

5 • The Girl Named Dirty

Forever and always, the Caretaker of Great Park brought those who were hurt or frightened, sick or broken to his wife, Mercie, because she was wise, and whatever she touched was made better...

Except Dirty. Dirty refused to become better. Caretaker had found her outside Stonegate Entrance, rooting around for food after a Burner had beaten her. The child was covered with welts and bruises.

When Caretaker approached the girl, she immediately stood to her feet and shouted, "I'm Dirty! I never wash! I never cry! I'll fight anything that raises a fist to me!" Then she fainted from her wounds and hunger.

Caretaker brought her to Mercie. But all of the old woman's efforts could not help the girl to enjoy life in Great Park. Dirty hated the cottage. She despised the people who lived there. She thought Caretaker, with his tree-hat and jingling pockets, was stupid. She hated Hero's ugly scar.

"I'm not going to live with those creeps," she declared one day as she stomped off to the barnyard to make her home with the pigs.

From that day on, she tromped in the mud and slept in the sheds. She practiced pig grunts. She learned pig calls, "Hoi-soi-soi-soi-hoi!" She watched the sows give birth to litters, and made pets of the piglets. And because the pigs were gentle, she loved them.

But she refused to love people.

Another outcast was living in the cottage—a girl Dirty's age who had a disease that made her crippled. Dirty hated the

Crippled Girl because she was ugly.

"Sui! Sui!" she would say to her pigs. "How can they live with that ugly thing? Why don't they just get rid of her?"

Dirty sat on a big sow and watched when Caretaker carried the Crippled Girl on a pallet into the warm sunshine. She heard Mercie, that crone of a housewife, sing songs. Dirty made pig grunts to drown out the sound.

At first Mercie tried to persuade her to come into the cottage for meals, but she would not. Then Mercie carried nourishing lunches to the dung heap where Dirty liked to sit, and she ate there with the girl. Finally, Dirty refused any food from Mercie's hand.

"I'll eat the pig slop," she said. "If it's good enough for pigs, it's good enough for me."

Finally, the wise woman and her husband decided to leave Dirty alone. The girl would have to learn that what was fine for pigs was not always right for children.

So Dirty lived in the pigpen in back of Caretaker's Cottage and never left it—except to creep into Deepest Forest on evenings of the Great Celebration. Dirty loved to watch the dancing and singing and the feasting and the joyful fellowship. She hid herself so well, none of the King's subjects knew that Dirty watched them on the nights when the Sacred Circle of Flames was lit.

At first, entrance—when all of the subjects became real—seemed stupid to Dirty. She had been irritated to discover that the simpering Amanda was a real princess. She had thought Amanda's airs were all bragging. She was furious when Mercie walked through the Sacred Flames and became the most

beautiful of women. She had snorted when silly Caretaker had become Ranger Commander.

What sort of tricks were they trying to pull on her?

No wonder they were happy and kind. It was easy to laugh if you were really a princess. It was easy to be kind if you were really beautiful. It was a snap to be good if you had all that power.

But what if you were just ordinary and never became anything else? Life was not so easy then. Dirty hated the subjects of the King all the more, but for some reason she could not stay away from their Great Celebrations.

One night, Dirty hid in the hollow stump of a felled tree and watched celebrants making entrance through the Sacred Flames. Looking through the dancing fire, she could see banquet tables being spread with glorious foods. She had brought a dried ear of corn from the pig trough and was munching on its hard kernels.

Suddenly, she heard someone calling out, "Alms! Alms for the poor!" She peeked her head out of her hole and saw a beggar, all ragged and threadbare.

Too late! The beggar had seen her and was coming her way. She grunted and grunted, hoping to scare him off. He peeked into the black hollow of the stump. "Aren't you coming to the Great Celebration?" the man asked.

Dirty climbed out. She got down on all fours and pushed her nose into the dirt. She snorted. She made a pig call, "Hoi-soi-soi-soi-hoi!"

The beggar was not fooled into thinking that she was a pig. "Come," he said. "Come! Go through the flames with me. Be my guest at the banquet table."

Dirty looked at him. She bared her teeth. She grunted again. "Sui! Sui! Go with you? You're nothing but an ugly beggar! I'd

rather be with the pigs!"

The beggar touched her gently on the shoulder. Dirty drew back, but her arm felt warm where his hand had been.

"Oh, Dirty," he said. "Don't you know? All the subjects of the King are nothing more than ugly beggars."

With that, he moved off. She was astonished that he hadn't hit her with his staff or shouted, "You filth! Who are *you* to call me ugly?"

Dirty watched the beggar make entrance. She heard the Rangers salute. She saw the glad clamor of hello in Inmost Circle. She watched the beggar become real. Through the burning flames, she saw that he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He was the King himself.

And he had said to her, Come with me...

At that moment, Dirty, unwashed and smelling of the pigpen, began to love the King. Longing filled her heart. She wanted to be as beautiful as he.

The music for celebration struck up. The King disappeared into the crowd. Dirty hid back in her hole. From her hiding place, she could see latecomers hurrying to make entrance. Far off, hastening through the forest, she spotted Mercie and Caretaker making their way toward the Sacred Flames.

As they approached, Dirty could see they were holding the Crippled Girl between their arms. They were taking her to the celebration.

Dirty wanted a better view. She scooted out of her hole to see if that ugly creature would become real. She watched as the three made the Kingdom vow: "To the King! To the Restoration!" She watched them pass through the flames.

Hah! thought Dirty. *Mercie became beautiful. Caretaker became Ranger Commander. But the Crippled Girl is still deformed.*