

## **The September Queen**

*By Gillian Bagwell*

It was near midnight when Jane heard the soft whinny of a horse in the darkness of the stable yard. John was back from Moseley. She could hardly believe that the king would really be in the house in a moment. She lifted the candle to view herself in the mirror above her dressing table. She looked anxious and white-faced, her eyes wide in the darkness of the room. She attempted a smile. Better. She wondered if she should change clothes. She had pondered what to wear. It was the king, after all, whom she would be greeting, and yet she would be meeting him in the kitchen in the middle of the night. She had settled on her favorite gown, a brocade of dusky rose, set off by the lace-trimmed sleeves of her shift. Her bosom swelled at the neckline of the bodice, and she draped a white kerchief around her neck and then tossed it away. It was the king, and she would look as pretty as she could, whatever the circumstances. She tucked a stray curl into place, and crept silently out of her room.

As Jane approached the kitchen door, she could hear men's voices. She paused to listen, her heart beating fast. John's voice, quiet and steady, but intense with emotion. Wilmot's tenor whisper. And a lower voice, speaking only a few words, which could only be the voice of the king.

She took a deep breath and entered the kitchen. The men were huddled near the warmth of the fireplace, their faces eerie in the flickering firelight. She stared with shock at what appeared to be a tall scarecrow standing between John and Lord Wilmot. Beneath a greasy and shapeless gray steeple-crowned hat, bloodshot eyes shone from a face that was freakishly mottled sooty black and greenish brown and creased with sweat and dirt, dark hair hanging lank and damp on either side. A threadbare green coat, too small for the broad shoulders, stretched over a battered leather doublet and ragged breeches, and the stockings of coarse yarn were heavily darned at the knees.

The king it must be, but if Jane had not known otherwise, she would have thought him some desperate beggar or Tom O'Bedlam. The men were looking at her and she collected her wits enough to curtsy deeply.

"You are most welcome, Your-" she began, but the scarecrow hastened to her and raised her, whispering fiercely, "No formalities, I pray you, Mistress. I thank you for your hospitality, but the less said the better for all."

Jane looked up at into the shining dark eyes of the king. She was astonished to see him summon a weary smile, and she found herself smiling back, her nervousness melting away. "Then I will say only I pray you sit, sir, while I get you some supper."

Wilmot's serving man settled himself on a stool by the fireplace and the others sat at the kitchen table, seeming near to collapse now that they were safe inside. Jane drew a pitcher of ale and put it before them with slipware mugs, and then dished stew from the kettle that hung on a hook to the side of the fire. She was pleased at the smile on the king's face when she set a steaming dish before him, and when she came back a minute later with bread, cheese, and butter, he had already eaten most of the stew.

"Forgive my animal nature, Mistress," he said, meeting her eyes. "It's little I've had to eat in the last days, and this meal is the best that I can recall in my life, it seems."

Jane blushed, and took up his empty dish. "Then I beg you let me give you more, sir." The king consumed the second plate of stew hungrily while John and Wilmot and Wilmot's man ate at a slower pace. Jane lit some more candles, and as the light fell on the king's feet, she was shocked to see that his shoes had been slit around the sides, and that his protruding toes were bandaged and dark with dried blood. What a terrible ordeal he had already passed through in the last few days, she thought, and what unknown dangers lay ahead of him.

"My brother has fresh clothes for you, sir," she said, setting another loaf of bread upon the table. "And water for a bath is hot and ready."

"The happiest words I've had in a week." He smiled, and she was pleased that so simple a thing probably was the most welcome gift she could give him at that moment.

"Then I will bid you good night," she murmured, with a half curtsy. "And I will see you on the morrow, a changed man."

Jane turned to go, but the king took her hand and spoke again. "I thank you, Mistress Lane, most humbly, for your kindness and your bravery."

Jane felt herself lost in his eyes, and was conscious of the other men watching her.

"Not at all, sir," she murmured. "I'm happy to do whatever I can in your service."

The king raised her hand to his lips and kissed it, and she felt as though a bolt of lightning had shot through her. She tried to speak but no sound would come, and she could only nod and smile as she fled into the darkness of the hall. In bed, Jane lay looking at the star-flecked night sky outside her window. She touched the back of her hand, where the king had kissed her. She seemed to feel the imprint of his lips on her skin and shivered. She was excited, but a thrill of terror was roiling her belly. Only a few days ago she had been longing for adventure, but what lay ahead of her was no story out of a book, but a real journey fraught with danger. The plan that had seemed thrilling now felt like madness. The king was a big man, not easily disguised. What hope was there that they could make their way undetected along a hundred miles of roads teeming with enemy troopers, and pass among countless common people for whom a thousand-pound reward would mean a life of security?

Guide us and protect us, Lord, Jane prayed. Make clear our path and cloud the vision of our foes. Preserve the king, that he may live to protect our beloved England. And help me to have the courage to see the journey through, whatever may come.