

Rumpelstiltskin

by Ian Gray

Every night the man danced round the fire outside his cabin in the woods. And as he danced he sang, and the song he sang was his song, for he had named it. He sang and danced for himself, but once a month the moon came and smiled on the dancing, singing man.

One night the man looked at the moon and said:

“You have often come to watch me dance and hear me sing, do you think I am your jester?”

“Certainly your motley garb befits a jester, and you dance and sing with gusto,” replied the moon.

“Then pay me a jester’s due,” said the man.

“I cannot pay you – I have no gold, only silver which is not mine to give but belongs to the world.”

“I have no need of gold, and I do not want the world’s silver, but you can grant me a wish.”

“Take care, little man,” said the moon more sternly, “for the moon’s favour can have two horns.”

“Grant me a wish.”

“Very well, say on,” said the moon.

“I have lived here many years, almost my whole life, and there is none to call me by name. How I long for someone to love, who would call me by name.”

The moon withdrew behind a cloud, and the man began to sing his song and dance his dance again.

The Nameless Land

Let us suppose a country far away, yet not so far that you feel it to be exotic. The country had mountains and valleys, rivers and lakes, towns, cities and tiny hamlets. Like a great wheel, the affairs of the country revolved around its capital city, which was the home of its government and its head of state – in this case, the king. A metropolitan country, then. True, it was not a large country – no-one lived much more than a day’s walk from the capital and, if need be, the presence of the king. But still, the writ of the king held more sway in the capital than in the countryside beyond.

He was not an especially harsh or unfair man, the king. But he lacked the softer parts of man’s nature, and was difficult to move. This was, of course, the result of his breeding and upbringing. He was born and raised to be king, and steeped in the lore of duty to his homeland. Nothing else featured in his thoughts. Even his own happiness and well-being were strangers to him. To avoid the taint of affection or loyalty to anything save this duty, it had become the custom of the king and his forbears to neglect to refer to his courtiers, ministers or servants by name lest any hint of favouritism be inferred. As is the way of habits adopted by kings, names themselves had fallen into disfavour and neglect, their use seen at best as oafishness, and at worst as insulting, and at times treasonable.

However, there were those who did not follow the custom of namelessness.

1. There were those, mostly young men, who deliberately flouted custom, and flourished names, real and affected, like battle scars or love trophies. This was recognised, frowned at, but essentially tolerated, as young men inevitably grow sense like beards and renounce their childhood vices.

2. There were those, not young, but older than the king, older than his father and grandfather even, who remembered an earlier time when names bore magic; when men carried many names, thus:

A name for use by parents – renounced on their death;

A name for use by a spouse or lover, spoken aloud but rarely, and only when no-one else is present;

A name for use by friends in tavern or kitchen, and changed when a friendship is lost;

A name known only to the self, and spoken by none.

There were few of these, found only in those remote villages near the borders of the country, in the forest or mountains, and their numbers were decreasing.

3. Finally, there were those men, not young exactly, who seemed to have left their names in the student inns, but secretly hoarded them in their hearts. They studied the old ways of the scattered villages and sought to turn them to their own ends. These anarchists were few in number and met rarely. Each was known by a different name to his several comrades, and each worked secretly and mainly alone. These were considered treasonous and hunted by the king and his police.

The Miller

It is the nature of millers to be vain and boastful bullies. It is also in their nature to be garrulous. Some folk are storytellers and some folk are listeners to stories. When the miller entered the tavern he had a tale to tell, but found the floor held by a stranger. The miller was forced to listen as the stranger told of the amorous adventures his travels had brought him. As each conquest was described in ever more detail the miller grew ever more agitated, for it is also in the nature of millers to be prudish.

At last, his tavern tale forgotten or drowned in drink, the miller rose and addressed the stranger directly.

“Silence, you degenerate! Are all women but gulls for you lust? Have you yet to meet an honourable maid or wife. I see you have not, for your complexion and bearing tell of a life of dissipation and turpitude!” At this, the company turned to mock the stranger, for in truth a little vice goes a long way in the quieter places of all kingdoms, and they were growing weary of the stranger’s boasting. Indeed the stranger himself smiled ruefully, and with a slight bow gave the floor to the miller.

“Let me tell you,” the miller went on, “I know of one whose beauty would melt your heart and whose goodness would madden you!”

“Ah, I have seen beauty and goodness in the eyes of maidens, the lips of children, and aye, in the wisdom of crones,” said the stranger wistfully.

“But I say to you, in goodness and beauty, my own daughter is the nonpareil!”

The company shifted in their seats and looked in their tankards for the miller’s daughter was known to them all. In beauty she was blessed, it could not be denied – but goodness? None doubted her virtue, but all knew it stemmed less from modesty than from haughtiness and pride, and some would say shrewishness.

The miller looked to his neighbours for support, but when this was less than forthcoming, the miller tried a desperate throw,

“And did you but know it, she has a secret gift, a skill known only to our family.”

“Say on friend,” coaxed the stranger.

But the miller just smiled, finished his ale and left. The company broke into animated gossip, more drinks were ordered up, but the stranger still looked at where the miller had left the door swinging.

When the moon rose that night it saw the little man sitting, disconsolate, outside his cabin in the woods.

“Why do you not dance and sing little man?” asked the moon.

“A month has gone and still I call my own name to myself. I fear my heart will break.”

“Did you think I would leave a gift on your doorstep,” scolded the moon, “Is this a story to lull children to sleep? No, you must stir yourself. Listen to the wind in the trees and something in the whispering leaves will guide you to your heart’s desire.”

The little man listened and heard the sobs of a young woman in distress. He followed them until he found what he was looking for.

The Miller’s Daughter

While the miller snored in his bed after his altercation in the tavern, his daughter busied herself about the cottage. It was a fine cottage, because she had

made it so. Since her mother had died, she had taken on the part of homemaker with a seriousness that said much about her character.

Gradually, her mother's horde of little mementoes, tokens and bric a brac was replaced in a taste both austere and appropriate. The ancient timber dresser and table stood polished and proud, decked with spotless pewter. The curtains at the sparkling windows were clean and pressed. The floor, though flagged with stone, was softened by the discreet placement of small but finely woven rugs. There were even several well-chosen books in the chimney corner. The cottage was a place where the humblest goodwife or the grandest duchess might find something of home. Which was something of a pity, for visitors to the cottage were rare.

It was, then, with a mixture of surprise and annoyance that the miller's daughter heard a knock at her door.

It so happened that word of the miller's boast had reached the ears of the king. Now, there was no question as to who ruled in the kingdom, but the chamberlains and ministers and other court advisers had, for some time, been questioning the king, in the most oblique and circumspect ways, as to his intentions towards the succession. The king was a proud man with precise and exquisite taste, and had long ago decided that only a woman with exceptional virtues and gifts would be fit to be his consort. He had followed the time-honoured methods of finding such a woman. Each year he embarked on a foreign tour, and at intervals acted as host to visiting dignitaries, both royal and common; for he was a modern king who placed personal worth above heredity. But none of these endeavours had found success, much to the exasperation of his advisers. Now, he was increasingly attracted to the arcane and unusual; in his

words “a special someone”. Thus, with something between curiosity and interest, he had summoned the miller and his daughter to court.

The miller stood before the king, his head bowed and his tongue tied. His daughter stood to one side, tight-lipped and fuming. A good roast had been left to spoil in the oven and she had an acute aversion to waste.

“So,” began the king, “I understand you have the non-pareil of daughters.”

The miller looked up, “Your majesty, my daughter is here as you can see.”

“It is not for you to say what his majesty can, or can not see!” interjected a private secretary. The miller dropped his eyes once more, and the king shot a glance at the private secretary who blanched, bowed and left the room by a side door.

“You must forgive my staff, they are sometimes rather over-sensitive as to my feelings. As you say, your daughter was kind enough to accompany you to court. I congratulate you; she is certainly quite beautiful. But I am led to believe she has other gifts.”

The miller looked at the king in bewilderment. “She is a good girl, your majesty, a fine cook and housekeeper...”

“Indeed, all very commendable I am sure,” interrupted the king, “but as my consort, she would have no more need of these skills. What else can she offer me?”

“Consort? You mean your queen? You want my daughter to be your queen?”

“Hold hard, my friend! I simply feel it is my duty to know my subjects, especially those who may – be of service. To the Crown. Now, this gift?”

In truth, the miller had almost forgotten his rash boast in the tavern, and now racked his brains for something to tell the king.

“She is quite musical, your majesty. She sings sweetly and plays a little on the guitar.”

“Come, come my friend,” said the king, growing a little impatient, “I find your coyness wearying. Your daughter’s gift! Can her tears bring rain in a drought? Do her footprints bring a thaw in hard winter? Will one of her loaves, baked from your flour feed a village? The gift – I demand to know!”

A Note on Magic

Those of us who live in modern, developed societies have rather lost touch with magic. To us, it is little more than clever deception, dextrous manipulation of objects with nimble fingers, or clever construction. For our ancestors however, magic was a part of life – a pattern of rituals in song, dance and gesture that kept the wheel of the world turning. A chant to ensure good harvest, a blessing on the sowing of seed and a charm to see a pregnancy to full term.

To the king, as we have seen, magic was more real than to us. After all, in the borderlands of his realm, there were those who invoked the power of names. Had that borderland been brought into the heart of the capital?

The miller cast his eyes around the room for inspiration, and his glance touched fleetingly on a golden spinning wheel, a gift to the king from some visiting potentate.

“She can spin, your majesty”

“Go on.”

“And make...”

“Yes, yes. Water into silk? Moonbeams into wine?”

“No, you majesty. She can, when the moon is full, spin straw into gold!”

Guided by his benefactor, the moon, the little man left the forest, made his way to the capital and into the king’s palace. Following the beams of moonlight he found himself facing a heavy oaken door. From the other side of the door he could hear the sound of weeping. The door was locked, but through the keyhole shone a narrow ray of light. The little man climbed the ray and entered the room. The room was littered with bales of straw and the only furniture was a spinning wheel and a wooden stool. On the stool sat a beautiful young woman. She was the one who was weeping.

The little man stood looking at the woman. Was this the gift the moon had promised him?

“You weep as if your heart were breaking.”

The woman looked up, showing little surprise at the little man’s appearance.

“My heart is not broken! I weep with anger and powerlessness!”

“Anger?”

“For sure. Anger at the folly and arrogance of men who use me as a bargaining counter, a currency and a serf to do their bidding, no matter how foolish the task.”

“I understand that to be the fate of all who are links in the paper chain that binds worlds together. From this grows your seeming powerlessness.”

“Seeming?”

“Certainly. All have the power to say yes. All have the power to say no.”

“Save your preaching! I have no truck with politics. I cry with frustration that I lack the skill to do their bidding!”

“But all skills can be mastered. The trick is to harness your abilities to your own bidding.”

*“All skills can be mastered! Can **you** complete this task? Can **you** spin this straw into gold?”*

“Certainly, should I wish to.”

The woman looked at the little man with more interest. She felt the stirring of an older faith.

“Why would you wish to?”

“Ah, now that is a question.”

The woman blushed a little, and for the first time seemed to lose her assurance.

“If I fail in this, I die.”

“And if you succeed?”

“The king will take me to wife.”

“Then your need is great.”

“I have nothing to pay you with save this gold locket.”

“Keep your locket. We can come to a more satisfactory arrangement.”

The woman remained silent, waiting for the man to name his price.

“If I do this, you will promise me your firstborn child,”

The woman paused.

“I have no choice.”

“There is always a choice.”

The woman bowed her head. The man caught a last glimpse of the moon before it set and then, in the darkness, he began to spin.

The next day the king was of course delighted, and the miller amazed and relieved in equal measure, as his own fate, though unclear, was dependent on the success of his daughter. It was some vestigial memory of faith or superstition that prevented him from questioning his daughter. Besides, she was now less his daughter and more the king's betrothed.

The date of the wedding was set for the next full moon, and the ceremony was conducted with full pomp and celebration. Soon after, the new queen was found to be with child, and all seemed well in the kingdom. Within the year the child was born, a little premature, but in full good health, and preparations were made for the Showing to the People – in the absence of naming or baptism, an important event.

A Note on Ceremonial Occasions

In a land where precedent and protocol played such an important part in life, state celebrations were seen, not only as a time for organised rejoicing, but also as a means for taking the pulse of the country.

So, as visitors flocked to the capital, the king's police mingled with them, picking up gossip, scotching some rumours and encouraging others. Were there new trends in behaviour worth noting? Did people appear as loyal subjects or tourists to enjoy the show? Much could be detected from people's chosen costume. Smart and formal suits and gowns seemed to depict a mirror to the court, while clothing chosen for comfort indicated a more self-centred, self-assured, less submissive tenor. Thus the king's spies moved among the throng listening, watching and counting. Were there more or less jackets and ties than last time? Did one colour seem to dominate? Did groups walk purposefully or wander with serendipity? These are the vital signs of a nation.

But there were others in the crowd. The anarchists with many names were also there to confuse and confound. Some clung in uniform groups, others were flamboyant individualists, swaying clusters with laughter and carnival, while others kept dark and low with a whispered word, a snatch of a half-forbidden song or a startling peal of laughter. For there was a mood abroad. The anarchists could smell it. Despite the previous year's wedding and the recent birth, they could smell the fear of the court.

As the huge crowd gathered in front of the palace, the queen felt uneasy. Her child was a month old and the manikin had not appeared to claim his prize. Was he perhaps here in this multitude? Her husband turned to her.

“Come, it is time. We must show the child to the people.”

“I think not,” came a voice, thick with accent of forest and border, “The child is mine and I come to claim it.” There, before the royal family and their courtiers, stood the manikin, barring the way to the balcony.

The king looked to the queen, who hurriedly explained her tryst and promise all those months ago. The miller blanched and slipped unremarked from the room. The king gathered himself, and with an attempt at a smile tried to reason with the interloper. He explained the problems of succession, popular expectation and the demands of statecraft, but the manikin was unmoved.

Then the queen took the king's arm and whispered to him. The king nodded and with a signal led the court from the room, leaving the queen and the manikin alone. The two paced the room arguing and discussing. Some of the issues raised in the debate would seem to be obvious.

The Arguments for the Miller's Daughter

1. The arrangement was always an unreasonable one, and she was right to take whatever steps were necessary to survive.
2. The baby is undeniably hers and it is wrong to separate mother and child.
3. She is a virtuous woman and the little man is a scheming trickster who is there to be outwitted.
4. The man sought to take advantage of the woman and profit from her difficulty and it is right that he should be denied.

The Arguments for the Mannikin

1. Whilst the woman is undoubtedly the child's mother, its paternity is less certain, and the manikin may have an equal claim to parenthood.
2. The queen entered into an agreement with no intention of keeping to it. She took advantage of the manikin.
3. The need of the manikin for love and affection are evident. Whilst the child would not be brought up in a palace, it would be provided with other riches.
4. The manikin has committed no crime. He has dealt fairly and kept his word at all times. On the other hand, the queen has lied to her husband about her gifts and schemed to profit from the goodness of the manikin.

Growing impatient, the king at last re-entered the room to find the queen alone, the manikin and child gone.

“His name,” she said, “we must find his name before dawn tomorrow!”

The king mobilised his huge army of police, spies and informers. All known and suspected anarchists were arrested and interrogated. Soldiers swooped on villagers at the borders. A huge catalogue of names was drawn up.

In a clearing in the forest glowed a fire by a log cabin, and the little man danced and sang. In his arms he held a child. At intervals he leapt and showed the child to the moon, or perhaps he was showing the moon to the child, for certainly the child chuckled and gurgled in the pale light. And the manikin sang his name to the child, and the child seemed pleased.

So rapt in his song was the manikin, that he did not notice the ring of bayonets coming closer. At last the captain stepped forward and interrupted the song.

“Your name is...”

His accusation was cut off by a scream of desperation from the little man, who flung himself to the ground, beating the hard earth with his little fists as if he would hammer his way to hell.

There the soldiers left him, as they turned to take the child back to its mother.

Coda

The child grew up fit, healthy and, apart from an interest in astrology, unmarked. On reaching adulthood he chose to lead a life away from the royal family. The exact details are unknown, but he is believed to have left his homeland for America.

The failure of the Showing to the People and the purge to find the manikin’s name served to unite the dissident factions, and the monarchy was eventually abolished. The country was thrown into disarray. Many of the people fled the pogroms and sought new lives as itinerant workers in neighbouring countries. To

discourage this flight, successive governments tightened border controls and the country became an inaccessible fortress.

The marriage of the king and queen did not survive. The king sought asylum with a cousin who happened to rule a pleasant island duchy. The former king was lost in a sailing accident. His ex-wife wandered the hotels and spas of Europe dining out on the story of her life, which, some years later, became the subject of a musical play and a film.

The miller fled to England and, believing his boasting to be the cause of so much strife, embarked on a holy pilgrimage.

The manikin changed his name and was never heard of again.

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Artist Details

Artist: Ian Gray

Bio: Ian Gray was born in South Yorkshire and educated in Durham and Leeds. He has taught in schools in Yorkshire and Lancashire for over thirty years and lives in Greater Manchester with his wife and daughter.

Other Work in Print: 'Entertaining Angels' (<http://www.lulu.com/content/303844>)

Email contact: ian@alians149.wanadoo.co.uk

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