

Nothing but a Name

By Seamus Dwyer

Hampton Court Palace glistened with the frost of December. The myriad of windows glowed with warm, yellow light from the great multitude of candles and lamps strategically placed behind their diamond-paned glass. The Tudor crest snarled triumphantly over the gate leading up to the main doors. A slender boy of about sixteen years was making his way toward the palace.

He snuggled into his cloak, ignoring the painful stinging on the tip of his nose, mercilessly inflicted by the savage Northeast Wind. What he would have done for gloves; he could no longer feel his fingers. The leather satchel hanging from his shoulder bounced against his waist as he walked. He knew that his master would have berated him to hold the satchel more protectively. Remembering this, the boy peered into the bag, made sure everything was intact, and then he adjusted the straps so that the satchel was well hidden beneath his cloak. Satisfied, he picked up his pace. He did have a very important appointment, after all...

The boy slipped into a small side quad, and entered the palace through a servant's entrance. He was greeted with the intense warmth of a kitchen fire. The only person to be seen was an old maid, sitting in an old rocker near the rocker. A white linen cap covered her head, and a black, thread-bare shawl was wrapped around her slender shoulders. She was rocking in the chair, staring meaningfully into the embers.

"Mistress Brooke?" The boy asked tentatively, not wanting to disturb the old woman too much. She looked up, and her old, milky eyes filled with light, "Bless you, Billy boy, I didn't know thou was comin' tonight, I'd 'ave made thee a cup o' hot ale."

"Ne'er ye worry, Mistress, I'm here on the good Doctor's business," the boy replied, "I wished to wish thee a good even, 'tis all."

“Marry, thou’rt a fine lad, Billy,” Mistress Brooke smiled, “God keep thee.”

“Adieu, Mistress Brooke,” the boy smiled, and bowed himself out of the kitchen.

The corridors of Hampton Court seemed eternal, but the boy knew them well by now. He arrived finally in a small antechamber lined with tapestries. There was not a person to be seen, save for two guards flanking a pair of impressive doors. Patting the satchel, the boy stopped and leaned against the wall. His feet aching, he longed for a seat. But he knew he couldn’t sit. Not here.

The impressive doors suddenly flew open, and out came a very important-looking man wearing a great white pleated ruff and black brocade. The boy jumped to attention, suddenly very self-conscious in his plain wool shirt and slightly stained britches. The man stopped before and looked around expectantly.

“But where be the good Doctor Dee?” He asked, annoyed .

The boy blushed, “I am afraid that my master is right whitely with the ague, Milord Chamberlain. He sent me with a finished copy. To show Her Majesty.”

The Lord Chamberlain looked down at the boy with a superior glint in his eye, then he nodded his head, “Very well. This collaboration is quite important to her. It would not do to tarry any further.”

The Lord Chamberlain turned his heel and began to walk toward the door. The boy hurried after him, through the doors into a spacious room of stone, with arched windows covered with frost that shuddered in the freezing winds. “A student of Doctor Dee, Your Majesty,” the Chamberlain announced, and nudged the boy into the room.

The room was barely lit, save for a few candles and a dying fire on the enormous hearth. The floor was lined, wall to wall, with an enormous rug imported from the Far East. The carpet muffled the

boy's steps as he entered the room. He looked straight ahead. Sitting on a high-backed throne chair on the far end of the room was the Queen.

She wore a gown of red and gold, the skirt stretched out by a hoop several feet in diameter. Around her neck was a ruff of starched lace that stood perfectly straight. Her head was surrounded by flaming ginger curls, and her skin was as white as the snow that lay just outside. The boy saw that she was old, nearly eighty; yet never before had he seen a person, man or woman, so majestic, so regal. Every time he saw her, he was always taken aback.

She watched him as he performed the proper ritual of protocol, three consecutive bows as he approached the royal presence. When he was standing only several feet from her, her eyes lit up with recognition and she spoke in a rich, crackly voice,

"I am told that the honorable Doctor Dee is ill. Do pass along to him my deepest regrets, will thou not, Billy?"

The boy bowed his head, "Most certainly, Your Majesty."

She shifted in her chair, "From whence com'st thou, Billy?"

"From Chelsea, Your Majesty. 'Twas not too long a journey."

The Queen nodded, watching him closely. Suddenly the door opened again, and the Chamberlain announced, "The Duke of Oxford, Your Majesty."

The boy turned around to see a flushed and windswept man walking with a quick, graceful jaunt toward the Queen, dressed even more splendidly than the Chamberlain, wearing a doublet of deep blue and high-heeled boots. He walked right past the boy and bowed before the Queen.

“Ah, my Lord Duke,” the Queen crooned, “So fair yet so foul you seem this night. You will remember Billy, who is a young student of our dear Dr. Dee.”

“Indubitably, Majesty,” the Duke responded, slightly inclining his head toward the boy, who bowed yet again. “Has he the script? I daresay the good Doctor hath had a long enough time with it.”

“Hush, Oxford,” the Queen rumbled, “The script, Billy.” She fixed her deep set eyes on the boy. He pulled the satchel from beneath his cloak, unbuckled the top flap, and pulled out a packet of thick parchment. He surrendered it to the Duke, who placed it in the Queen’s waiting hands.

“And so our little playwright conspiracy continues, my lord,” the Queen remarked as she opened up the pages, “how long can we contain the secret, think’st thou?”

The Duke chuckled, shifting from foot to foot.

“The Most Excellent History of the Merchant of Venice” she read, “most ingenious. All of these notes written by the doctor, he surely hath a great deal of time on his hands...” She paused on one page, and suddenly she was not smiling. “My lord, read this here page.”

The boy knew what they had paused on. It was a speech, given by a Jew in the tale in defense of his humanity. A speech constructed by his own pen. It was a speech that was designed to compel each person in the audience to search into the very depths of his soul to find a new truth. Oh, how the boy had labored over it, day and night, searching for the very words that could do his thoughts justice, that could reveal the nature of his dreams for humanity. He swelled with pride as he watched the Queen of England’s eyes swim in tears. Then the Duke spoke,

“What a blessed, forgiving mind hath the good Doctor Dee to write such beauteous words, think ye not, Majesty?”

“Aye,” said the Queen as she dabbed her eyes.

Then the boy felt his pride diminish. Of course it was foolish to expect recognition. Not from them. They were the three greatest minds in all of England, the Queen, the Duke, and the Doctor. It had been they who had generated the great thoughts that allowed the world to turn, not him. And it would be their names that would echo throughout the corridors of history, not his. He felt his hands go limp at his sides.

“It is ready for publication, methinks,” said the Duke stoutly, and he held his hands out to relieve the Queen of the script.

“One moment, Oxford,” said the Queen, “the pseudonym.” The boy flinched inwardly as the Queen reached for a pen and wrote in a flourishing script the name. His name.

William Shakespeare.

Yet no one would ever know the full story, nor would they know his secret contribution to the halls of literature. To them, it would just be another name. The boy accepted the play and stowed it in his satchel. He bowed himself out of the hall and walked through the corridors.

As he made his way into the kitchen, he saw that Mistress Brooke had gone to bed. He snuggled into his cloak and stepped outside into the cold.

And as the North Eastern wind howled, the boy with nothing but a name made his way into the night.