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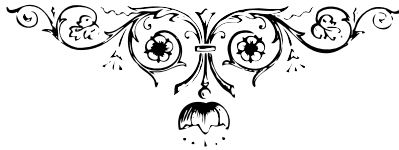
Written by Gillian Bagwell

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THE
DARLING
STRUMPET



GILLIAN BAGWELL

AVON

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This book is dedicated to my family:

My sisters

Rachel Hope Crossman

and

Jennifer Juliet Walker

My father

Richard Herbold Bagwell

And the memory of my mother

Elizabeth Rosaria Loverde

She's now the darling strumpet of the crowd,
Forgets her state, and talks to them aloud,
Lays by her greatness and descends to prate
With those 'bove whom she's rais'd by wond'rous fate.

From "A Panegyrick Upon Nelly"

Anonymous, 1681

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NELL'S FAMILY

Eleanor Gwynn – Nell's mother.

Rose Gwynn – Nell's older sister.

Charles Beauclerk, Earl of Burford and Duke of St. Albans, referred to as Charlie – Nell's first son.

James, Lord Beauclerk, referred to as Jemmy – Nell's second son.

John Cassells – Rose's first husband.

Guy Foster – Rose's second husband.

Lily – Rose's baby girl.

MADAM ROSS'S

Madam Ross – keeper of a brothel in Lewkenor's Lane.

Jack – Madam Ross's lover and bouncer at the brothel.

Jane – one of Madam Ross's girls.

Ned – barman in the taproom.

Robbie Duncan – a regular client of Nell.

Jimmy Cade – an early regular client of Nell.

THE THEATRE

Charles Hart – leading actor, shareholder, and one of the managers of The King's Company. Nell's mentor and teacher.

John Lacy – leading actor, shareholder, and one of the managers of The King's Company. Nell's mentor and teacher.

Michael Mohun – leading actor, shareholder, and one of the managers of The King's Company.

Walter Clun, also known as Wat – leading actor and shareholder in the King's Company, specializing in character roles. Agrees to teach Nell to act.

Thomas Killigrew – founder and patent-holder of The King's Company and a supporter and intimate of King Charles.

Betsy Knepp – actress in the King's company. A friend of Nell and of Samuel Pepys.

Katherine Mitchell Corey, also referred to as Kate – actress in the King’s Company, specialising in character roles.

Dicky One-Shank – old sailor and scenekeeper at the Theatre Royal.

Harry Killigrew – son of Thomas Killigrew and lover of Rose Gwynn.

Aphra Behn – playwright with the Duke’s Company and friend of Nell.

Anne Marshall – actress in the King’s Company. Probably the first English woman to appear on the professional stage.

Rebecca Marshall, also referred to as Beck – actress in the King’s Company.

Moll Davis – actress in the Duke’s Company. Mistress of King Charles, and a rival of Nell’s.

Mary Meggs, known as Orange Moll – holder of the concession to sell oranges and sweetmeats at the Theatre Royal.

Margaret Hughes, also referred to as Peg – actress in the King’s Company and friend of Nell.

Edward Kynaston, also referred to as Ned – actor in the King’s Company.

Elizabeth Barry, also referred to as Betty – actress with the Duke’s Company and mistress of the Earl of Rochester.

Marmaduke Watson – young actor in the King’s Company.

Theophilus Bird, referred to as Theo – young actor in the King’s Company, son of an actor by the same name.

Nicholas Burt – old actor in the King’s Company.

William Cartwright – old actor in the King’s Company.

Frances Davenport, also referred to as Franki – actress in the King’s Company. Sister of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Davenport, also referred to as Betty – actress in the King’s Company. Sister of Frances.

Elizabeth Weaver – actress in the King’s Company.

Betty Hall – actress in the King’s Company.

Richard Bell – actor in the King’s Company.

Anne Reeves – young actress in the King’s Company and mistress of John Dryden.

Matt Kempton – scenekeeper at the Theatre Royal.

Willie Taines – scenekeeper at the Theatre Royal.

Richard Baxter – scenekeeper at the Theatre Royal.

Sir Edward Howard – playwright.

THE COURT

Charles II – king of England. Succeeded to throne upon execution of his father Charles I in 1649. Restored to the throne 1660.

Catherine of Braganza – Charles II’s queen, who had been the Infanta of Portugal.

James, the Duke of York – younger brother of Charles II and later King James II.

George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham – intimate of King Charles. Friend and advisor of Nell. Playwright, poet, politician.

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester – intimate friend of King Charles and Nell. Poet and playwright.

Charles Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, Earl of Dorset and Middlesex – poet and playwright.

Sir Charles Sedley – playwright, and a friend of Dorset and Rochester. Known to his friends as ‘Little Sid’.

Barbara Villiers Palmer, Lady Castlemaine, Duchess of Cleveland – longtime mistress of Charles II.

Louise de Keroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth – unpopular French mistress of Charles II.

Hortense Mancini, Duchess Mazarin – tempestuous mistress of Charles II, who he had wanted to marry as a young man.

James Crofts, Duke of Monmouth – illegitimate son and oldest child of Charles II. Friend of Nell. The namesake of Nell’s little boy Jemmy.

Sir Henry Savile – courtier and friend of Nell’s. Charles’s Envoy Extraordinaire to France.

Anna Maria, Countess of Shrewsbury – mistress of the Duke of Buckingham and mother of his child, the Earl of Coventry, who died as an infant.

Lady Diana de Vere – Daughter of Aubrey de Vere, the twentieth and last Earl of Oxford.

NELL'S HOUSEHOLD

Meg – longtime servant of Nell.

Bridget – longtime servant of Nell.

Thomas Groundes – Nell's steward.

John – Nell's coachman.

Tom – Nell's chair man.

Fleetwood Shepard – courtier and poet. Tutor to Nell's boys.

Thomas Otway – playwright and tutor to Nell's boys.

OTHER FRIENDS AND ADVISORS

Samuel Pepys, also referred to as Sam – theatre aficionado, friend of Nell, and well acquainted with the king, Duke of York, and others at court through his position as Clerk of the Acts of the Navy Board.

Dr. Thomas Tenison – vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and spiritual advisor to Nell.

CHAPTER ONE



London—Twenty-Ninth of May, 1660

THE SUN SHONE HOT AND BRIGHT IN THE GLORIOUS MAY SKY, AND THE streets of London were rivers of joyous activity. Merchants and labourers, gentlemen and ladies, apprentices and servants, whores, thieves, and grimy urchins—all were out in their thousands. And all with the same thought shining in their minds and hearts and the same words on their tongues—the king comes back this day.

After ten years—nay, it was more—of England without a king. Ten years of the bleak and grey existence that life had been under the Protector—an odd title for one who had thrown the country into strife, had arrested and then beheaded King Charles. What a groan had gone up from the crowd that day at the final, fatal sound of the executioner's axe; what horror and black despair had filled their hearts as the bleeding head of the king was held aloft in triumph. And all upon the order of the Protector, who had savaged life as it had been, and then, after all, had thought to take the throne for himself.

But now he was gone. Oliver Cromwell was dead, his son had

fled after a halfhearted attempt at governing, his partisans were scattered, and the king's son, Charles II, who had barely escaped with his life to years of impoverished exile, was approaching London to claim his crown, on this, his thirtieth birthday. And after so long a wait, such suffering and loss, what wrongs could there be that the return of the king could not put right?

TEN-YEAR-OLD NELL GWYNN AWOKE, THE WARMTH OF THE SUN ON her back in contrast to the dank coolness of the straw on which she lay under the shelter of a rickety staircase. She rolled over, and the movement hurt. Her body ached from the beating her mother had given her the night before. Legs and backside remembered the blows of the broomstick, and her face was bruised and tender from the slaps. Tears had mingled on her cheeks with dust. She tried to wipe the dirt away, but her hands were just as bad, grimy and still smelling of oysters.

Oysters. That was the cause of all this pain. Yesterday evening, she'd stopped on her way home to watch as garlands of flowers were strung on one of the triumphal arches that had been erected in anticipation of the king's arrival. Caught up in the excitement, she had forgotten to be vigilant, and her oyster barrow had been stolen. She'd crept home unwillingly, hoped that the night would be one of the many when her mother had been drinking so heavily that she was already unconscious, or one of the few when the drink made her buoyant and forgiving. But no. Not even the festive mood taking hold of London had leavened her reaction to the loss of the barrow. Replacing it would cost five shillings, as much as Nell earned in a week. And her mother had seemed determined to beat into Nell's hide the understanding of that cost.

Nell had no tears today. She was only angry, and determined that she would not be beaten again. She sat up and brushed the straw out of her skirt, clawed it out of the curls of her hair. And

thought about what to do next. She wanted to find Rose, her dear older sister, with whom she'd planned so long for this day. And she was hungry. With no money and no prospect of getting any.

At home there would be food, but home would mean facing her mother again. Another beating, or at least more shouting and recriminations, and then more of what she had done for the past two years—up at dawn, the long walk to Billingsgate fish market to buy her daily stock, and an endless day pushing the barrow, heavy with the buckets of live oysters in their brine. Aching feet, aching arms, aching back, throat hoarse with her continual cry of “Oysters, alive-o!” Hands raw and red from plunging into the salt water, and the fishy, salty smell always on her hands, pervading her hair and clothes.

It was better than the work she had done before that, almost since she was old enough to walk—going from door to door to collect the cinders and fragments of wood left from the previous day's fires, and then taking her pickings to the soap makers, who bought the charred bits for fuel and the ashes to make lye. Her skin and clothes had been always grey and gritty, a film of stinking ash ground into her pores. And not even a barrow to wheel, but heavy canvas sacks carried slung over her shoulders, their weight biting into her flesh.

Nell considered. What else could she do? What would buy freedom from her mother and keep food in her belly and a roof over her head? She could try to get work in some house, but that, too, would mean endless hours of hard and dirty work as a kitchen drudge or scouring floors and chamber pots, under the thumb of cook or steward as well as at the mercy of the uncertain temper of the master and mistress. No.

And that left only the choice that Rose had made, and their mother, too. Whoredom. Rose, who was four years older than Nell, had gone a year earlier to Madam Ross's nearby establishment at the top of Drury Lane. It was not so bad, Rose said. A little room

of her own, except of course when she'd a man there. And they were none of the rag, tag, and bobtail—it was gentlemen who were Madam Ross's trade, and Rose earned enough to get an occasional treat for Nell, and good clothes for herself.

What awe and craving Nell had felt upon seeing the first clothes Rose had bought—a pair of silk stays, a chemise of fine lawn, and a skirt and body in a vivid blue, almost the color of Rose's eyes, with ribbons to match. Secondhand, to be sure, but still beautiful. Nell had touched the stuff of the gown with a tentative finger—so smooth and clean. Best of all were the shoes—soft blue leather with an elegant high heel. She had wanted them so desperately. But you couldn't wear shoes like that carting ashes or oysters through the mud of London's streets.

Could she go to Madam Ross's? She was no longer a child, really. She had small buds of breasts, and already the lads at the Golden Fleece, where her mother kept bar, watched her with appreciation, and asked with coarse jests when she would join Mrs. Gwynn's gaggle of girls, who kept rooms upstairs or could be sent for from the nearby streets.

But before she could do anything about the future, she had to find Rose. Today, along with everyone else in London, they would watch and rejoice as the king returned to take his throne.

Nell emerged from under the staircase and hurried down the narrow alley to the Strand. The street was already thronged with people, and all were in holiday humour. The windows were festooned with ribbons and flowers. A fiddler played outside an alehouse, to the accompaniment of a clapping crowd. The smell of food wafted on the morning breeze—meat pies, pastries, chickens roasting.

A joyful cacophony of church bells pealed from all directions, and in the distance Nell could hear the celebratory firing of cannons at the Tower.

She scanned the crowds. Rose had said she'd come to fetch her

from home this morning. If Rose had found her gone, where would she look? Surely here, where the king would pass by.

“Ribbons! Fine silk ribbons!” Nell turned and was instantly entranced. The ribbon seller’s staff was tied with rosettes of ribbons in all colours, and her clothes were pinned all over with knots of silken splendour. Nell stared at the most beautiful thing she had ever seen—a knot of ribbons the colours of periwinkles and daffodils, its streamers fluttering in the breeze. Wearing that, she would feel a grand lady.

“Only a penny, the finest ribbons,” the peddler cried. A penny. Nell could eat her fill for a penny. If she had one. And with that thought she realised how hungry she was. She’d had no supper the night before and now her empty belly grumbled. She must find Rose.

A voice called her name and she turned to see Molly and Deb, two of her mother’s wenches. Nell made her way across the road to where they stood. Molly was a country lass and Deb was a Londoner, but when she saw them together, which they almost always were, Nell could never help thinking of a matched team of horses. Both had straw-coloured hair and cheerful ruddy faces, and both were buxom, sturdy girls, packed into tight stays that thrust their bosoms into prominence. They seemed in high spirits and as they greeted Nell it was apparent that they had already had more than a little to drink.

“Have you seen Rose?” Nell asked.

“Nay, not since yesterday,” said Deb, and Molly chimed her agreement.

“Aye, not since last night.” She looked more closely at Nell.

“Is summat the matter?”

“No,” Nell lied. “Only I was to meet her this morning and I’ve missed her.” She wondered if the girls’ good spirits would extend to a loan. “Tip me a dace, will you? I’ve not had a bite this morning and I’m fair clemmed.”

“Faith, if I had the tuppence, I would,” said Deb. “But we’ve just spent the last of our rhino on drink and we’ve not worked yet today.”

“Not yet,” agreed Molly. “But the day is like to prove a golden one. I’ve ne’er seen crowds like this.”

“Aye, there’s plenty of darby to be made today,” Deb nodded. Her eyes flickered to a party of sailors moving down the opposite side of the road and with a nudge she drew Molly’s attention to the prospect of business.

“We’d best be off,” Molly said, and she and Deb were already moving toward their prey.

“If you see Rose . . .,” Nell cried after them.

“We’ll tell her, poppet,” Molly called back, and they were gone.

The crowds were growing, and it was becoming harder by the minute for Nell to see beyond the bodies towering above her. What she needed was somewhere with a better view.

She looked around for a vantage point. A brewer’s wagon stood on the side of the street, its bed packed with a crowd of lads, undoubtedly apprentices given liberty for the day. Surely it could accommodate another small body.

“Oy!” Nell called up. “Room for one more?”

“Aye, love, the more the merrier,” called a dark-haired lad, and hands reached down to pull her up. The view from here was much better.

“Drink?”

Nell turned to see a red-haired boy holding out a mug. He was not more than fourteen or so, and freckles stood out in his pale, anxious face. She took the mug and drank, and he smiled shyly, his blue eyes shining.

“How long have you been here?” Nell asked, keeping an eye on the crowd.

“Since last night,” he answered. “We brought my father’s wagon and made merry ’til late, then slept ’til the sun woke us.”

Nell had been hearing music in the distance since she had neared

the Strand. The fiddler's music floated on the air from the east, she could see a man with a tabor and pipe to the west, only the top notes of his tune reaching her ears, and now she saw a hurdy-gurdy player approaching, the keening drone of his instrument cutting through the noise of the crowd.

"Look!" she cried in delight. A tiny dark monkey capered along before the man, diminutive cap in hand. The crowds parted to make way for the pair, and as the boys beside her laughed and clapped, the man and his little partner stopped in front of the wagon. He waved a salute and began to play a jig. The monkey skipped and frolicked before him, to the vast entertainment of the crowd.

"Look at him! Just like a little man!" Nell cried. People were tossing coins into the man's hat, which he had thrown onto the ground before him, and Nell laughed as the monkey scampered after an errant farthing and popped it into the hat.

"Here," the ginger-haired boy said. He fished in a pocket inside his coat. She watched with interest as he withdrew a small handful of coins and picked one out.

"You give it to him," he said, holding out a coin as he pocketed the rest of the money. Nell could tell that he was proud for her to see that he had money to spend for an entertainment such as this.

"Hist!" she called to the monkey and held up the shiny coin, shrieking with laughter as the monkey clambered up a wheel of the wagon, took the coin from her fingers, and bobbed her a little bow before leaping back down and resuming its dance.

Laughing, she turned to the boy and found him staring at her, naked longing in his eyes. He wanted her. She had seen that look before from men and boys of late and had ignored it. But today was different. Her stomach was turning over from lack of food, and she had no money. Molly and Deb had spoken of the wealth to be had from the day's revelries. Maybe she could reap some of that wealth. Sixpence would buy food and drink, with money left over.

She stepped nearer to the boy and felt him catch his breath as she looked up at him.

“I’ll let you fuck me for sixpence,” she whispered. He gaped at her and for a moment she thought he was going to run away. But then, striving to look self-possessed, he nodded.

“I know where,” she said. “Follow me.”

HALF AFRAID THAT SHE WOULD LOSE HER PREY AND HALF WONDERING what had possessed her to speak so boldly, Nell darted through the crowds with the boy after her to the alley where she had spent the night. Slops from chamber pots emptied out of windows reeked in the sunshine, but the passage was deserted, save for a dead dog sprawled in the mud. Nell dodged under the staircase beneath which she had slept. The pile of straw was not very clean, but it would do. The boy glanced nervously behind him, then followed her.

With the boy so close, panting in anticipation, Nell felt a twinge of fear. For all the banter and jokes she had heard about the act, she had no real idea what it would be like. Would it hurt? Would she bleed? Could she get with child her first time? What if she did it so poorly that her ignorance showed? She wished she had considered the matter more carefully.

Her belly rumbled with hunger again. Why had she not simply asked the boy to buy her something to eat? But it was too late now, she thought. She pushed away her misgivings and flopped onto her back. The boy clambered on top of her, fumbling with the flaps of his breeches, and heaved himself between her legs, thrusting against her blindly. He didn’t know what to do any more than she did, she realised. She reached down and grasped him, amazed at the aliveness of the hard member, like a puppy nosing desperately to nurse, and struggled to help him find the place.

The boy thrust hard, groaning like an animal in distress, and

Nell gasped as he entered her. It hurt. Forcing too big a thing into too small a space, an edge of her skin pinched uncomfortably. Was this how it was meant to be? Surely not. Yet maybe to him it felt different.

She had little time to consider, as the boy's movements grew faster, and with a strangled moan, he bucked convulsively and then stopped, pushed as far into her as he could go. He stayed there a moment, gasping, and then Nell felt a trickle of wetness down the inside of her thigh, and knew that he must have spent.

The boy looked down at her, with an expression that mingled jubilation with shame and surprise. He withdrew and did not look at Nell as he buttoned up his breeches and straightened his clothes. She grabbed a handful of straw to wipe the stickiness from between her legs. The smell of it rose sharp and shameful to her nose, and she wanted to retch. The boy reached into his pocket and counted out six pennies.

"I must go," he said, and almost hitting his head on the low stairs, he ducked out and scurried away.

Nell looked at the coins. Sixpence. She felt a surge of power and joy. She had done it. It had not been so bad. And now she had money. She could do as she liked. And she decided that first and immediately, she would get something good to eat.

She used her shift to wipe as much of the remaining mess as she could from her thighs and hands, and then knotted the coins into its hem. She hurried back toward the Strand, her new wealth banging pleasantly against her calf.

The smell of food hung heavy in the air, and her stomach felt as if it was turning inside out with hunger. Earlier, she had noted with longing a man with a cart selling meat pies, and she sought him out, her nose leading the way. She extracted one of her pennies and received the golden half-moon, warm from its nest in the tin-lined cart. The man smiled at her rapturous expression as she took her prize in both hands, inhaling its heady aroma.

Voraciously, she bit into the pie, the crust breaking into tender shards that seemed to melt on her tongue. The rich warm gravy filled her mouth as she bit deeper, into the hearty filling of mutton and potatoes. She thought nothing had ever tasted so good. The pie seemed to be filling not only her belly, but crannies of longing and misery in her heart and soul. She sighed with pleasure, so hungry and intent on eating that she had not even moved from where she stood.

The old pie man, with a weathered face like a sun-dried apple, laughed as he watched her.

“I’d say you like it, then?”

Nell nodded, wiping gravy from her lips with the back of her hand and brushing a few crumbs from her chest. She was tempted to eat another pie right then, but decided to let the first settle. Besides, there were other things to spend money on, now that she had money to spend.

She again heard the call of “Ribbons! Fine ribbons!” The rosette—her rosette—cornflower blue intertwined with sun gold, its silken streamers rippling in the breeze—was still pinned to the woman’s staff. Waiting for her.

Nell raced to the woman, her face shining. “That one. If you please.” The woman gave her a look of some doubt, but as Nell pulled up her skirt and produced a penny from her shift, she unpinned the rosette from the staff.

“Do you want me to pin it for you, duck?”

Nell nodded, feeling grown up and important as the ribbon peddler considered her.

“Here, I think, is best.” The woman pinned the rosette to the neckline of Nell’s bodice and nodded approvingly. “Very handsome. The colour brings out those eyes of yours.”

Nell looked down and stroked the streamers. Even hanging on the rough brown wool, the gleaming ribbons were beautiful, and she wished that she could see herself. At home she had a scrap of

mirror that she had found in the street, but she would have to wait until she went home to have a look. If she went home.

That brought back to mind her next task—finding Rose. The street was becoming more crowded, and she would have a hard time seeing the king when he came by, let alone her sister. She needed to find a perch from which she could view the road. But not the wagon with the red-headed lad. Given his urgent flight, he might not relish her company. And in truth, she did not think she would relish his. He had served his purpose. Now, perhaps, there were bigger fish to fry.

She considered the possibilities. The carts, wagons, barrels, and other vantage points at the sides of the road were packed. The windows of upper storeys would provide a superior view, if she could find a place in one.

She made her way eastward, searching windows for familiar faces but found none, and felt herself lost in a sea of strangers. She was almost at Fleet Street now. Surely Rose would not have come this far. She would go just as far as Temple Bar, she thought, and then turn back.

“Oy! Ginger!” The voice came from a window three floors up, where several lads were crowded. A stocky boy with close-cropped hair leaned out of the casement and regarded her with a wolflike grin.

Maybe she didn’t need an old friend. Maybe new friends would do.

Nell put a hand on her hip and raked the lad with an exaggeratedly critical glance, drawing guffaws from his mates.

“Aye, it’s ginger, and what of that?” she hollered. “At least I’ve got hair. Unlike some.”

The lads howled with delight, one of them gleefully rubbing his friend’s cropped poll and drawing a shove in response.

Playing to his audience, the boy took a deep swig from his mug and leered down at Nell. “You have hair, do you? I’d have thought you was too young.”

“Too young be damned,” cried Nell. “It’s you who must be too old, bald-pated as you are.” The lads set up a raucous cry at that, thumping their friend from all sides. Nell grinned up at them, gratified at their reaction and the laughter from the crowd around her. In her years selling oysters, she had found that a little saucy humour helped her business, and made the time pass more quickly.

“Come up and join us!” shouted another of the lads, a cheerful-faced runt with bright blue eyes.

“Aye, come aloft! Let me get a look at you up close!” cried Nell’s original sparring partner.

“And why should I?” Nell called back. “What do I want with the likes of you?”

“Come up and I’ll show you!”

“We’ve plenty to drink!” promised the thin lad, waving a mug. “And a view better than any in London!”

“Well, I could use a bit to drink,” Nell twinkled up at her admirers. There was a scramble at the window, and a few moments later, the door to the street-level shop flew open and one of the lads beckoned. He was gangly and sandy haired, and he giggled as he ushered her inside. She hesitated a moment, wondering if she was courting danger. But she followed him up the narrow stairs, finally arriving at the room where the boys were gathered.

“Here’s the little ginger wench!” The first lad swaggered over, chuckling as he eyed her. Behind him were the boy who had let her in, the scrawny lad, and a boy with dark brown hair and snapping dark eyes. They crowded around Nell, and she suddenly felt very small. But it would never do to seem shy, so she gave them a cheeky grin and chirped, “Pleased to meet you, lads. I’m Nell.”

They were all about sixteen years old, probably nearing the end of their apprenticeships, and it looked as if their master was nowhere near, for a barrel had been tapped and stood on a table at one side of the room. Each of the boys held a mug, and from their red faces and boisterous laughs, Nell guessed they had been drinking for some time.

“I’m Nick,” said the first boy. “This is my brother Davy, and Kit and Toby.”

The boys nodded their greetings, and Nell took the mug Kit handed her and drank. The dark stout tasted full and bitter, much heavier than the small beer she was accustomed to drinking, but she swallowed it down as the boys looked on, grinning. Feeling their eyes on her a little too keenly, she went to the window.

From this height, the view stretched eastward down Fleet Street toward St. Paul’s, and southwest past Charing Cross to Whitehall Palace. Across the road to the south, she could see over the walls of the grand houses along the Thames, their imposing fronts facing London and their capacious gardens sloping down behind to the river. Every wall, window, and rooftop was occupied, and the streets as far as she could see were aswarm. The noise of the crowd was growing louder. Nell heard drumbeats and the tramp of booted feet.

“Here they come!” Kit shouted, and the lads crowded to the windows around Nell. A shimmering wave of silver moved towards her, and she saw that it was a column of men marching. At the front was a rank of soldiers in buff coats with sleeves of cloth of silver, a row of drummers to the fore, rapping out a sharp tattoo as they swung along. Behind them marched hundreds of gentlemen in cloth of silver that flashed and shone.

Toby whistled. “Lord. Never knew there was so many gentlemen.”

“There wasn’t, a month since,” laughed Nick. “They was all lying quiet in the country or somewheres. Only now the king is come and it’s safe again. . . .”

The silver swarm was followed by a phalanx of gentlemen in velvet coats, interspersed with footmen in plush new liveries of deep purple and sea green.

“I didn’t know there was so many colours,” Nell breathed, awed by the beauty of the rich reds, greens, blues, and golds. “I didn’t know they could make cloth like that.”

“They can if you can pay for it,” said Davy.

“Aye,” Nick agreed. “I’ll wager Barbara Palmer has a gown of stuff like that.” He turned to Nell with a wink.

“Who’s Barbara Palmer?” she asked, not wanting to seem ignorant, but desperate to know.

“Why, the king’s whore!” Nick cried. “They do say she’s the most beautiful woman in England. Nought but the best for the king!”

Nell took this in with interest. The king’s whore. Wearing fine clothes. The whores she knew made themselves as brave and showy as they could, but she had never seen anything like the finery on display today.

The Sheriff of London and his men, all in scarlet, passed and were succeeded by the gentlemen of the London companies—the goldsmiths, vintners, bakers, and other guilds that supplied the City, each with its fluttering banner.

“There he is!” cried Kit. “Our master,” he explained, pointing to a beefy man in deep blue who strode along with his brothers in trade.

After the guilds came the aldermen of London, in scarlet gowns, and then more soldiers with tall pikes and halberds. But unlike the grim-faced soldiers who had patrolled the streets throughout her life, these men did not strike fear into Nell, for they couldn’t help smiling at the ringing cheers.

The roaring of the crowd exploded into a frenzy. Nell scrambled for a hold on the windowsill and craned to get a better view.

The king was coming. Three men on horseback rode through Temple Bar, but the king could only be the one in the middle, in a cloth-of-silver doublet trimmed in gold, his saddle and bridle richly worked in gold. He turned from side to side to wave as blossoms showered down upon him. The throngs pressed forward, waving, throwing their hats into the air, calling out to him—“God save the king,” “God bless Your Majesty,” “Thank God for this day!”

“Those are his brothers,” Toby shouted to Nell. “The Duke of

York and the Duke of Gloucester.” They were a dazzling sight, all in silver, riding side by side on three enormous dark stallions, radiant as angels in the noonday sun.

The king was close enough now that Nell could see him clearly. Big and broad shouldered, he sat tall in the gilded saddle, long booted legs straightening as he stood in the stirrups, as if he could not stay seated in the face of his people’s adulation. His long dark curls cascaded over his shoulders as he swept his hat from his head and waved it, turning to either side to acknowledge the cheers.

He smiled broadly, laughing with exuberance at the tumultuous welcome. “I thank you with all my heart,” he called, his deep voice ringing out amidst the clamour and cries.

“God save King Charles!” Nell realised it was her own voice. The king looked up, and Nell caught her breath as he looked her full in the face. He grinned, teeth showing beneath his dark moustache, eyes twinkling in his swarthy face, and called back to her, “I thank you, sweetheart!” Impulsively, Nell blew him a kiss and was immediately overcome with horror at the audacity of her act. But the king threw his head back and laughed, then blew a kiss to her, waving as he and his brothers rode on.

Nell giggled and bounced off the windowsill. “Did you see? He blew me a kiss!”

“Aye, and from what I hear of him, he’d offer you more than a kiss, was you close enough for him to reach you!” Nick guffawed. “He’s got a mistress who’s another man’s wife, and two or three merry-begotten brats by other women, they say. For who will say nay to the king?”

Not I, thought Nell.

The procession continued below, but once the king had passed, Nell’s attention was no longer focused exclusively on the street. Nick refilled her mug, and the other boys drifted away from the window to drink.

Nell was in high good humour, awed by the glamour of the procession and her exchange with the king. Her head swam a bit from the stout and from the excitement at being out on her own for the first time, in company with these older boys, almost men.

“What think you of the king, Nelly?” Kit asked.

“Oh,” she cooed, “he’s fine as hands can make him.”

“Not finer than me, surely?” cried Nick.

“Oh, no,” Nell shot back. “No more than a diamond is finer than a dog turd.” The boys roared and moved in close around her. At the heart of this laughing group, she felt worldly and sophisticated. She had been silly to doubt that she could handle the lads. They were eating out of her hand.

“Ah, Nick, you’re not good enough for Nell,” Toby chortled. “Mayhap you’d have better luck with Barbara Palmer.”

“Well, Nell?” Davy laughed. “Do you think she’d have him?”

“Aye, when hens make holy water,” Nell answered tartly.

“What?” Nick gawped at her in mock amazement. “How can you say such a thing? When you’ve hardly met me! Why, I have qualities.”

“Aye, and a bumblebee in a cow turd thinks himself a king,” she retorted. “Is there no end of your talking?”

“I’ll leave off my talking and set you to moaning,” Nick leered, sidling closer. “Once a mort is lucky enough to feel my quim-stake, she’s not like to forget it.”

Nell gave him a shove in the belly.

“Enough of your bear-garden discourse.”

“Aye, speak that way to Barbara Palmer, and you’re like to be taken out for air and exercise,” Toby grinned.

“No, you’d get worse than a whipping at the cart’s arse for giving her the cutty eye,” Kit shook his head. “Look the wrong way at the king’s doxy and you’ll piss when you can’t whistle.”

“How say you, Nick?” Davy asked. “Do you reckon there’s a woman worth hanging for?”

“If there is,” Nick said, “I’ve yet to clap eyes on her.”

“Don’t lose hope yet.” Nell batted her eyes at him. “The day is young.”

Eventually the last of the king’s train passed, followed by a straggling tail of children and beggars, but the crowds in the street below did not disperse. Drink flowed and piles of wood were being stacked in preparation for celebratory bonfires. The party would continue through the night.

“Come on, who’s for wandering?” Nick turned from the window. “To Whitehall!” he bellowed, once they were in the street. “I want to see this trull of the king’s.”

Their progress was slow, as the way toward Whitehall was packed with others wending their way there, and there were constant diversions. Musicians, jugglers, stilt walkers, and rope dancers performed, as if Bartholomew Fair had come early.

Before the palace, the gang crowded with others around a roaring bonfire. The windows of the Banqueting House glowed from the light of hundreds of candles. Carriages clogged the street, the coachmen and footmen gathered in knots to talk as they waited for their masters.

“The king’s having his supper now, before the whole court,” Nick said. “I reckon he’s got that Barbara Palmer with him.” He moved closer to Nell and she felt his eyes hot on her. He was quite big and the intensity of his gaze made her heart race.

“I know I’d have her,” he continued, “wherever and whenever I wanted, was I king.” The boys hooted their agreement, but Nick’s attention was on Nell now. He pulled her to him roughly and ran a hand heavily over her small breasts. She felt a surge of fear and tried to pull away.

Someone nearby cried out, the crowd stirred and buzzed, and Nell saw that the king had appeared at one of the windows of the Banqueting House. Nick loosened his hold on her and turned to gawk. The light blazing behind the king created a golden aura

around him. The bonfires illuminated his face and made the silver of his doublet shine. He raised a hand to salute the crowds below, and they roared their approval and welcome.

Then a woman appeared next to him, and Nell knew that this must be the famous Barbara Palmer. She was darkly beautiful, her hair dressed in elaborate curls, and she wore a low-cut gown of deep red that set off the pale lushness of her bosom. As she leaned close to the king, sparkles and flashes of light from the jewels at her ears and throat cut through the shadows.

Nell had never seen a woman so stunning. She looked carefully, memorising every detail, and longed to be like her—gorgeously dressed, elegant, and at ease before the adoring crowds.

Barbara Palmer disappeared from view. The king gave a final wave to the crowds and followed her.

“Aye, just give me half an hour with her,” crowed Nick. “I reckon she’d be worth the price.”

“You’ll not earn the cost of her in your lifetime!” Davy gibed.

Nell felt a rush of envy. She didn’t want to lose the delicious new sensation of feeling admired and special.

“She may be beautiful,” she announced, tossing her tangled curls, “but she’s not the only one worth her price.”

This pronouncement produced a ripple of some indefinable undercurrent and an exchange of meaningful glances among the lads. Nick moved close to her, and she could not breathe for the nearness of him and his size. The firelight flickered orange on his face, and on the faces of the other lads, who stood flanking him and regarding her with new interest.

“Is that so?” Nick asked, taking a lazy drink. His eyes gleamed in the dark. “And just what might your price be?”

Nell’s stomach heaved with nervous excitement, but remembering Barbara Palmer’s easy confidence, she managed an inviting smile as she looked up at him. She thought of what Deb and Molly had said—was it only this morning?—about the riches to be made this night.

“Sixpence,” she said to him. And then, taking in the others with a flicker of her eyes, “A piece.”

“Well, then. Time’s a-wasting,” said Nick, with a canine grin. He glanced toward the blackness of St. James’s Park, grabbed Nell by the wrist, and pulled her along, the other boys in tow.

The park was scattered with revellers, but there were secluded dens amidst the darkness of the spreading trees and tangled shrubbery, and in any case, no one was likely to ask questions, tonight of all nights. Nick drew Nell into a thicket of trees, and the others crowded in behind him.

This felt very different from the morning’s hasty coupling with the red-haired apprentice, and facing the four lads, panic rose in Nell’s throat. But there was nothing really to be afraid of, was there? A bit of mess and it would all be done. And she would be two shillings the richer. Best to get it over with. She turned to find the driest spot on which to lie, but before she could move further, Nick shoved her down and onto her back, pulled her skirt up to her waist, and was on top of her.

He leaned on one forearm as he unbuttoned his breeches, his weight taking Nell’s breath away, then spit on his palm, guided himself between her legs and entered her hard. Her nether parts were tender, and his assault made her gasp in pain. She bit her lip and struggled not to whimper.

Nick lasted much longer than the young apprentice had, and finished with a low growl and a deep sustained thrust that made Nell cry out. He looked down at her for a moment, vulpine triumph in his eyes, then, grunting, heaved himself off her, put his cock back in his breeches, and buttoned his flies.

“Who’s next?” he asked. There was a moment of hesitation, and he turned in irritation to his mates. “What ails you? I said who’s next?”

Toby came forward. He was faster than Nick, and Nick having spent within her made his entry easier, but still it was painful. Nell

turned her head so that she would not have to look him in the eyes. The other boys needed no urging now. Davy and Kit hovered on either side of her, watching, eager for their turns, and Davy knelt between Nell's thighs as soon as Toby was done. He hooked his arms under her knees, and he looked down at her keenly as he moved inside her, snarling like an animal.

The other boys laughed and called out their encouragement. Nell shut her eyes. Rocks and twigs pressed into her back, and the damp earth was soaking through her clothes. She didn't feel elegant and enchanting, only uncomfortable and frightened. But it would soon be over. And the money would make it all worthwhile.

Kit nearly knocked Davy aside in his haste to get on top of Nell. She was so sore now that she could barely keep from crying, but managed not to let more than a stifled moan escape.

Finally, Kit finished, and sat back to fasten his breeches.

"Come on!" Nick ordered, yanking him to his feet.

"My money!" Nell cried, struggling to get up. "Two shillings." Nick shoved her onto her back with a foot.

"Two hogs?" he sneered. "For that? We'll not pay a farthing. You're not only a whore, you're a stupid whore, at that."

Nell scrambled to her feet and caught at him. They couldn't. After all she had suffered.

"You said—you agreed!" But Nick just flung her away, and she tripped sideways and fell to her knees as the boys ran, crashing away through the branches.

It was hopeless. She gulped, fighting back sobs. Every part of her ached; the insides of her bruised thighs were clammy; she was covered in mud. She tried to straighten her clothes, and cried out as she realised that her rosette was gone. In a panic, she looked and felt around her. And there it was. It must have come off when Nick first pushed her down and been crushed beneath her. It lay crumpled in the muck, its beautiful bright colours sodden grey.

The tears Nell had held back flowed now, and she wept, her body

shaking, as she clutched the precious knot of ribbons in her hand. Nick was right. How stupid she had been, to think that she could ever be like the glorious Barbara Palmer. She was just a shabby little ragamuffin, fit for nothing better than selling oysters. Her dreams of freedom had been so much foolishness. She would have no choice but to go back to her mother, to endure the beating that she knew awaited her, and resume her life of drudgery.

When she had finally cried herself out, Nell pushed herself up, wincing in pain, and wiped her nose and eyes on her shift. Her fingers closed around the lump in the hem. Her remaining pennies were still there. One shred of consolation. But the money would not buy her lodging for the night, and she longed to lie herself down. She could go home. Or spend a second night on the street. Unless she could find Rose. That thought brought her to her feet. Rose would surely be at Madam Ross's.

She emerged from the trees. There were still crowds gathered around the bonfires before the palace. She hurried toward Charing Cross, spurred on by hunger and weariness and the hope of comfort. Fires burned in the Strand and music drifted towards her on the warm evening breeze. She turned into the warren of narrow lanes that lay to the north of Covent Garden. She was near home now, and it felt odd to bypass the familiar close. But, resolutely, she made toward Lewkenor's Lane.

"Nell!" Rose's voice called her name. Nell rushed toward Rose and clung to her.

"I've been looking for you all the day," Rose exclaimed, and then took in Nell's state of dishevelment. "Wherever have you been?"

Nell's tears burst forth again, and Rose guided her to a step, sat her down, and listened as the whole story came out in a rush. After she finished, Nell sat sobbing, overcome by humiliation and shame. Rose stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

"Oh, Nelly," she said. "I wish I had found you this morning. If I had only known what was in your mind. . . ." She shook her head,

considering, then put a finger under Nell's chin and tilted Nell's face to hers. Nell looked into her sister's eyes, and Rose's voice was gentle.

"I cannot make the world a different place than it is. But I can tell you this: Get the money first. Always."