

Rumple What?

by Nancy Springer

After spending 46-59ths of her life in Pennsylvania, Nancy Springer now lives in a hangar at a remarkably rural airfield a few miles south of Alabama, where she is learning a great deal about aircraft and alligators. Her daily life is in marked contrast to that of the protagonist of her current series, which is set in 1890s London and features Enola Holmes, daredevil embarrassment to her much older brother, the famous Sherlock. Her new story for us (her first in far too long) is a new look at a classic fairy tale.

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To take first the point of view of the miller's daughter, her father is just the sort of consummate jackass who *would* brag to the king that his girl can spin straw into gold. So when she is unceremoniously escorted to a shed full of straw, locked in there with a spinning wheel, and told to do her thing or die, she weeps—but not pathetically, as the tale would have it; rather, she howls with rage. No matter how dire her fear, no miller's daughter has ever been able to weep the dewy, snot-free tears of a damsel in distress; our wench bawls with messy, grimacing fury, all the more so because crying is *not* what she wants to do. It is one of the Seven Most Unfair Fates of the female condition that when you really want to thunder, threaten revenge, scare your asinine father and his new crony the king shitless, what happens? You goddamn cry.

Even so, when the shed door opens and the most peculiar little man comes in, she does not seize the opportunity to thump someone smaller than she, for quite sensibly she wonders what the hell is going on. The king locked the door himself. By what power did this dwarf, who is too short to reach the handle, open it? And what does he want? The miller's daughter has heard some nasty rumors about what really went on with Snow White. Perversely, because there is now clear and present danger, her weeping ceases. Wiping her face and blowing her nose upon her apron, she tries to study the visitor, but through her traumatized eyes she can see only that he is sharp, all points, including his face. Pointy nose, steeple brows, wishbone chin, skinny birdy arms and fingers, chicken legs in velvet trousers tailored to fit. Peaked velvet cap, curling feather. Probably never went heigh-ho off to work in his life.

"What's the matter?" he wants to know. His voice is thin and pointy too, like a needle.

She replies very politely, in case he might be somebody, "Thank you for

asking. It's my allergies. I'm horribly allergic to dusty places, straw, stables, that sort of thing." This happens to be true, making her whole rotten day even rottener.

"What will you give me if I spin the straw into gold for the king?" Of course he knows all about it; otherwise, why would he be there?

The miller's daughter offers, "Um, my necklace?" and is puzzled when he accepts that commonplace string of beads without further bargaining. As he spins all the straw, quite quickly, into gold, she feels relieved, naturally, that she need not die in the morning, but also apprehensive, for there's no getting around it: she's dealing with the supernatural, and has not yet paid a sufficient price. Even as she thanks the little man effusively for saving her butt, even as he takes his leave, she is hoping she will never see him again, yet has a miserable feeling that she will. These things happen in threes.

Bingo. She doesn't even get to go home for her second-best necklace before the greedy king, with the inevitable death threat, sticks her into another, bigger shed full of straw. At nightfall, sure enough, just like a mucus machine she starts weeping—this time with tears appropriately wretched, due to her allergies plus the fact that, while she does not miss her father, she does miss breakfast, lunch, and supper—and right on cue, the little man shows up.

She gives him her ring—again, the cheapest of baubles, yet once more he accepts without demur. Once more, not unkindly, he sets to work. He is an odd sort of midget, thinks the miller's daughter as she watches, maybe not a dwarf after all, too slender, more like one of the pixies, but lacking their beauty, perhaps an elf ... with a face like a wedge of cheese? No, he seems to fit no known category of little people, but it hardly matters, so long as he spins straw into gold.

Which he does. She is saved. But oh, no, day three, huge shed this time, huge pile of straw once more, death if she fails. Only this third time the king, that total oinker, adds that if he doesn't kill her, he will marry her, as if this were supposed to be an *inducement*?

So this time, when the little man shows up, the miller's daughter is weeping wearily, for no matter what happens, she's out of luck. When he asks what she'll give him to spin the straw into gold, she replies, "I have nothing left," which is, of course, not true. She could offer him the oldest of incentives, quite expects him to request same, and really doesn't care, although she supposes that, for the dubious sake of survival, she will—

So she is totally taken off guard when, instead of bargaining for the pleasures of her body, he says, "Oh, that's okay. Just promise me your firstborn child."

She is astonished; what on Earth does the little man want with a baby, all that noise and filth? But of course she agrees; who wouldn't? A firstborn child, which might or might not happen sometime down the road, is the merest abstraction when one is a teenager faced with death at sunrise.

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To take now the little man's point of view: Eureka! The baby! This is the prize he has sought all along, caring nothing for the baubles, the necklace, the ring, and as for the girl herself—yes, indeed, she is quite appealing in her peasant-wench way, and he knows she is desperate enough to let him embrace her, but within his strong, solitary mind he also knows that such intimacy would provide only the most temporary of respite from his terrible loneliness.

For he is uniquely alone. It is one of the Seven Egregious Unfairnesses of his life that he is out of place even among supernatural manifestations. He is neither dwarf to delve in the Earth with other dwarves, nor pixie to dance in the moonlit mushroom-ring with other pixies, nor elf, sprite, fetch, bogey, nixie, leprechaun, brownie, or any sort of acceptable faery-goblin. And his is a situation most unjust, for, while giants sometimes live alone because of their grisly habits, and ogres because they are odious, the singular little man has committed only kindness, namely, the spinning of straw into gold.

Yet he could save the miller's daughter's life a thousand times and she would still give him the same wary look, like a barn cat. Because she is an ordinary person, and he is not. In the minds of those who consider themselves normal, who *are* normal, otherness is suspect. Deformity (being auger-nosed, chicken-limbed, and only three feet tall) signifies evil. Doing impossible things means the devil's help, reason for fear.

But the baby will know none of this! Never will the baby look at him with misgiving; the baby will not only accept him, but love him! No baby can help but love, completely and helplessly and forever after, the one who nurtures it. And nurture it he will, as well as any mother; he will give it magical milk to drink, and what are a few soiled diapers to a being with the power to spin straw into gold? He will provide well for the child. And once he has possession of it, and especially once it grows a bit and can talk with him, he will be no longer a misfit, alone, but he will belong to a clan of two.

Now he must wait for the miller's daughter to give birth, that is all. And even if it takes a few years—which seems unlikely, given the buxom bloom of that girl—but even if she has the sagacity to delay the inevitable, the singular little man will pass the time in patience, as he has already passed many, many years, tens of hundreds of years.

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To the king, who scarcely deserves a viewpoint, it's about time something went right. One of the Seven Most Unfair Grievances on his rather limited mind is that he had no choice what to do with his life, no options other than to be king after his old man croaked, yet he never got to be a Handsome Prince (he is an oinker in face as well as in heart) and therefore he never found a Beautiful Princess willing to be his bride. Or a Fair Lady. Or any female the least bit suitable to wed His Exalted Highness. Now he's a middle-aged Majesty with an ale belly, up to his triple chin in debt for doublets and hose and ermine codpieces and all the other ridiculous, expensive trappings of his regal job, and with vassals grumbling that he needs to provide an heir, and—and lo and behold, here the dumbass miller puts him onto a reasonably attractive girl who goes and makes him rich.

The king does not care about being loved. He does not feel alone in the world; there are plenty more like him, heading up nations and corporations. He considers that he can be very happy with gold to pay the bills, plus a wench with whom to rumple the bed sheets. Why not marry her? While she lacks the sort of pedigree that is usually required, she shows every promise of being quite fertile—almost certain to pop out an heir—and then there are the financial considerations. If he needs more money, he can always threaten again to kill her.

Not that he really thinks she has spun straw into gold. No, if he believed that, he wouldn't touch her; what if she could turn other things into something elses? But the king doesn't worry, because he knows about the little man. He is no fool; he has his spies, his guards, his people keeping watch. He figures that whatever she—the miller's daughter; even though he is going to marry her, the king can't recall her name—whatever she gave the little man doesn't count because of the minuscule size involved, and absolutely can be overlooked in the light reflected from a pile of gold.

And if the little man comes back into the picture, well, it depends whether he, the king—who does not deserve a name either—whether he wants more gold at the time, or would rather take the freaky bastard, who has been described to him as twig thin and no more than three feet tall, and whack him in half with one

blow of his sword.

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At first the miller's daughter thought it would be fairly yucko, having to deal with His Ugliness, but she soon adapts. When he comes to her bed, she spreads her legs and thinks about necklaces made of real jewels, not beads. Thus, aside from her dealings with His Porcine Highness, being queen turns out to be a blast—getting to dress up, and spend money, and order people around, no more scrubbing and cooking and messy flour for her! Relief from hard manual labor is ample compensation for being married to the king, for the miller's daughter is no dreamer; she had never thought to find love. Least of all in wedlock, but not in any other way, either.

So it startles her to the heart of her heart, indeed it startles and astonishes her to discover such a heart within herself, when, most unexpectedly and all in a moment, she falls in love. Deeply. Irrevocably. Completely. Under the most unexpected circumstances, when she has just gone through the most harrowing pain she has ever known.

When the midwife places the baby in her arms.

When she lays her face against the soft spot atop the baby's downy head.

One breath of that primal infant essence, and the queen is no longer the miller's daughter or the king's wife either; she is woman, and she is mother. She is weak and invincible and happier than a butterfly yet fiercer than a wolf, for she will defend this tiny person, this newfound love, with her life, against anything that threatens—

And then she remembers.

What she promised.

Oh. No.

No. Never. No matter what.

But—surely it won't come to that; surely the freaky little man didn't mean it, really. Or he has forgotten. She hasn't seen or heard of him for a couple of years.

Still, alarm bells of hell ring through her, agitation that will not cease for any soothing, so relentless that, within a day, she breaks down and asks to speak with

His Royal Ego, her husband.

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For the simple reason that the king gives not a rat's sphincter about the fate of the baby, one can tell that the newborn is a girl. One can assume this even though the child's gender is undocumented.

When his wife begs him for guards because someone is likely to take the baby, he laughs at her and asks who would want such a bawling parcel of stink. She does not know that he knows about the little man, and it costs her all the courage she never knew she had to tell him that she did not herself spin straw into gold. Will he kill her now? No; he laughs again, this time in quite an ugly way, because it has been necessary for her to admit that the little man spent three nights with her, and that she promised him her firstborn. He asks her what the gold-spinner wants with the baby. She whimpers that she does not know. Again she pleads with him to safeguard the child. "Why should I?" he demands, shouting with cancerous laughter. "It might not even be mine!" He says this not because he thinks it true, but simply because he can. He says it to press his advantage, to consummate his power over her, to complete her despair.

Triumphant, exit the king.

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When the little man opens the locked door to the queen's chamber and goes in, he is unprepared for the emotional maelstrom that greets him, for he had assessed the miller's daughter as the most pragmatic of peasants. Yet there she sits in the great canopied bed, hugging the infant to her velvet-robed bosom and weeping as he has never seen her weep before. And offering him all the riches she has, necklaces of emerald and ruby and diamond, rings of sapphire and gold, if he will only let her keep the child.

"But I care nothing for necklaces and rings," he says.

"You did before!"

"Only because the narrative demands a sequence of three."

"Let me give you my third child, then!" Fierce, desperate, this time she does not weep in a messy mucus-prone manner; today, hers are the tragic, crystalline tears of a true queen.

“But you promised me this baby,” he insists, knowing that he is in the right, although her tears pierce his heart.

“Please!” She knows, also, that a queen must keep her promises. “Is there no power that can persuade you otherwise?”

“No power can prevent me except one: if you should guess my name.”

His own compassionate honesty drags this truth out of him, for it is a very serious matter, the naming of names; as he is something more than a normal Tom, Dick, or Jane, anyone who knows his true name would possess power to command him. This is how wizards control genies and demons, by the naming of names.

The queen realizes what a chance he has offered her. “Grant me, then, three days—” It must, of course, be *three* days. “—to discover your name, I beg of you.”

He can’t believe what a doughnut he is being. Yet, “Very well,” he replies, turning away.

“A hint! At least give me a hint!” The queen cries as the baby starts to whimper at her breast. “Is yours a short name or a long one?”

“Outlandish and multisyllabic. I will be back tomorrow to see how you are doing.” And off he goes, knowing himself to be a soft-hearted fool, and knowing just as well that she nevertheless considers him an imp of evil, and that he will be so depicted in human retellings of his story for the next millennium or two.

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Along with love and womanhood, the baby has taught the queen the awesome power and significance of names, for she must name the child, and feels all the responsibility of the nomenclature not yet accomplished.

But far greater is the weight of divining the name that will save her baby—for so she perceives the matter; she cannot imagine what the bizarre little man could want with her child other than to eat it, perhaps, or sacrifice it in some fiendish rite, or starve it into a bony monster like himself, or whatever it is that fairies do with the babies they steal from cradles.

All day, hugging her child, she sets herself to thinking of names. That night she lies awake nursing the infant and trying to remember all the outlandish,

multisyllabic names she has ever heard in her life. In the morning she summons the court scribe to begin a database—she herself can neither read nor write—and she sends out messengers to bring her more names, and more. But in the darkest hollow of her heart she knows that so many possible names are far beyond her ken; even a computer naming all the names of the deity would take a few minutes before the stars would begin to blink out.

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When the little man whispers the name of the door and walks in, the queen is ready for him. She tries first some fairytale-type names she made up during the night. “Is your name Goldenhands? Is it Goldfingers? Goldspinner? Treasurewright?”

“No, no, no, and no.” Marveling anew at his own idiocy, the little man gives her another hint. “Your majesty, my name makes no sense.”

“Moon Unit? Dweezil? Madonna? Rosencrantz, Guildenstern?”

“No, no, no, no, no.”

And so it goes all that day and the next. Kasper, Melchior, Balthazar, Schwarzenegger, Engelbert, Humperdinck, ad infinitum and ad nauseum; wearisome to the max for all concerned, especially the little man. He nearly decides not to show up for the third day, but he grits his pointed teeth and reports to the queen’s chamber.

And he senses at once that, overnight, something has immensely changed. That royal woman, with babe in arms, welcomes him with dry eyes that emanate a strange gleam. “Rumplebedsheets,” she greets him.

Oh, no. He begins to feel alarmed. “My dear little miller’s daughter—”

“It’s Rump something. Rump-for-skin?”

“No.” Then he repeats, shocked, “No!”

“Rumplestockings? Wait! Rump—Rump-shins-skin?”

“You are still trying to make sense out of me.” When nothing makes sense. He feels his own eyes as sharp as knives begin to drip the clear blood that is tears, for he knows what she has done, like generations of mothers before her, for the sake of her child.

“Rumple-stilts-skin!” she cries.

He feels weak, he feels her power over him, he has to sit down. “Almost,” he admits. “Not quite. You’re spelling it wrong.”

“Spelling? I know nothing of spelling! But I know your name is Rumpelstiltskin!”

“In the original German,” he hedges, “it is Rumpelstilzchen.” And in the French Grigredinmenufretin, in the Swedish Bulleribasius, the Finnish Tittelintuure and the Italian Praseidimio, and there are many more, in Estonian, Czechoslovakian, Hebrew, Japanese and so on, for like any self-respecting supernatural being, our oddling has many names, of which the miller’s daughter knows only one.

“Rumpelstiltskin,” she repeats in vast and bitter triumph, for it is just as the little man says in the story; the devil has told her. She has made a pact with the devil, bargaining away her soul to save her child, trading it for the knowledge of Rumpelstiltskin’s name. So she belongs to the Prince of Darkness now. But her baby does not. Her baby, body and soul, belongs to no one but her.

Rumpelstiltskin has been defeated. But he does not, as the devil and the tale expect, stamp off in a suicidal rage. There is no longer any need for him to rip himself in half, as it has been proven that he is not an evil being.

He sighs in great, everlasting sadness and makes a strange request. “I would like to give the little one a name.”

“What?” The mother is startled, for she had thought his interest in her baby was culinary. “How come?” For the first time she really looks at the little man. “What did you want with my child?”

Such is his weary sorrow that he does not even try to explain. Yet, now that she has shaken hands with Lucifer, she sees the light.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” she whispers, “you wanted the exact same thing that I have.”

Unspeaking, he stares back at her with spindle-sharp eyes.

“You get out of here,” she orders. Recent events have made her a fitting mate for the king; they will be two of a kind from now on.

Her command lifts him to his feet, but before he departs he asks again, "Allow me to gift the little girl with a name."

And in her shameless greed the mother agrees to let him bless with the power of a faerie name the child he cannot possess.

He touches the babe's rose-petal cheek and names her, "Softasilkskin."

Then he goes away with his head hanging, his woodcock nose directed toward the ground, and is never heard from again.

But Softasilkskin, despite her deplorable parents and to the devil's disappointment, grows up to be the good and beautiful Princess Silkskin, meets a Handsome Prince and Lives Happily Ever After, even though everybody else in the story is royally screwed.