the renowned letter writer. Lady Harley was said to have become pregnant by so many lovers that, the historian Roy Porter recorded, her children were known as the 'Harleian miscellany'.

The day following Dennis's encounter with Lady — (the

[2] From the *Genuine Memoirs*. I have amplified some of the details of the story of Dennis and Lady —.

Genuine Memoirs gives no name or initials), he was loitering outside White's Chocolate House, musing on her smile, when an elderly woman asked him the way to Bolton Row in Piccadilly. She offered him a shilling to escort her there. When they arrived, she invited him in from the cold to take a drink. The mistress of the house greeted Dennis and asked him whether he knew of any chairmen looking for a place. 'Yes, Madam,' Dennis answered, 'an' that I do: I should be very glad to be after recommending myself, because I know myself, and love myself better than any one else.' Well, then, the woman replied, he should go to the house of Lady — in Hanover Square, mention no name, but say that he had heard of the vacant position. 'God in heaven bless you,' Dennis exclaimed, draining his substantial glass of brandy.

The next morning, Dennis dressed himself as finely as he could, and presented himself in Hanover Square. He made the right impression, got the job, at a salary of £30 a year, and started work the next day. Standing in the hall, self-conscious in his new livery and excited at this access to grandeur, he looked up to see his mistress descending the staircase. She was of course the same Lady — whose teasing smile had occupied his thoughts since their journey to the palace. But she offered no hint of recognition. She hurried into her chair, making it known that she wished to be conveyed to the Opera House. Her expression on arrival was more encouraging; and when, at the end of her appointment, she came out of the theatre, she blessed Dennis with another smile, more provocative than before. Taking his hand, she squeezed it gently round a purse. He felt his strength liquefy; a tremendous effort of concentration was required to force his trembling limbs to carry the chair safely home. Alone, he opened the purse, to find that it contained five guineas.

The next day was busy. No sooner had Dennis returned from an errand to the mantua maker (a mantua was a skirt and bodice open in the front) than he was off again to the milliner, and then to the hairdresser, and then to the perfumer. Last, there was

a parcel to deliver to Bolton Row – specifically, to the house where he had received the tip-off about his job.

Again, he was invited in, but this time ushered into a back parlour, where – as the *Genuine Memoirs* described the scene – a giant fire was roaring and where the only other illumination came from four candles. Dennis sat himself close to the blaze, the delicious heat dispersing the cold in his bones. A young woman, with shyly averted face, brought him a tankard of mulled wine. He drained half of it in a gulp. More warmth suffused him; he did not want to move from this room. He looked at the girl, who for some reason was loitering by the door, and got a general impression of comeliness. He asked her what she was called. She replied obliquely: she had been asked to entertain Mr Kelly[3] until her mistress should return, 'and indeed I am happy to be in your company, Sir, for I do not like to be alone'.

This was promising, Dennis thought. 'Upon my soul,' he asserted, 'I am equally happy, and wish to be more so. Come sit by me.'

The girl approached, sat, and turned towards him. She was Lady —. They fell on each other; bodices, and other garments too, were ripped. As evening turned to night, and as the fire subsided, they enjoyed mutual happiness. At last, Lady — said she must leave. Exchanging her servant's clothes for her usual ones, and leaving Dennis with another purse, she sought her coach, which had been waiting a few doors away.

Dennis, more dazedly, reassembled his attire. Returning to the workaday world was a wearying prospect. But there was another surprise, less welcome, in store. The door of the parlour opened, and the old woman whom he had conducted to the house three days earlier entered. You have done well for yourself, she observed; such fortune would never have befallen you had it not

[3] Dennis styled himself 'Kelly' – the anglicized version of his name – during his early years in London.

been for my assistance. No doubt you would want to reward me accordingly – my mistress and I depend on taking advantage of such eventualities. Your mistress gave you a purse earlier, and, as a man of honour, you should share it.

Dennis was nonplussed. Surely this woman had no claim on him? 'By Jasus,' he replied, 'but she never gave me a single guinea.'

The woman smiled complacently. 'Come, my dear creature,' she said (pronouncing it 'creter'), 'come along with me, and I'll show you the difference.'

She took him by the hand, and led him to the front parlour. On the wall was a small looking glass. She removed it, revealing an aperture, and invited Dennis to look through. He got a fine view of the back parlour, and particularly of the part of it near the fire. Resignedly, he reached for the purse, looked inside, and saw that it contained an enormous sum: twenty-five guineas. ''Tis only my right that I take ten,' the woman told him, 'as I must account for it to my mistress.' Dennis knew when he was cornered. He handed over the money.

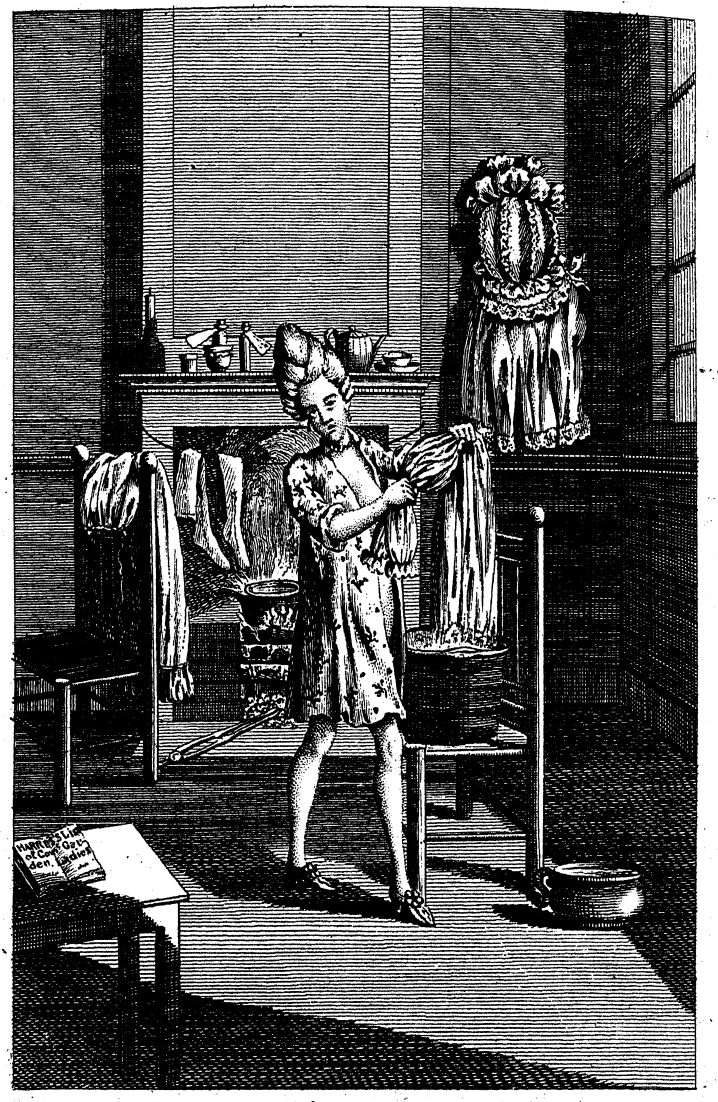
This dampener did not submerge his enthusiasm for the affair, which continued happily for several months. It was both delightful and profitable. But Dennis was not Lady —'s only sideline. The *Genuine Memoirs* said that she took lovers among her own set, too; and, unfortunately, Lord — was not as liberal in his attitudes to such behaviour as were some eighteenth-century husbands. He threw her out of doors, and divorced her. With Dennis's mistress went Dennis's job.

After a taste of life in Hanover Square, Dennis was not inclined to return to hauling a licensed sedan chair. He might continue to enjoy the high life, he reasoned, if he lived by his wits. He frequented the Vauxhall pleasure gardens, where, for a shilling a ticket, people gathered to walk, eat, listen to music, and stare at one another. He spent many hours in coffee houses, at tennis courts, and at billiard tables, where he picked up some money as both marker (keeper of the score) and player. He made notable

friends, among them the Duke of Richmond and Sir William Draper, the soldier. Everyone was clubbable – while he had money.

As the money ran out, Dennis continued to spend. He had discovered an addiction to extravagance, and he thought he could charm, or dupe, his creditors. But there was a way of taking revenge on people who did not honour the money they owed: you could get them jailed. Dennis's creditors sued, and saw him confined to the Fleet, the debtors' prison.

The year was 1756. Five years would pass before Dennis regained his freedom. It was the disaster of his life. But it led him to the woman who would be both his lifelong companion and his partner in making his fortune.



The Whore's Last Shift. *A once-fashionable 'Cyprian lass' (one of the arch phrases by which Charlotte Hayes and her contemporaries were known) is down on her luck. On the table is* Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies, *first compiled by Charlotte's sometime lover, Samuel Derrick.*