

THE NAME



My mother I never knew. She was sickly after my birth and died when I was two years old. My week-old sister died too. Now I am certain that my father should have married again. At the time, like every child, I wanted only to have all his attention, all his time, all his love. Roomfuls of expensive toys, bevies of hired nursemaids served only to convince me (especially during my father's frequent absences) that I was the loneliest child in the world.

Early memory brings dinner served at night in the great hall. The carved table seated forty guests, but only two of us dined there: Father at one end, his slender face partly hidden by the silver candelabra, and I at the other. My chair was of dark wood, built high especially for me. I used to curl my fingers into its deep carving. Tall footmen in livery served endless dishes. I sat and listened to my father. "You bear a proud name," he told me again and again, "the oldest name in the land. See that you are a credit to it."

"Yes, sir," I would say, as loudly as I could, with my shoulders back like a man, or as much like a man as I could manage.

Only his sister ever argued with him. "Pel should be having nursery tea for the next ten years," she said. "A child needs a real childhood."

"If you don't like my ways, don't darken my door, Amelia," my father told her.

"Please, Father, I like having dinner with you," I said. Father smiled grimly, and Aunt Amelia ordered her carriage and left.

After dinner, Father and I would sit by the fire in the library. I had the run of the place and could take down any book from the shelves. Father merely smiled his thin smile if I dropped one of the great leather tomes that were almost as heavy as I was myself. I could see that he was pleased I did not ask for help, either from him or from one of the servants. I do not remember a time when I could not read, though I had no teacher. "Read widely and observe closely," Father said. "Later, perhaps, you shall go away to school."

I never wanted to go away. I was small, smaller than the village children, and never grew very much. None of that mattered until shortly after my tenth birthday. Disease swept through the countryside that summer, killing many children and leaving others with a dragging leg or a useless arm. It did not spare our great home. I shall never forget the pain. Worse than the pain was the terror that I would not be able to breathe, that I would die of suffocation. I clung to the doctor, to the house-

keeper, to any human presence in my room, and could not be pried loose.

My father came only once. He himself tore my desperate hands from his arm. In his eyes I saw both fear and shame. "Be a man" was all he said.

Later, when I was well enough to be carried to the library, he watched from the gallery. He dictated that I should eat henceforth in my own rooms. A crippled son! How could I carry on The Name?

Slowly I regained the use of one leg. Slowly I gained strength in the other. Although I finally threw away my crutches, my limp and the tilt of my body became worse with the years. My right leg continued to grow. My left leg did not. I was thankful when all growth ceased, however short I might be.

Perhaps my father refused to see me because he loved me and was pained by the sight of my crippled body. Sometimes today I manage to consider this possibility. Mostly I felt the desolation of being abandoned, alone and unloved at ten years of age. He was a proud man, my father. He could bear almost anything except pity. Other people might have pitied him on my account, but he gave them no opportunity. Unsocial he had always been; now he became a recluse.

I was desolate. Ill, crippled, and deprived of all companionship, I kept to my rooms at first. After some months, I took my crutches and ventured out into the estate. I carried crumbs of bread and befriended the ducks on the pond. In time I learned to be so silent and still that a fawn would dare to approach.

Later still, after the need for crutches had disappeared, I would wander with my book to the riverbank above the millrace, letting sun and water heal my spirit and bring strength to my body. There one day a nymph appeared, a maiden all golden curls and dimples.

Can anyone in these wicked times believe in love, innocent love, adoring love, love without hesitation? It happened to us both, that is the miracle. Thinking later, I knew I looked like a lord, even in my old shirt and breeks, there in the sweet grass, with my back against a sturdy oak. "Oh," she murmured, "how beautiful," and bent to my lips. I caught her hands, and there was no turning back. She never winced or turned away even for a moment when she later saw my hobbled walk, my mismatched legs. "She's simple," the villagers said, feeling sorry for the miller's son, to whom she had been promised in marriage as a child. Their mothers had been childhood friends, but the girl had not grown up in the village and the miller's son was taking his time about the wedding, not sure that he would go through with it.

It was not easy for me to get the information about her that I craved, but I had learned to disseminate well. Certainly none of the servants knew my interest in the gossip they told.

How could I marry her myself? I wondered. How could I gain my father's consent? It would not be easy. Before my illness, he had half-arranged a match with an earl's daughter. If I raised the question of marriage, he would no doubt insist on the

marriage he had planned. The earl might object to a crippled son-in-law, but likely not, my looks being less important than my estates and my ability to father an heir.

Meanwhile, I wanted only my golden girl, and loved her by the riverbank in the sweet grass. Summer was forever. Wild plans for the future half-formed in my head, but never seemed real or possible. My darling lived only in the present, and happily, lovingly so. I joined her there.

It came to an end when her pregnancy began to show. Then I had to force an interview with my father. "Rejoice, Father," I told him, "a child grows, begotten of my body."

He made inquiries. "I will not see her," he wrote to me, "nor you again unless I must. The girl is a simpleton who can barely say her name, they tell me, and writes and reads not at all. Who knows if you are the father of her expected child? The miller's son must wed her. I will provide her dowry. Thus it shall be."

And thus it was. Try as I would, I could not stand against my father's will and power. The village was drunk for three days at my father's expense, and a new mill and granary were built, as well as a cottage for the happy couple. When the child was born a few months later, it was a week before I knew. I did not seek out my darling. Surely she had forgotten me already, living in the present of her new baby and her new life. I would not trouble her tender heart. But my own pain was greater than in my illness. I stop
we know what we are facing now

ne into the hills, into the forest. Wandering aimlessly, I came upon a simple stone hut. The roof had fallen in long since, but the walls were sound. I had not been trained to manual work, but set myself to construct a roof that would withstand the elements, and succeeded tolerably well. Some winter snow blew in, and my hut was always either smoky or cold (sometimes both), but it suited me. There I stayed. A shepherd boy was persuaded, for a small fee, to bring me simple food. To fill the long hours I chopped wood, and was surprised to find that when my funds ran low I could support myself with this labor. I did not need my father after all. Perhaps I could have run off with my golden girl. Perhaps we could have had our child.

Thinking thus, I would batter the great logs with my ax until exhaustion put an end to thought and feeling both.

Seasons passed, and years.

One winter day my shepherd, now a grown man, lingered in the shelter of my hut. He had brought my supplies as usual, neither of us expecting the sudden storm. "The old lord is dying," he told me. "Criers are out everywhere to seek his son and heir."

I waited for some feeling in me to emerge: bitterness perhaps, sorrow, even joy, but nothing stirred except a faint curiosity. It was enough. I could go and see him and be untouched.

Curiosity was still dominant when I approached his bed the following day. It had not been difficult to convince the household of my identity, though

twenty years had passed. My legs had grown stronger but had not changed their disproportion. My body, though lithe and muscled, was more twisted. The soft shirt felt strange against my callused palms. "Forgive me, my son," whispered the shrunken figure on the bed. "Forgive."

How he hated pity, my father, but no other feeling was possible. "I forgive you," I told him, and again, "I forgive."

Forgiveness came easily to my lips then, but it was fortunate that my father died that night, before I began to discover what had happened, before my rage began to rise. Years before, I discovered, the old miller had died and the son had taken his place. He came now to the great hall where my father's body lay in state, paying his respects along with everybody else, great and small. He had grown fat and gray. His belly walked before him. I did not know him. I scanned every female face, waiting to see my beloved. I could not have failed to recognize her, no matter how much she had changed. She did not appear.

I could not chance damaging her reputation by direct inquiries. It was several days before I pieced together the story, the repeated beatings, the ugly death. Accidental, the judge had ruled, but my darling was surefooted by day or night. I knew she would never have fallen to her death down a flight of stairs. The miller was warned to take good care of his baby daughter. No further accidents would be tolerated.

"His" daughter! I sent for both of them immedi-

ately, but they were gone. They had left that very afternoon for the city. "The miller is taking a special fine white flour to the king himself," my courier said in awe. "His daughter is to be presented, along with other young ladies. She is very beautiful, even though her father is only a miller."

I had never been presented myself and had no friends at court. I rode badly and painfully. I possessed no clothes suitable for society. Nonetheless, I took horse immediately, accompanied by two servants. The carriage would have been easier, but I could not wait. This time, things would go *my* way. My haste was warranted. Was that miller vengeful or just greedy? The fool! He had told the king that she could spin straw into gold. The king—another fool—had locked her and her spinning wheel into a room full of straw, vowing to have her executed next morning if the straw had not been turned into gold. His chamberlain was having a scaffold erected. "Nobody can spin straw into gold," the watchers said. "We might as well be here early for the hanging."

Then I blessed the old servant who had urged me to take gold and had shown me my father's treasure chest. It was not easy to bribe my way in to see the maiden, but gold can work miracles at need. She sat there in tears, head bent over her wheel. "Look at me," I ordered. Slowly her face was raised to mine. It could have been her mother's face, young again, a little narrower, but her eyes were gray like mine instead of her mother's blue. Holding back my own tears was the hardest thing I have ever done.

"I can help you," I said at last, my voice rough with the unshed tears. "Give me your necklace."

I held it in my hands, a pretty bauble of green glass beads, warmed by her white neck.

It was well for me that the guards knew their king for a fool. They delighted in removing the straw and carrying in the heavy bags of gold coin. "It doesn't look much like it's been spun," one of them told me, "but he's so greedy he won't care."

And so it was. The king was delighted. "You are the most wonderful spinner in the world," he told her. "Do it again tonight. We'll leave the scaffold up just in case, but I'm sure you won't fail."

I had suspected that something of the sort might happen and had sent my men home for more gold. Just as well. This was a larger room, with more straw. The guards were happy to go along with me again. "She's a pretty thing," one of them said to me. "She wouldn't look nearly so good with a stretched neck."

"No," I agreed through clenched teeth.

Again she was weeping, but her head came up quickly as I touched her shoulder. I could see the hope in her eyes. "Give me your ring," I told her. It was a pearl, set in a narrow band of gold.

"It was my mother's," she told me.

"It was," I agreed, but did not tell her that I had given her mother the pretty thing.

Again we exchanged straw for coin, and again the king laughed and praised her for spinning straw into gold. "Do it one more time and I'll marry you,"

he told her, leading her past the scaffold to a third straw-filled room, bigger than the other two put together.

It would take all my remaining gold to make a decent show in that room, but I did not hesitate. "What must I give you this time?" the maiden asked. "I have nothing else."

Nor have I, if the king does this trick one more time, I thought but did not say. "Give me your first-born child," I told her.

She looked away from me, shuddering a little. Her eyes fixed on the window. My eyes followed hers. Outside, the gallows made a black "L" upside down against the rising moon.

"If I live, and if I have a child," she replied. It did not seem a great thing at the time.

Again the king was pleased. Happily, he demanded no more spun-gold bars, but married the miller's daughter, my daughter, as he had vowed to do.

I sold an heirloom or two and made my bow at court in time to be invited to the wedding. A costly gift was expected—nay, required. Mine was a carousel, a music box of gold and ivory, inlaid with lapis and pearl. When it was wound, the ivory and ebony horses pranced, riding up and down their golden poles, and a tiny diamond-and-sapphire-studded ballerina danced bareback on the leading horse. The carousel had been my grandmother's christening gift, and I loved it above all my family possessions. It seemed right that it should go now to my daughter, even though she did not know me for her sire.

At the wedding, I was on tenterhooks to see

whether she would recognize me as the one who had saved her life. My lame leg and off-balance body are distinctive, as is my diminutive stature. But I need not have feared. In the straw-filled rooms, I had been dressed in sober black, and she had looked up at me through her tears. Those rooms were somber, each one lit dimly by one small window through which the scaffold loomed, menacing us both.

Now darkness had turned to light. The great hall of the palace was bathed in sun from high clerestory windows. Like all the guests, I glittered in jeweled robes. From her dais the young queen smiled graciously at everyone in turn, including me when at last I bent my head before her. She did not know me, although she thanked me a thousand times for my gift, which she said she loved and valued above all others, "except my husband's, of course," she added carefully. I was relieved and disappointed at the same time, but it was safer this way for us both. Afterward my ancestral home was so lonely I could not bear it, and after a month of trying to wear elegant clothes and eat extravagant dinners, after a month of trying to read in a library where I seemed always to hear an echo of my father's pronouncements, I went back to my hut in the woods and to my simple life. Winter's cold winds were mine by right.

No one came to my hut, no one knew of its existence except my shepherd supplier, who over the years had also become my friend, if one can call it that. We talked little, but our silences were compa-

ionable. I liked him to share my fire. In the spring, in lambing time, he told me that the queen too had borne a child. Bonfires were lit in rejoicing throughout the land. I smiled, thinking of that baby, my own grandchild.

It was time to return to my great hall. Preparations were necessary. A wet nurse had to be hired and a nursery outfitted. I had not seriously thought it would ever happen, and it had happened. This time I went to court by carriage, carrying a bassinet lined with silk and embroidered with rosebuds and golden leaves. This time there was no hurry.

In the fullness of summer, I came to the young queen.

This time I wore the same black cloak I had worn in the spinning rooms, the same three-cornered hat. Her face turned ashen. She put her hands behind her, interposing her slight body between the cradle and me.

I held out my arms. She shook her head, kept shaking it, gasping like a fish landed on the riverbank, knowing it will never again dart carefree in the cool comfort of the stream. "My mother died young," she gasped at last, breathless. "I never had a creature, any creature, to love."

It was no easier for me to speak than for her. "Your promise," I croaked at last. "Give me the child."

Suddenly she was on her knees, clutching my hands. "Anything else, anything, my life if need be." I felt the ordeal, the sharpened spear in each word, and pushed her aside with leaden arms. Trembling, I

lifted the sleeping child and looked in wonder at the long, dark eyelashes, at the miraculous whorls of a tiny, exquisite ear. The mother was beside me at once, but no more desirous than I of interrupting that sweet sleep. We looked down together on the tender face.

"You love her too," the mother softly exclaimed. "I love her too," I agreed.

"Then it's easy. You love her. You could not, would not, tear her from her mother's arms." "I was torn from mine," said I, "and you from yours."

Her eyes blazed into mine. "You cannot do it. My daughter! How I loved her, the tiger fighting for her cub. In that moment, I was ready to lose my grandchild, as I had lost my mother and my mate. The moment passed. "Tell me my name," I told her lightly. "If in three days you can tell me my name, you shall keep your child." Handing her the infant, I turned abruptly on my heel.

Why did I do that? I asked myself on the drive to my rented lodgings. Why on earth did I do that? To buy time, I answered myself. Time. To decide. Three people: her, me, the child. Four: include the child's father the king, a foolish, greedy man. Five: include the miller, the child's acknowledged grandfather, a wife-beater, perhaps a child-beater too, given any opportunity.

Could I be happy, raising the child in the shadow of her despair? Could I find any value in living if I had no child to cherish? What would be better for the child? To be raised by a loving mother and a

dangerous, foolish, greedy, unpredictable, sometimes cruel father? To be raised in the shadow of the throne? To be raised by an old man? (A wise old man, a loving old man, but an old man nonetheless.) I warmed my daughter's necklace in my hands.

I went back to her the following day with no clear answer in my own heart. For three hours, she named names: Michael, Samuel, Peter, Bill, Will, William. Do short forms count? My name is of elvish origin. She never came even remotely close. I felt the force of her will, but again could make no decision.

Again the next day I presented myself. This time she had sent messengers far and wide, she told me. Surely no name could have been missed! Her gray eyes were moist with hope and fear. "Highbothom, Dauoodaset, Running Elk, Shortribs, Caliban," she began. This time she took five hours of guesses. I substituted headshakes for words when my throat began to choke on "No."

I had sent for my shepherd friend the day before. He greeted me when I again reached my lodgings. He would be the ideal person to send to her with my name, should I choose to give it to her. The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons, even unto the seventh generation. I had learned bitterly that those words were not the ravings of a vengeful God but were rather a statement of fact: how long it takes for evil to become neutralized, to be turned perhaps to good.

She will be an amazing child, that baby. Even as I

held her tiny body (could it have been only yesterday?), I could feel the strength of her will, feel it even through her sleep.

Tonight my decision must be made. What is best? What is best?

Tonight I must decide to leave the queen my daughter forever ignorant, and to raise this child myself.

Or tonight I must summon my messenger and send him to her, letting her know that elvish name of which my father was so proud.