“ This year, 1672,’’says Burnet, “ the king declared a new mistress, and made her duchess of Portsmouth.”

He now rose to high favour with Buckingham, who, as mas­ter of the horse, appointed him one of his equerries, and, as colonel of a regiment, captain-lieutenant of his own company. He is likewise said to have conferred upon him many other advantages. But the poet had not yet reached the height of his good fortune. His next patron was the merry mo­narch himself, who thought no reward too great for a jest, and no recompense too inconsiderable for those who had shed their blood in his service. Such devotion indeed was strongly indicative of folly, and Charles admired none but men of wit. Wycherley was fortunate enough to inspire the king with excessive fondness, which was crowned by the very singular condescension of paying him a visit at his lodgings, when he was ill of a fever. When he became somewhat convalescent, his majesty advised him to try the air of Montpellier, and furnished him with five hundred pounds to defray his travelling expenses.

In 1673 was acted at the Duke’s Theatre Wycherley’s second comedy, “ The Gentleman Dancing-Master.” The incidents of this play are quite farcical, and the catastrophe is obvious from the commencement. It appears to have been coldly received, for in the prologue to' his next co­medy, the Country Wife, occurs the following line :

The late so baffl’d scribbler of the day.

“ The Country Wife” was acted in 1675, and was fol­lowed in 1677 by “ The Plain Dealer.” Wycherley’s first play made him the paramour of a woman who wanted only the name of a queen, and his last made him the husband of a countess. Being on a visit to Tunbridge, he entered a bookseller’s shop, and while he remained there a lady came and inquired for the Plain Dealer. “ There he is for you, Madam,” said a friend of his, one Mr Fairbeard, by whom he was accompanied, pushing Wycherley towards her. This lady was the countess of Drogheda ; and an acquaintance, thus ludicrously commenced, soon ripened into an intimacy that terminated in a matrimonial union. Wycherley’s splen­did marriage was the most disastrous incident of his life. His lady’s outrageous jealousy, for which it was not impro­bable that be gave her some cause, imbittered his existence, for she became infuriated whenever he disappeared from her sight. Sometimes, by special favour, he was permitted to dine at the Cock Tavern, opposite their lodgings in Bow Street; but upon these occasions he was compelled to leave the windows open, that she might be satisfied there was no woman present. She did not live long to torment him, and left him her whole fortune at her death ; but her will was contested, and he found himself heir to nothing but a suit at law. Being unable to pay the expenses of litiga­tion, and some other debts which he had contracted when he thought himself beyond the reach of poverty, he was thrown into a jail, where he was suffered to languish for the space of seven years. From giddy splendour to unpi­tied destitution there was an easy and natural transition. To the king it is not likely that he had the assurance to apply ; but his father would do nothing for him, and he was re­fused a loan of twenty pounds from his bookseller, who had made large sums of money by his works. From this abyss of misery he was rescued at last by a hand that was soon afterwards deprived of the power to do either good or evil. Charles was now dead, and his luckless successor happening to see the Plain Dealer acted, was touched with compassion for its author, and assigned him a pension of’ two hundred pounds a year.@@1 He also gave orders for the immediate payment of his debts, and sent Lord Mulgrave to ascertain their amount ; but Wycherley was ashamed to tell that nobleman how much he owed. He was now re­stored to liberty, but continued to be harassed by his cre­ditors till near the close of his life, when he devised an expedient to satisfy their demands, which at such a solemn crisis could scarcely have occurred to any one but himself. By the will of his father, to whom he seems to have owed little but his birth, he was deprived of the power of alienat­ing the family estate; and not wishing to quit the world in debt, a feeling which deserves commendation, he mar­ried a young woman possessed of fifteen hundred pounds.@@2 With odious indelicacy, this creature was induced to give her hand to the expiring debauchee by the inducement of a handsome jointure. Having discharged his other debts with part of his wife’s fortune, he paid the debt of nature on the 1st of January 1715, eleven days after the celebration of his nuptials. A little while before he closed his eyes for the last time, he is said to have requested his wife, with Cervantic gravity, not to take an old man for her second husband. Thus was a life of frolics closed with perfect consistency. Major Pack says that he died a papist. He was a great admirer of Dryden, in whose honour he wrote some indifferent verses : perhaps the melodious reasoning in the Hind and Panther had some share in the merit of his reconversion to the Romish faith.

Wycherley is eminent only as a writer for the stage, but he is the author of a large volume entitled “ Miscellany Poems, as Satyrs, Epistles, Love-Verses, Songs, Sonnets, &c.” Lond. 1704, fol. The times had changed since Charles’s days, but Wycherley continued the same. The public ear had become habituated to gracefully-expanded sentiments which he wanted the skill to supply, and if not to more severe morality, to less inharmonious impurity than his ; and the dissonant and licentious crudities of the veteran rake excited little attention. The versification of Wycherley is scarcely more felicitous than that of Dr Donne. Several years after his death appeared “ The Posthumous Works of William Wycherley, Esq. in prose and verse : faithfully publish’d from his original manu­scripts, by Mr Theobald. In two parts. To which are prefixed, some Memoirs of Mr Wycherley’s life, by Major Pack.” Lond. 1728, 8vo. By appealing to the avarice of one Captain Shrimpton, who had married his relict, the book­sellers obtained the possession of the papers which formed this collection, in which there is nothing that can add to the reputation of Wycherley, either in a moral or intellec­tual point of view. His folio volume is curious, as con­taining the pieces alluded to in the following passage in Johnson’s Life of Pope : “ His esteem of Pope was such that he submitted some poems to his revision, and when Pope, perhaps proud of such confidence, was sufficient­ly bold in his criticisms and liberal in his alterations, the old scribbler was angry to see his pages defaced, and felt more pain from the detection than content from the amend­ment of his faults. They parted ; but Pope always con­sidered him with kindness, and visited him a little time be­fore he died.”@@3 Lady Μ. W. Montagu says that Pope paid his court to him with a view to a legacy ; but this calumny is sufficiently refuted in the state of Wycherley’s affairs. At this period Pope was about sixteen, and Wycherley had passed his grand climacteric.@@1

@@@, Among his Posthumous Works is a poem “ On a Sea Fight which thc author was in, betwixt the English and Dutch,” p. 235. James’s kindness for him may have been prompted by the remembrance of mutual danger. It is possible that Wycherley served under him upon one or other of the occasions when he commanded the red squadron against the Dutch. Some nautical knowledge, how­ever acquired, is displayed in the Plain Dealer.

@@@2 For this act another motive has been assigned, the wish to disinherit a nephew whom he disliked.

@@@3 Johnson’s Lives of English Poets, vol. iv. p, 11.

@@@4 The letters that passed between Pope and Wycherley are to be found in Warton’s edition of Pope's Works, vol. vii. p. 1-52.