

The Darling Strumpet

By Gillian Bagwell

*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 wondrous fate.*

From
A Panegyrick on Nelly
1681
Anonymous

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 laborers, 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 the Second, 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?

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 tag rag 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 humor. 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 colors, and her clothes were pinned all over with knots of silken splendor. Nell stared at the most beautiful thing she had ever seen—a knot of ribbons the colors 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 realized 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-colored 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,” nodded Deb. 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 someplace 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."