

The Weaver's Tale

by A.J. Grace-Smith

'Hmph! Dream indeed! "Past the wit of man to say what dream it was" - the man's a knotty-pated arse.' The old master-weaver spat into the fire, his rheumy eyes bright with contempt, then looked round furtively; Nathaniel was not yet returned, good. The shorter summer nights brought back the old restlessness, and only three days to the Solstice... once more he drew out from his doublet the fragile gold thing, cradling it in his work-worn palm. A minute breath of wind whispered across his fingers, bringing the elusive scent of her. Perfection.

Her skin in the moonlight like living marble, but so warm to touch, and she wanted his hands on her, oh yes. He couldn't look away from her if he tried, her eyes glowing in the not-dark, filling his head with her desire of him, and the stars wheeling behind her head as she moved over him, riding him so very hard -

Nathaniel dropped the haphazardly piled armful of logs. Jerked out of his reverie, old Nicholas regarded his clumsy grandson while concealing his golden treasure. Perhaps now was the time...

'Tonight, boy, I'll tell of how I met the Faery Queen.'

'Not that one again! 'Tisn't true anyhow - you lifted it from that playwright.' Nathaniel was indignant. 'And I'm not a boy. My voice broke long since, *and* I've a beard coming.'

The old man glanced at Nat's earnestly outthrust chin, then stared into the fire again, watching the glowing logs shift and resettle.

'You're not a man yet, lad. And my telling is the true tale, long before Master Shakestaff left for the bear-pits of Bankside, and he had the telling of it from me, as I'll tell you anon.

We were out late that night, the six of us. I lost the others when I went for a piss behind the great holm oak - I see you rolling your eyes boy, just listen.'

Nat waited quietly as the old man stared into the fire, lost to the present, and all the while absentmindedly fidgeting something small round and round in his hand.

The moon was almost full, and the light of it made everything like a dream of living. The woods are tricky places of a summer night, and the owls were ghosting low. Moonshine lit everything silver and grey. And there she was, watching. Quick as light and dark together, and her eyes in the shadows like a cat's in candlelight. Nick could not stir, stood there trying to shuffle the codpiece, and she floated towards him, limbs paler than milk, and not a stitch on her.

'Oh she glowed, like the moon grew sick to look on her... aye, she outshone the moon. Hair like a clouded net of smoke and brilliance, and she held out her hand to me, and so help me lord I could never have refused her...'

Nat realised he was holding his breath. He had never heard the old man tell it this way before, although Nick took as much pride in weaving a good story as he did the fine cloth that had brought wealth to the Botham family.

Nick sighed again, shifting his buttocks on the hard settle, though he scarcely felt it beneath him. Gone were the infirmities of age; he was once again the lusty journeyman weaver...

Enthralled by her moonlit glamour as she called him down to her side in the summer night, her long arms clasping him as ivy clings to elm, in a bower of vines and flowers all tangled wantonly together...

The old man's voice rumbled low; Nat had to strain to hear him.

'She never took her eyes off me, never looking where she trod; she had no need. The trees would have bowed down to her, had she but asked. And she filled my head so all I could see was her, and the light of her, and the scent... like nothing I've caught nose of, not before or since. Like clear water, and moonshine, and dusk with the woodbine, and dainty roses blowing in your mother's garden, and sweetest blooms from the Indies... and spices! She is the Old and New Worlds together, and everything that ever came before, or after.'

Nick fell silent. The fire cracked and popped around the fresh logs, sending sparks dancing upwards. Nat hardly dared to move, lest the old man lose the thread. The firelight made strange shadows in his grandfather's face, hiding the lines of careworn age, so that Nat fancied he could see the young man Nick had been. Then the flickering darkness danced again, making a cadaver of his head. Nat surreptitiously crossed his fingers to avert ill fortune. Nick leaned back, and the shadows changed again.

'Your mother might meet with her tonight, boy.'

'Who?' Why had the old man wandered from the tale?

'*Her*: She has power over the marriage bed, and what goes on between its sheets, be they finest linen or no. And your mother's gone with the midwife, to assist Will Bowery's young wife. I'll lay odds the Faery Queen'll be somewhere about. Here, lad, this tankard's empty.'

Nat scrambled to his feet, taking the tankard to the barrel. The rich nutty smell of his mother's best brewed beer filled the kitchen. Nat found a cup for himself, filling both vessels to the brim, never spilling a drop.

'Good lad; your mother's beer is not to be wasted.' Nick took a long draught. He smiled then, a smile of knowing wonder, as once more the vision of her filled his mind's eye.

Her pale face above him a mystery of light like the sun's rising, and the warm-cool sensation of her skin against his. The knowing of her around him, enclosing him within her, and the near-unbearable pleasure of her hips rocking against him...

'She called me down to her, arms so strong and white like finest marble, and her maids that came and went like fireflies about us. Then turning her above me, her eyes filling my head, blinding me so all I could see was the knowing of her around me. She was an unearthly nonpareil, as no daughter of Eve ever could be, smooth and rounded, her breast so high, like a maid's in the first flush of growing. But full and heavy too, a more than goodly handful - she took my hands up to her, when she saw I was feared to touch her. Aye, she wanted my hands on her...'

Young man and old sighed alike at the image the old man's words conjured: Nick at the long memory of it as his hands now repeated the gestured caress midair, Nat at the unimaginable wonder of ever touching a woman.

'And her voice! Sweetly soft, and low, but commanding! Never a man could gainsay her command, he'd sooner hack his own limbs than dare to disobey. I was under her spell, though never let the priest hear me say so. I had no choice, lad. Remember that, when you're alone in the woods and strange lights come to you. There is no choosing if they call to you, not though you pray to God in Heaven, for he cannot deliver you from their Elder graces. And why should we desire to resist it? What harm can there be though we are powerless against them? Not of God, and not the Devil neither, I'll lay my immortal soul to *that*. You're more than old enough to know the truth of living between what they preach in church, and what we see with our own eyes of the ways of this world. If she calls, you go.'

'Wil she call, think you?' Nat didn't know whether he was eager, or scared. Nick gave no heed.

'And all around us lights and glimmers like a thousand shooting stars, and my skin bare as a newborn babe's to the breeze. Her eyes holding me still, and her hands like fire and ice together. Never a woman could match her... and never a woman wanted me with such strange joy and fury. She took me up into her like oil soaked silk... the sweet motion of her riding against me - why blush boy? This is the way of it, as you'll find soon enough. I know you've been watching the Carters' maid. The stars swung round above her head, great Orion with his sword and belt, and she rode me in a frenzy, her smile never changing, and her eyes holding me to her, still, so calm, like stone come to life, like the moon in water. Never have I lasted so long for a woman's pleasure - she held the mastery over me as no mortal woman could, before or since. Even when the clouds covered the moon, and the shadows came down to surround us...'

*Icy chill prickling his skin even as her heat overtook them both.
The trees whipped to a sudden frenzy as the Darkness strode*

towards them, and the only light now was her face turning to laugh in the teeth of the King of Shadows' fury.

Nick shuddered, his hand clutching round the fragile treasure still imprisoned in his left hand. Soft warmth stole through him then, quietening his agitation. He took a deep breath.

'Still she held me tight into her, riding me hard as I thrust beyond my own endurance. And when He appeared, in all His darker fury, still she rutted against me, laughing in His face, and God help me I could do naught but what she wanted of me. His voice sent shivers into my very soul - no words I heard, but His rage was in the wind in the trees, in the bone-chill slicing through the summer night, and the shrieking owls. And still she laughed at Him. All her pleasure of me was to despise Him, and only when He moved in darksome rage did she release me to my pleasure's relief. She took it all, every drop of spirit I had in me to give, then turned she away from the both of us, the King of Shadows and me, calling her attendants about her with the clear song of the nightingale. And I was left upon the ground, my clothes scattered about, while they had gone.

As I picked up my jerkin, I found a small treasure of hers. I doubt she knew she'd left it, or maybe she never missed it. Or it was meant to remind me... anyhap, 'tis here.'

Nick held out his hand to the boy. In the centre of his palm lay a tiny ring of golden oak leaves. Nat whistled.

'Carefully lad, try not to bruise the leaves.'

Nat nearly dropped the fragile thing, before cradling it delicately in his left hand.

'They're real? How can that be?'

Nick regarded his grandson's bent head thoughtfully. With his curling brown hair and merry grey eyes, the lad reminded him of himself at that age. It was time.

'Tis a part of her power, even after all these years they've never withered. Makes me think there is something as yet unfinished in my tale. I'm only an old man, time for me to make my last confession soon enough. You take it boy, and may it bring you good fortune.'

He closed Nat's hand gently over the glowing golden thing, then heaved himself up from the settle. Nat opened his hand to marvel again at his new treasure. It felt light, and warm, the miniature leaves tickling his skin. He wondered about offering it to Bess Carter, whether she might let him kiss her. No. It wasn't that sort of keepsake. It should be kept safe, and unsullied. As he stared, he fancied he felt a tiny breeze stealing across his palm. Breathing in, he caught the scent of summer woodland, woodbine, and water. Restless excitement stirred in him, and he felt a sudden urge to go wandering into the night.

Rising to his feet, he realised that Nick had heaved open the door to the garden, and was relieving himself by the gate. Pausing on the threshold between the warm firelight and the cool summer darkness, Nat glanced back. The familiar safety of home seemed a small thing now; all he had to do was stride past the old man and into the night along the west road. He'd be lost among the trees in no time.

A movement by the gate caught his eye: disturbed by his grandfather's prolonged staling, a nightingale darted swiftly from hawthorn to crabapple, setting up a rippling carol, and provoking an answering chorus from the woodland beyond. The starlit singing seemed to herald... what? And then he saw.

Advancing up the road from the east, surrounded by a nimbus of silvered light, came a cavalcade of shining beings. All light, and fire, and quicksilver movement they were. Smaller lights danced attendance round two figures, the source of light, and a subtle shimmering music that seemed to further illuminate the darkness. Tall they were, and pale, and clad in simple robes of midnight blue and silver, that flowed and swirled like smoke with each silent step. Mother and daughter they seemed to be, the taller queenly one with a silver crescent in her clouded net of hair, and eyes like depthless night; and the younger maiden's silver-gilt locks bound with a circlet of stars, her grey-green eyes alight with joyous curiosity. Nat glanced at his grandfather, but Nick was oblivious to the fantastical procession. Even when the maiden paused by the gate to admire the

tiny pink roses scrambling through the hedge, the old man carried on fidgeting with his codpiece, his arthritic fingers struggling with the string. Nat caught his breath as the nymph turned in the moonlight, her exquisite fingers caressing a cluster of blooms. She looked directly at him, and smiled. Nat was entranced.

A hawking sound broke the spell. Nick spat happily into the hedge. Nat blinked. When he looked again, the procession had vanished. The birds were silent. And his mother was coming up the road from town. Nick took his daughter-in-law's arm as she passed him, and she helped him into the house.

'Shut the door my love, you'll be letting the bad spirits in after midnight!'

Reluctantly, Nat heaved shut the door. No wandering tonight. As Martha bustled about, clearing tankards and platters, Nick questioned her in a low voice. Her answers evidently pleased him, for he turned, smiling to Nat.

'I knew it would be so,' the dancing firelight gave a puckish cast to his expression.

'Knew what, grandfather?'

'I knew *she'd* be there tonight. I knew it, and so 'twas. Will Bowery's got himself a fine son this night, and his wife safe too, when all thought she'd not last out her time. Can only be as she willed it so. Tell me boy,' the old man leaned closer, 'tell me, after I gave you her trinket, did you notice anything... strange?'

Nat thought of the maiden by the gate, and her sweet smile; the scented breath of air, and the warmth he could feel even now from the ring tucked safely over his heart. He nodded.

'Mark my words, and watch your step when you're alone near the woods. She'll know you now.'

