

Daughter of the White Rose



DIANE ZAHLER

DAUGHTER
OF THE
WHITE ROSE

DIANE ZAHLER

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**FOR PHIL
YOU TOLD ME SO**

**FOR JULIUS
I WILL MISS YOU EVERYDAY**



SEPTEMBER 1485



*There is a riddle that Master Thaddeus told me,
the last time I saw him.*

We were in a tavern in Gravesend, and I was on the run for my life. Soldiers with swords had pursued me across the broad mouth of the Thames. They would kill me if they found me. They would kill Master Thaddeus, too, if we were seen together. But he had been the queen's fool, and riddling was his trade; he could not help himself. So he winked an eye and said to me:

*“The twin of a prince, but with no royal kin;
A witness to murder, though no blood was shed;
She once saved two kings, through both courage and fear,
And one still lives on, but the other is dead.
Who is she?”*

I knew the answer, of course.

*That twin, that witness, that brave, frightened girl was me. Me,
Nell Gould, who once kissed a king, and rescued a prince.*

*Who was responsible for the death of the boy she loved more than
any other.*

*Me, Nell Gould, who was the daughter of the queen of England's
butcher.*

This is how it happened.

CHAPTER ONE



“Papa, tell me my story!” I begged.

It was my fourth birthday, and I sat on my father’s knee before the fire. I loved to hear the story of my birth, and of how Papa became butcher to the queen. The two tales were woven together like the threads of a tapestry, and I made him tell them again and again.

“Your story, Nell?” he teased me. “It is not yours, but the prince’s story.”

“Tell it!” I demanded. And Papa, who could deny me nothing, began.

In the year I was born, there were two kings in England.

One was King Henry the Sixth from the House of Lancaster, the house of the red rose. He was ill in mind and body; he had spent one entire year without speaking or moving, and he couldn’t even drink without attendants’ help. He was not esteemed, for he was a poor king, wasting English money on hopeless wars and giving other men’s land to his favorites.

The other was King Edward the Fourth from the House of York, the house of the white rose. He was a distant cousin of King Henry's who had taken the throne by force of arms when Henry became too sick to rule. All the people loved King Edward—he was tall, handsome, gallant. He brought back order and peace, and his subjects were grateful for it.

But Henry grew better, and he wanted to win back his crown. So the two kings went to war, red rose against white, in the Wars of the Roses.

At that time, my mother was in her seventh month of pregnancy—and so was King Edward's wife, Queen Elizabeth. Of course, the queen could not go to war with her husband, but she couldn't remain in the royal palace, either; if King Henry's soldiers should get to her and take her, she would be in terrible danger. So, to stay safe, she went into sanctuary at Westminster Abbey, where none could be harmed, being under the protection of the church.

The abbey was at the end of our street. My father told me how he watched the procession of the queen and her attendants pass the house.

"Imagine it, Nell," he said to me, as I sat breathless on his lap. "All the merchants of King Street—the tailor, the saddler, the cooper, the fletcher, both of the bakers—standing outside their shops, with all their wives and children and servants. No one made a sound. We just waited. And then, at last, we saw the ladies coming, a long line of them in their silks and satins, walking down the street. Servants carried the princesses, as little

as they were. The queen rode in a covered litter embroidered with the royal arms, and as she passed, we all cheered for her courage.”

As he spoke, I could see the procession as clear as a painting: the little princesses, the beautiful ladies in their bright gowns, the servants carrying bags and boxes, the curtains of the litter parting just a bit as the queen peeked out to see her cheering subjects.

The abbey was just beside Westminster Palace. Papa’s shop was so close that he often supplied the royal kitchens with meat for feast days, and he recognized one of the palace cooks as he walked past. Stepping out from the crowd, Papa cried, “Master Keene, does the queen have need of food?”

My father was not a forward-speaking man, but he hated the idea that Queen Elizabeth, as heavy with child as his own wife, could be in danger. “I knew I spoke above myself, Nell,” he said when he told that part of the story. “My heart nearly beat out of my chest, I was that afraid!” I laughed, for I thought then that my father was not afraid of anything.

The cook stopped and looked searchingly at Papa. “Butcher Gould, is it not?” he said. “Do you know what you ask, sir? If you send food to the queen, and her cause is lost . . .”

He did not need to finish. Papa knew what might happen to him if he supported King Edward’s queen and King Henry won the throne back. It would be treason, and he could go to prison—or even lose his head. Still, he nodded to Master Keene.

The cook smiled. “I will find out what we need and send

word to you,” he said, and the somber procession passed by and through the great gates of the abbey, where Abbot Mylling waited to care for the queen, her daughters, and all their many attendants, and where they would be safe, protected by law from any of King Henry’s followers who might have wanted to harm them.

The queen even stayed in the abbot’s own quarters, which were grand, with wall hangings and gold plate. So she did not really suffer, except with worry about her husband and her own future.

That night, a messenger arrived at our rooms above the butcher shop on King Street. He carried a note on thick royal parchment that Papa kept always afterward on his person.

The queen has need of half-a-beef and two muttons for each week of her seclusion.

The queen was asking Papa to bring meat to her—to help her survive in sanctuary! Forever after, Papa’s cheeks reddened with pride when he spoke of this message—and when he wanted comfort or reassurance, he would put a hand on the leather pouch at his belt that held that scrap of paper marked with the royal crest.

But this work was dangerous, and soon enough the news came that King Edward had been forced into exile in Burgundy. King Henry returned to London, traveled the three miles to Westminster Palace, and took back the throne—still sickly, but

well enough to appear in public. The queen, too pregnant now to move, stayed in sanctuary, and King Henry, a devout man, vowed he would not harm her.

But he made no such vow to her supporters, and Papa had to be very careful when he brought the queen her meat.

As the weeks went by, Papa delivered the meat himself each Thursday, and he reported to my mother—and later described to me—how life went on inside.

“There were thieves and criminals of all types just outside the abbey walls,” he said. “Men whose faces were scarred from fighting. Men who’d be long gone with your purse before you even noticed it was missing! Some were hungry, and the meat I carried was a great temptation to them. They would reach out to me and grasp at my packages. More than once I had to use my stick to hold them off!” I imagined these men, greedy or pathetic or both, and shivered at Papa’s bravery.

Leaving the alleys of the outer sanctuary district, which surrounded the abbey, Papa would pass through a gate into the hush of the abbey compound itself. There, quiet monks walked by, their lips moving in silent prayer, and the scent of boxwood and herbs took over from the stench of manure and the sweat of the crowds that lived just outside. Papa would stride to the abbey kitchens and leave his packages with the grateful cook, sometimes giving pointers on how best to prepare the week’s cuts—the mutton is a bit tough and would benefit from extra stewing, he would say, or the beef is young and tender and should not be masked with a sauce.

Occasionally, the queen would call him to her and they would exchange a few words, as she had none of the usual amusements of court to entertain her and longed for news of the outside world. My mother eagerly awaited Papa's descriptions of these visits.

"The queen is very large, and very uncomfortable," he told her. "She sits on a cushioned couch with her feet up on an embroidered stool. She said to me, 'Butcher Gould, do your wife's feet swell? My feet did not swell with my daughters, but with this child, I can barely walk.'"

"What did you say to her?" My mother loved these stories. She was only nineteen, and I would be her first child. She found it wonderful to think that a queen, more than a decade older and with several children already, should complain of the same ailments as a simple butcher's wife.

"Well, all the ladies gasped at her immodesty, but the queen doesn't seem to hold with common manners. She speaks her mind. I told her that your feet were swollen to twice their usual size, but that I was sure your discomfort could not be as great as hers."

"John!" My mother began to laugh.

"She *is* the queen, my love," Papa said, laughing as well. "Should your suffering be equal to hers?"

Queen Elizabeth had a reputation as variable as her moods. She was cold-hearted and proud, people said, but she had a hot temper. Many despised her because she was a commoner, the daughter of a mere knight—and she'd been married before, a

widow and the mother of two children already when she wed the king in secret. Had the king tried *openly* to marry a commoner, Papa said, there would have been an outcry so great as to be heard across the Channel in France.

But common or not, the queen's family, the Woodvilles, were rich and powerful, and rumors of betrayal, treason, and even murder swirled around them. Some actually believed the queen used witchcraft to enchant King Edward into marrying her, but in truth, I always thought that her face was enchantment enough. Even swollen with child and fearful for her very life, Papa reported, her high brow remained unlined, her eyes as blue as a tranquil sky, her hair a smooth sheet of shining gold.

In sanctuary, with Papa, she let down her guard. I think now that she must have been frightened and lonely, and so she welcomed the knowledge that a butcher's wife was also seven, then eight, then nine months along, sharing in the common aches and pains that went with the condition.

Often Papa brought back a vial of rosewater for Mama from the queen—"To bathe your tired brow," he quoted—or a dainty pastry. And as both their confinements neared, he carried home one day an embroidered coverlet for my cradle. True, a lady-in-waiting had stitched the design of blue-and-gold flowers and green leaves, but in the corner was an interwoven *E* and *R*, *Elizabeth Regina*, done by the queen's own hand. It was our household's foremost treasure.

Mama's labor started early one Wednesday, and when it came time for Papa to deliver his meats to the abbey on Thursday,

I still had not been born. Her pains were dreadful, and Papa grew alarmed. He took it on himself to ask the queen for help. Though she herself was feeling the first twinges of childbirth, she sent with Papa her own doctor, the Italian Dr. Serigo. Mama protested when the doctor entered her bedchamber, wanting only her midwife, not the unknown attentions of a stranger, but Papa soothed her.

“The queen, too, labors, my love,” he said, “and yet she sends you her doctor. She fears for your long efforts and wishes to help you. You must let the doctor do his work.”

As Papa described it, Mama at last closed her eyes, sighed, and gave up her long struggle to the Italian, who knew at once that the birth cord was wrapped dangerously around my neck, and did what had to be done to help us both.

And so I was born, slippery and squalling, into the hands of Dr. Serigo, the same hands that hours later would hold the prince named Edward, the king’s first son.

Dr. Serigo took my father aside after the birth. “Your wife is very weak,” he told Papa. “She has labored two full days and lost much blood. Keep her abed for a fortnight at least, and be sure that she does not lift or scrub any time soon.” Papa grasped the doctor’s hand and tried to give him money, for he had saved Mama’s life. But Dr. Serigo would take nothing but a cup of wine, stroking my damp red cheek before he returned to the queen.

“You are a special one, my girl,” Papa said, imitating the doctor’s voice for me. “You will share a birthday with the heir of England—surely this is a sign of great things for you!”

That night the abbey bells rang out, and soon all of Westminster—and then all of London, and then all of England—knew that a prince was born. A prince—and a butcher’s daughter, as well. Oh, but I loved that part of the story! I pretended, as I sat with Papa’s arms tight around me and his beard warm and scratchy against my cheek, that the bells had rung for me.

Not much later, Papa recounted, he came home in a state of great excitement. “Alice!” he cried to Mama as she lay, still pale and feverish, in a bed made up beside the hall fireplace. “The queen wants to see our Nell!”

Mama gasped. “But—why?”

Papa perched beside her on the bed. “Dr. Serigo boasted of how he saved you—and Nell—and how it was by the queen’s generosity in sending him to you that little Nell is here at all—”

“Which is true,” Mama interrupted mildly.

“Yes, yes, so it is,” Papa agreed. “But Queen Elizabeth was so pleased by the story that she wants to see its result. I am to bring Nell to her tomorrow!”

A lively spark came into Mama’s eyes, and she struggled upright to help our serving girl, Mathilda, bathe me and comb my few hairs and dress me in my embroidered christening robe.

On a bright December morning, Papa carried me down King Street and into the abbey. There, he was taken into the room where the queen held court, which he later described to me so precisely that I can see it still, if I should close my eyes.

At one end of the room, a fire blazed in a huge carved fireplace, and every wall was draped with thick woven tapestries.

The floor, he said, gleamed with painted tiles, each decorated with a scene of royalty at play—hunting, dancing, feasting. Ladies sat on benches cushioned with embroidered pillows. They sewed and chatted, sounding, Papa said, like a flock of pretty birds, with one crow in their midst: the queen’s fool, Master Thaddeus. He was a slight man who told riddles and tales in a singsong voice. His jester’s clothes of motley stripes and patches stood out among the ladies’ silks and velvets.

Before the fire played the queen’s three daughters: Elizabeth, called Bess, who was four; Mary, three years old; and Cecily, one, who toddled after a gilded ball her sisters rolled to her.

In the middle of everything, the queen sat in a carved wooden chair beside an elaborate cradle. She seemed fully recovered from the suffering of childbirth and was as beautiful as ever. Her high-waisted gown was of gold brocade, trimmed with ermine and embroidered with vivid blue flowers. On her head was a white gauze butterfly headdress, from which her golden hair peeked out at her forehead. Papa’s hands shook at this vision so that he feared he would drop me, and he faltered as he came forward to present me.

“Her Christian name is Eleanor, Your Majesty,” Papa told the queen. “We call her Nell.”

“She has a well-shaped head,” the queen observed, tracing my cheek with her long fingers. “But I think she will not be a beauty. Comely, perhaps, but not a beauty.” My father, who already thought I was a beauty, just nodded politely. And I, following the movement of that graceful hand with my unfocused

eyes, somehow managed to reach up and grab a finger, grasping it tightly.

“Already trying to impress her queen!” Master Thaddeus observed.

The queen smiled her enchanting smile, and her ladies-in-waiting cooed, and little Princess Bess clapped her hands and said, “Oh, Mother, let’s see how Nell likes our Ned.”

So, with my father looking on astonished, I was laid in the cradle beside Edward, the Prince of Wales and heir to the throne of England, four hours younger and even balder than I. We babies fussed and squealed until at last we fell asleep, warm and safe together in a royal cradle, while the battle between King Henry and King Edward, the battle for a kingdom and the prince’s future, continued outside the abbey walls.

CHAPTER TWO



But the story didn't quite end there.

"*The king is coming! Make way for the king!*" voices shouted from the street one morning. Papa leapt from the bed and ran to the window; Mama grabbed me from the cradle and held me tight.

"Whatever has happened, John?" she asked, frightened. Papa shook his head.

"Master John!" we heard Mathilda call from downstairs. Papa pulled on his clothes and scrambled down the narrow stairs to the hall, where Mathilda stood in a state of wild excitement. It was a moment before she was calm enough to speak.

"It's the king—our King Edward!" she managed at last. "The king is coming into London! Oh, sir!"

Papa, Mama, and Mathilda watched from our rooms above the shop as a mob of shopkeepers, servants, and merchants coursed through the streets. They learned, from the shouts below, that King Edward and his troops had sailed back to

England without warning. There had been a battle at Barnet, north of London, and King Henry's army was all but defeated. King Henry had given himself up to King Edward and was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Queen Elizabeth had already left sanctuary and returned to Westminster Palace by the time we heard this. King Edward and his men marched to London, and they paraded south to Westminster and then down King Street under the banner of the white rose.

Papa and the others who had supported them—and many of those who had not—let loose with their cries and cheers. It was the first time I saw the king, Papa said, for he held me high so I could view the procession, and I waved my little hands and squealed my huzzahs with the rest.

Bells rang, and people shouted, and the king waved and smiled at the head of a line of mounted soldiers, his handsome face turning this way and that, his armor glinting in the weak spring sunshine. But he rode fast, and it was clear to all that he longed to see his new son for the first time.

• • •

The king did not rest long with his family, however, for the war was not truly finished.

There was a huge battle right after that, King Edward's soldiers against the last of King Henry's. The two armies came together on Easter morning, in a thick mist on a field near London. Not five hours later, two thousand men lay dead, and finally it was ended.

Papa and Mama and I were at St. Margaret's, our parish church, when the tidings came. "The door of the church burst open"—Papa told the tale when I was older—"and we rose up from the pews in fear. Ladies screamed. The priest trembled at the pulpit. We knew there had been a battle, but we had no idea who'd won. Were these Henry's men, victorious, come to punish King Edward's supporters? Would they run us through with their lances, put our heads on pikes?"

"Oh, Papa!" I cried, shivering in delicious terror, for I knew the answer.

"Don't frighten the child, John!" Mama said reprovingly.

"But no," Papa went on. "They were King Edward's, carrying the banner of the white rose, and they pushed the priest aside and shouted to the congregation, '*The rightful and righteous King Edward has won the day!*'"

The cries of joy that rose at the news, Papa said, seemed to ascend through the vaulted ceiling of St. Margaret's straight to Heaven. For years the strife between Henry and Edward had divided town from town, even brother from brother, emptying the kingdom's treasury and leaving the people to wonder if there would ever be peace. So the gladness felt in Westminster that day was echoed throughout the kingdom.

King Edward returned to London once more, his foes defeated, his power secure. Henry the Sixth was his prisoner, and the war was over. King Edward and his friend Lord Hastings, darkly bearded and small beside the king, marched in triumph with all their soldiers through the streets. Papa watched the grand procession,

heralded by trumpets and gaily colored flags and banners. Mama remained at home with me, but out the window she could see the crowds, and the bonfires, and the minstrels and street mummers flocking down the Strand—the road along the River Thames between London and Westminster—in merry celebration.

Papa danced and sang with them all night, but in the morning when he came back to us, his face was grim.

“King Henry is dead,” he told Mama as she stroked his aching head. “Poor sick Henry is dead, God rest his soul.”

“But how?” Mama asked, appalled.

“He died in the Tower last night. Some say he was murdered.”

“By . . . King Edward?” Mama whispered.

“I cannot believe our king would order such a thing,” Papa said. “People say it was the king’s brother Richard who did the deed, to clear a path to the throne. Even King Henry’s staunchest supporters wouldn’t question King Edward’s right to rule if Henry were dead. But who’s to know what really happened?” He shook his head. “I must go out again, my love. They will be bringing King Henry’s body through the streets to St. Paul’s Cathedral. Surely if King Edward were guilty of . . . were responsible for his death, he would not allow that.”

Mama nodded, and Papa splashed cold water on his face and changed his ale-soaked shirt before he left to walk the two miles up the Strand to St. Paul’s. He stood with a silent crowd as the body of King Henry was carried publicly through London to the cathedral. They laid him there with his face showing so everyone could believe him truly dead.

“*Murder!*” was whispered in the alleys and back ways of Westminster. But all of England was tired of war and nothing could be proved, so the charges of murder faded away. Now, though, I wonder. I think that the darkness of those whispers cast a shadow over King Edward, and his whole family, that they could never quite escape.

With King Edward’s return to Westminster, our family was forgotten, it seemed. There was no need of Papa’s services, nor of mine. When Queen Elizabeth had lived in sanctuary, every so often a messenger from her court had come to our door. The prince was colicky, and Queen Elizabeth declared that only my warm self beside her son would soothe him when he howled. With the neighbors peeping from their doors, Papa would carry me down the street to the abbey, and I would spend some hours kicking and cooing in Prince Ned’s cradle, helping him to calm himself and sleep. But this no longer happened. Our lives became more like our neighbors’ lives.

I think that Papa must have missed the excitement and danger of that time. Now he spent his days going to the cattle market in Smithfield, visiting his pastures at Tothill where he raised beef, or overseeing his slaughterhouse, while his apprentice, Simon, helped Mama mind the shop. Two days a week, Papa himself worked in the shop while Mama made candles or stuffed sausages. I slept in my cradle at Mama’s side or, as the months passed, played on the shop floor, which Mama and Mathilda worked hard to keep spotless.

In November I had my first birthday. We were sitting in the

hall before a warm fire when a knock came at the shop door. Mathilda was hoping to see Thomas, the draper's son, who was courting her, and she clattered through the shop eagerly, adjusting her hair and the neckline of her gown.

But in a minute she was back in the hall, her face pink. "Master John," she gasped, "it's a messenger from the king."

Mama looked up from her sewing, startled, as Papa stood and said, "Show him in, Mathilda."

The messenger, a young page, was clearly disdainful at visiting a butcher's home. He kept his hat on, and held himself in a way that hinted he feared getting his fine clothes dirty in such a house. Speaking in a high, nasal voice, he said in a rush, "Butcher Gould, the king's steward sends you the greetings of King Edward and Queen Elizabeth this second day of November and wishes you joy on the anniversary of your daughter's birth."

"Oh!" Mama breathed.

The page ignored her and continued. "The steward desires you to know that the king is aware of your sacrifice and your aid to his queen in her time of greatest need. To express his thanks, you are invited to become part of Prince Edward's household, as butcher to the prince."

Papa was stunned, and Mama burst into tears of shock and confusion, while Mathilda, speechless for once, flapped her apron up and down helplessly.

"What does this mean?" Papa asked finally.

"If you should accept the post, you will serve the prince's household as they need you. You will oversee the purchase

and distribution of meats for said household, which numbers seventy-three.” The page’s sour expression made clear his opinion of Papa’s presence at court.

“Seventy-three!” Papa murmured. How many sides of beef and mutton would that be? And the royal family ate other meats as well—capon, venison, lamb, kid. Ordinarily there was little call for such exotic fare in Papa’s business. He would have to learn a whole new aspect of his trade.

“As befits a member of the prince’s household,” the page went on, “your rooms here on King Street shall be enlarged and a new sign provided for your shop. However, as your time will be spent for the most part at court, you will have to give over the daily business of your shop to your apprentices or journeyman.”

“Of course,” Papa said limply. “Well. Please tell His Grace that we are honored at the appointment. When does he wish me to begin?” There was, of course, no choice in the matter for Papa. It was a privilege he had to accept.

“Immediately.” The page turned smartly and went to the hall door. He waited impatiently while Mathilda gathered her wits enough to open the door for him, and after his exit, Mama, Papa, and Mathilda sat in silence before the fire, too surprised to speak.

“It *is* an honor,” Papa said at last. “And we won’t be moving. We can keep the shop, and our home.”

“We won’t see you much,” Mama said mournfully. “Meat for seventy-three! Do you think they’ll give you an assistant?”

• • •

In fact, they gave Papa three assistants. He had to provide enough for seventy-three hungry mouths daily, and he had to oversee the butchering and trimming of their meat, to ensure that all was of the very finest, freshest quality. It was an enormous responsibility. Even with his new helpers he worked day and night, for the Christmas season was coming on, with its many festivals and banquets.

Often he took me with him to the palace, for Mama was frequently ill in the cold months. The first time he brought me, one of the queen's grand ladies-in-waiting instructed him to take me up to the nursery, fearing that the heat and dangers of the kitchens with their five enormous fireplaces might harm me.

We were met at the door by Lady Mistress Darcy, the dour-faced woman who ruled the nursery. She glared at me, her expression darkening as she looked me up and down, from my not-entirely-clean dress to my scuffed leather shoes. I can clearly recall the way that, when she scowled, her long nose and even longer chin would nearly meet. She pursed her mouth and said, "This is the royal nursery, not a place to foster common orphans."

Father was furious. "She is not an orphan, Mistress. This is Eleanor Gould, who was born on the same day as the prince and delivered by the queen's own physician. Lady Woodville told me to bring her here."

Lady Mistress Darcy could hardly argue with that. Lady Woodville was not only a lady-in-waiting but the queen's sister, and no one to trifle with.