

Nobody's Son

SEAN STEWART



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*For Kay, Christine, Cait
—mother, wife, daughter—
this book about fathers and husbands and sons*

Nobody's Son

The Red Keep

Memories haunted the Ghostwood, brittle as the twigs that splintered like tiny bones under Mark's boots. Sifting through drooping cedar boughs, the old wind muttered of things that waited in darkness without hope. To every question the Ghostwood had but one answer, made from sorrow, and loneliness, and time.

Shielder's Mark followed a stream into the Forest, whistling a cheery tune and thinking, *God, what a bloody dismal place. Only an idiot would come here on purpose. An idiot with ambition*, he corrected himself wryly. *An idiot who means to collect on the King's promise to grant one wish—any wish—to the man who breaks the Ghostwood's spell. Just because practically every hero since Duke Aron has failed to survive the Wood, that's no reason to be scared.* "That's a reason to bloody panic," Mark growled to himself.

Sure, they were heroes: but could they shear a sheep, or shoe a horse, or mend a fence with a loop of haywire? No doubt a village handyjack has a thousand tricks that would put those famous duelists and adventurers to shame.

Right.

Somehow, this had all seemed a good deal less stupid before Mark had actually entered the Ghostwood.

From time to time the Forest's desolation would run into his limbs like water, and he would have to stop, and spit a long carpenter's spit. *You've nowt to go back to, last and*

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least of heroes, he would remind himself. So you might as well go on.

All his life Mark had longed to seek his greatness in the Ghostwood. His father had abandoned him when he was only a boy. When his mother died, early in the spring of his twenty-first year, he left his home and set out for the haunted Forest. He left his hammer to the cooper, his spare clothes to the miller's son, his mother's grave to the grass and the rain.

He tried to leave his childhood too, but that came after him. Dreaming of fame to come, Mark never looked back; never saw his childhood following behind, cool and dark and vague as a shadow.

It was a hard scramble following the stream into the Ghostwood. After hours of sloshing through eddies and jumping from rock to rock in the channel, Mark suddenly stopped, heart pounding, and stared at a boot cradled in the grasp of a willow root. It had been a proud boot once, fit to grace a gentleman.

Little now remained but tattered pieces of tooled leather, spotted here and there with rust where once a button or a buckle gleamed. *Must have tumbled downward from the Red Keep and gotten snagged.*

Shite.

At the sight of something which had once touched human life, the vague dread of the Ghostwood hardened into panic in Mark's chest. *Probably came off some poor bastard who went to break the spell. Nails to nuts that's you in two days, my friend.*

O god.

O god.

Well don't just stand there staring, you silly bugger. Get on, get on with it!

He spat and scrambled on without looking back.

When some hours later he saw the second boot, wedged between two rocks and half-buried under dead leaves, he felt a different, deeper kind of dread, the kind you feel when faced with the impossible. The second boot was the mate of the first, no question: but it was whole. Worn, but whole.

How the hell! T'other one's been through a hundred years, but this. . . . A buckle, only slightly tarnished, clinked against Mark's sword blade as he brushed away the coverlet of leaves. He'd never heard a lonelier sound. *My god, he thought: T'awd stories are true!* Two boots, one old, one young. *You're walking back through time, lad. Back through time!*

He swore and leapt away. He couldn't pretend this was normal any more. He bolted forward, splashing wildly through the stream, jumping from rock to rock or floundering through the freezing water until exhaustion finally drowned his fear. Then he slowed, trudging forward into the Forest's dark heart, feeling himself dwindle like a match falling into a well endlessly deep. For the first time in his life he wished he believed in God.

Hours passed as he hacked his way through ranks of pine boughs. *Bastard way to treat good steel,* he thought ruefully. He wiped off his sword as best he could, but the blade was still sticky with pine-sap when he gave up and stuck it back into its sheath.

And then, a little miracle: a path began to grow from nowhere, a hollow tunnel through the Wood. *Well, that's the worst behind you,* he thought.

And with every step, the shadow of his past streamed out longer and darker at his back.

The stories said there was a Tower at the centre of the Wood, guarded by terrors. Mark had brought his sword, and

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a set of iron climbing spikes: he figured he had a damn sight better chance of scaling the Tower wall than he had of battling past guardians that had proved too awful for any of the great heroes to defeat.

He walked for a long time while the dirt path got broader and cleaner. Gloomy cedars drooped around him, and chambers of pine, quiet and dusty as cathedrals; as full of death and long silence. At length these gave way to other trees, elms and poplars and muttering oaks. As he travelled back through time, white paving stones erupted from the earth and knit themselves together into a road. But the better the path became, the harder Mark found the walking. He strode through years drifted like withered leaves, rustling around his ankles, his knees, his hips: wading with every step through uncounted empty days. At last he could think of nothing but grief, age, death, abandonment, hollowness, desolation.

"Shite!" *The King can pay a Keep for this: nowt less.*

Think! Think about summat. . . . Twenty servants, then, the King can give you; a stable too, and canty livery. Summat smart, as a man would feel proud to wear. Blue and silver maybe: but soldierlike, not just flashy.

How long had he been walking in the Wood?

One day?

Three?

Five?

It was twilight now, but he couldn't remember when last he'd seen the sun.

The path was paved with flagstones of white marble, gleaming under a ghostly grey tunnel made by an aisle of oaks. Farther on, an orchard of cherry trees whispered with the breeze, their tops a foam of pink blossom.

And beyond that, above a wide moat, stood the haunted

Keep and its Tower, built of red granite. *The Tower.* Mark shivered with wonder. *Tales around that spire like red wool wound around a spindle. Break the spell here and be famous for life. Forever! Shielder's Mark, greatest of champions. Father of a proud line.*

Firelight winked close by, fierce as lightning to Mark's nervous eyes. He smelt smoke on the air, and something else, like foul stew.

There: there it was again, another yellow crack in the dusk, in the shadows by the road, perhaps twenty paces from where he stood. He peered into the darkness. At a place where the low limb of an oak thrust out level with the ground, someone had made a crude shelter, stacking cedar boughs to make a ramshackle lean-to.

Company in the Ghostwood! A warm fire, friendly stories, a meal and someone to share the dark watches of the night!

Mark trotted forward, faltered, stopped. *A fire? Here?* "Only madmen come here," he said to himself. "And ambitious idiots." He tugged out his sword. Where pine-sap had stained the blade it was tufted with sheep's-wool from his fleece-lined sheath.

Shite. Now don't you look ridiculous. He hovered, torn between caution and hunger, loneliness and plain fear.

Balls, boy. If you can't handle a blink of fire, how d'you think ye'll manage the Red Keep, eh? Shielder's Mark, hero of legend. Specialty: running away from things. You aren't standing here for caution's sake. You're soft as lead and yellow as goat's piss. What will you do, mama's boy? Wait for the sun because you daren't cross candlelight?

His fingers tightened around the pommel of his sword and he started forward.

High overhead the oaks whispered, swaying and lament-

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ing, *all gone, all gone*. Around the Red Tower, memories crowded thick as moths around a candle flame.

A huge black squirrel, the size of a big cat, padded from the lean-to and hunkered back on its haunches, looking Mark over. Its black eyes gleamed like polished pebbles. A moment later, an old woman followed it. "Well an' well! Come, Shade: look at what jetsam the dark hath stranded on our shore."

Mark blinked. "Best o' the night to you, awd Mother," he said uncertainly.

"I did not crack for tha to flower from my nut," the old woman said tartly. "Am no man's mother now, boy."

O lord. The old woman's accent was thick as cream and queer as a lead nail. Mark wasn't sure what she'd said, but he got the idea he wasn't supposed to call her Mother.

Easy enough. He looked at the old crone and suppressed a shudder. She was short and thin-boned as a squirrel herself; her black eyes glittered in her pinched face. Once her dress had been rich and proud with braid, but now it was tatters of coal-coloured cloth; her long grey hair was wrapped in a rag of satin.

She was mantled in a fine man's cloak, twice her size, closed with three mismatched clasps. She wore a broad-headed signet ring on each thumb, one marked with the impress of a star, the other with a swan. A crude wooden charm dangled from her neck, hanging from a thread of cedar bark. At her hip hung a duster made from squirrel-tails.

"Art tha moon-mad or mazed, to stand gawping at my door?" the old woman demanded. "Come in, come, boy: I'll have you for dinner."

Mark gulped. "Dinner in me, were that, or me in dinner?"

The old woman cackled and reached out to fluff him with her squirrel-tail duster. "She were not such a scathesome

hag as *that!*" She smiled with small yellow teeth and held out an acorn. "Oak-egg?"

Thrown by the old woman's firelight, Mark's shadow trembled behind him like a frightened boy as he hastily shook his head. Many times had he taken his mother's pigs into the wood and knocked down acorns to fatten them for All Hallows. He had no wish to be fattened for the slaughter himself. A score of witchtales flooded back to him.

He found his hand on his dagger hilt; then slowly took it off. *Heroes don't stab mad awd women*, he told himself sternly. *At least, not without a good reason.*

"What's tha clept, boy?"

Mark blinked. "Er, what was that?"

The old woman pursed her thin lips and spat in annoyance. "John? Jack? Ven? Perse? Bill? What's tha clept?"

"Oh!" The light dawned. "Uh, Shielder's Mark. Mark. And you?"

The old woman sighed. "No easy telling, boy: no easy tale. I buried my name under a bush and ne'er could find it more. 'Tis better so, in sooth," she whispered. "Names as mine are better underground." Her loneliness pierced Mark like a spear; it seemed as if all the Ghostwood lingered in her withered frame, everything lost and alone.

Moodily the old woman shook her head. "Tha must clepe me Husk, as Shade does," she said, nodding at the huge black squirrel. She flicked her duster at Mark's sword. "Tha'lt be going to try thy luck at Red Keep."

He nodded.

Husk glanced back at the Tower, her eyes mazy with hatred and old longing. "Well an' well. I've some speaking as tha might need to hear, if ye'll be going yonder. But 'tis my fancy to ask all the fine stallions to take a small fence afore I give 'em oats—dost tha follow?"

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Mark spat, a long working man's spit. "I have to pass a test before ye'll tell me about the Red Keep.—Right?"

"Aye."

"What happens if I don't take it?"

A crinkle of sly crow-footed eyes. "Nought, nought. 'Tis ony if ye care what sooth an old hag might speak, who's waned beneath yonder Tower for a moon's age."

Mark grunted. "Well, set me the task, and I'll do my best."

The old woman hissed, pleased. At her feet, Shade studied Mark with glittering black eyes. "See tha yon oak tree?" the old crone asked. "Each dark I watch the Scarlet Tower gore the dying moon, sitha, but now that oak hath swole and blocked my seeing; stars wiggle fishwise in its twig-nets. If tha were to move that oak-tree from my way, I'd thank tha."

Mark took a long, careful look. The oak in Husk's way must have been sixty years old at least, tall and smooth-limbed and strong.

He had a tinderbox to work with, a lead pencil and a sturdy knife, a hank of string and a twist of haywire that he kept always in his pocket. "An I had a magic sword I could fell it with a single stroke," he murmured.

"Oh aye. Philip Four-fingers went that way."

Mark shot the old woman a glance. "You really saw him?"

"All, my chick, all of them."

Mark grunted. "If I were giant I could pull the damn tree over."

"Sir Veramos did; caught splinters in his eyes and never saw the sun again."

Mark studied the oak up close, thoughtfully fingering his tinderbox.

"No fire," the old woman called, as if reading his

thoughts. "Too easy for it to run thruff the trees and gobble up my orchard."

Scratch the tinderbox. A long coil of rope filled half Mark's pack, along with his climbing spikes. Maybe he could use the rope to saw through the oak? Or ring it with spikes and then, and then. . . . *Shite.*

Mark spat reflectively. "An I had spade, I'd dig away at base until the bloody thing fell ower on its own."

Husk nodded. "Aye. Tine Silverhand took it so. Brought a pick for to mole beneath the Red Keep's walls."

"But I don't have a bloody pick," Mark growled. Oh, he was stupid, he was stupid. He'd spent all his life smithing himself into a blade with a single purpose, to storm the Red Keep. Was he to blunt against the first piece of wood that got in his way?

Steady on. Your temper was never your best friend, Shielder's Mark. There's a way through. There's a way through, if only you can see it.

A sharp eye cuts neater than a mail fist.

You've no magic sword, no giant's arm, no pack of tools; so you'd better use your brain. If you don't know the answer then change the question. That's your manner, Shielder's Mark. If the snake's head is slick then grab its tail. . . . Ah!

Aaaaaah. T'awd woman gives the test to every passing Hero: but the tree's still here!

Quickly Mark peered into the twilight. Sure enough, not ten paces away he saw a stump littered with woodchips.

Grinning, Mark ambled back to the old woman. "Grand news, awd Husk! You'll have a fine sight o' moon tonight." He bowed as best he knew how, reached down, and picked up the cedar branch that made the left half of her doorway.

Because of course Husk had to set the test up new for

each hero. There had to be some way *she* could solve the puzzle. And that was to move the hut, not the tree!

Well pleased with his own cleverness, Mark started rebuilding Husk's hovel against the limb of a different oak. *By the Devil's scratchy drawers, you'll make a hero yet, Shielder Mark!*

The old woman cackled too, and ruffled his hair with her bony fingers. "Mayhap tha'lt stay a stranger to worm guts for a little, boy, an' a little yet."

She asked him in, after he'd dug a new firepit and remade her walls. Her hovel swarmed with squirrels. Two crouching squirrels in the middle of the tiny room stared greedily up at five dead fish, blind and stinking, that swung on strings tied to the oak branch that served as a roof-beam. The great black squirrel, Shade, eyed Mark coolly from between Husk's legs.

From the roof-beam Husk had also hung a score of medallions like the one she wore around her neck: chips of wood carved with a crude pattern, a snake eating its own tail. In the corner of the hut were baskets lashed from willow-wands, filled with acorns, sloes, and goosegrass. Husk nursed a reeking stew in a small black pot above the fire; the pot might once have been a knight's helm.

Mark thought uneasily of Husk's borrowed cloak, its three different brooches, her pair of mismatched signet rings. "What happened to the men who didn't pass your test?"

Husk stroked Shade tenderly on the flank. "Why we et them, Shielder's Mark. If a gallant fails an old crone's test, I wis he weren't likely to conquer the Keep! And waste's a sin, tha knows."

Mark gulped. Beside him, the pot that might have been a helmet slurped and burbled to itself. The old woman's eyes

glinted over the squirrels that seethed around her. "Dinner, dinner, dinner," she muttered. She squinted at squirrels by the grate, in the thatch, slumbering by her skinny thighs. "We know a wench as failed her mistress, eh, Henrietta?" she murmured, staring at a plump brown squirrel that backed nervously toward the doorway. Husk crept slowly after, crab-stiff and softly crooning. "Thine furry thighs so glossy, eh? Thy cheek so silk. Enspelled by thy own face in the pond, is it? Stuffed with thy own prettiness like a tick full to bursting. Tha'lt be sorry now, won't tha lass?"

"Please!—Let me help," Mark said quickly. O god: Henrietta stew. "I've cheese in my pack, and bread, and a bit of smoked pig." Come to think of it, he'd feel safer eating his own food anyway. "I can't pay much for my dinner, milady. Take this and make my heart easy."

Husk looked him over as he rummaged in his pack. "A smooth tongue in a rough face, i' sooth!" Her curtsey as she spoke was deep and strangely graceful; an echo from some gentler life.

Mark sighed with relief. *Shielder's Mark: squirrel-saver.*
The legend begins.

Old Husk smiled at him her haggish benediction. "A forest-full of gentles have I known, most with more good i' their faces and less in their hearts. But art tha not cloddish, i' sooth?"

"Er, what?"

"Base! Churlish! Low!"

"Oh. Am I common?—As dirt," Mark said with a grin.

"Not yet too fine to break bread with a toothless mazed old bitch, eh? Not like Serimus nor Flavian nor Stargad the Shrewd. Him I remember, crouched like a silk-swaddled toad afore my lintel thruff the whole night, and then sidles by at noon."

"You—you met Stargad? But that must have been halfway back to grandfather days!"

Husk plucked Mark's knife from his belt and began shaving slices of pig into the stewpot. "Time, tha knows: time's foxy in the Wood. They all come by here, this Kingdom's heroes: brave-braided all, with their medals bouncing to heartdrums' beat." She grinned at Mark. "Where are thy ribbands and favours, boy? What hast tha done that harpers sing? Cracked a kingdom? Drank dragon-blood?"

"Uh, not exactly," Mark admitted.

"Climbed a mountain's sun-spiring snowpeak?"

"I don't think so."

"Arm-wrestled oliphant?"

"No."

"Diced with the Devil on a throw of bones?"

Mark shook his head. "Not as such."

Husk glared at him. "Were ye nought then but breathing? Dost tha come armoured in air and girt with hoping?"

"That's me." Mark fished a hank of haywire from his pocket to fiddle with, unable to meet Husk's eyes. *T'awd bitch is right. How can you expect to win where all the real heroes lost?*

Shade jumped up to Husk's shoulder. Crone and creature gazed at Mark without enthusiasm. "Shade, Shade, Shade," Husk muttered. She cut up the last of the smoked pig. "An hundred hundred nights and weeks and years I've waned beneath yonder Tower, boy. My weft is ravelled and ony warp's left. But still I know the Red Keep is perilous; spell-webbed, fear-fangled. Old nuts rot and nothing green grows up from them: magic has withered since grandfather days. You come with no spell sheaf, no flight of impossibles. Many mighty men that were flesh and fearless i' th' sun are clay now: their soul-pots cracked and ground to

dust." Stroking Shade, Husk met his eyes. "What can tha do that they could not?"

How many times had Mark asked himself the same question? "Maybe I can't. Maybe I'll die." He twisted the haywire between his fingers, then stuffed it abruptly back in his pocket. "I go because I must. This is what has been given to me. This is my only gift. I am no general, no lover, no wizard nor duelist, no hero nor thief. I am only Shielder's Mark, who waited all his life to go to the Ghostwood, and went."

Mark fell silent. The stewpot bubbled above the small yellow fire. Beside his boot, squirrel-pups mewled at their dozing mother's side. Shade's tail swished across Husk's face and the old woman sneezed. Then she laughed. "Better to go with fate than wisdom. Odds be, tha'lt die with a shriek in thy throat, but perhaps not. Still, tha must be shrewd!" She dumped a ladle-full of stew into a wooden bowl. "Bend ear a while, and hear an old owl's screeching."

"Gladly," Mark said. "Tell me about Stargad!" The favourite stories of Mark's boyhood had been about Stargad. Not so much the later triumphs, but the early days, learning bladework under his uncle's stern, fair eye. Earning at last the famous sword that perished with him in the Ghostwood. "Did he have Sweetness? Did it sing, like the old stories say?"

"Not singing, exactly: more whizzing, windsome: reed-hollow. Witched the ear and made the heart drunk with a cider oozed from emptiness."

Mark glanced down at the sword belted at his hip. An excellent blade, won on a bet from a travelling duelist. But what was it, compared to Invincible, or Scalpel, or Sweetness?

A name, Mark thought for the thousandth time. He needed a name for his sword. Protector? Valiant? Victor? But who

wanted to be less valiant than his weapon? He imagined introducing himself: "Shielder's Mark, good sir! And this is . . . *Victor!*"—Baring his scabbard with a swirl of cloak.

Folk would think you mad.

He tried to get Husk to tell him of the Red Keep, but she would only warn him not to stay longer than a day, then ask him of the outside world, for she was parched with a thirst only his tales of farm-hands and dull everyday chores could slake.

Once she started up and touched his cheek, frowning. "Tha'rt like . . . I cannot filch it back to mind," she murmured. "Did thy father come thruff the Ghostwood, once upon a time?"

Sudden tightness clenched at Mark's heart. "My dad were too great a coward to stick by his wife and child; I doubt he came here," Mark said coldly.

The crone glanced at him with interest. "Aye . . . there's a coal that's not yet embered," she cackled. "But this is the Ghostwood, Shielder's Mark. Here thy shadow throws *tha*: feet run not to the light ahead, but from the dark behind." She barked again with laughter lean and tough as wire. "Well an' well, little clod: I did not mean to hurt *tha*." She laid a brittle hand on his arm. "A candle this night was, to an old hag drownt in shadows, Shielder's Mark. I have summat for *tha*, if *tha*'lt take it." From around her neck she took one of her wooden charms, pressing it into Mark's hands with her dry old fingers. "No longer do I understand the meaning in this wyrm," she said, tracing the pattern of the serpent with her fingers. "Mayhap 'twill serve *tha* for a luckpiece."

"You honour me," Mark said soberly. He lifted the loop of cedar bark and placed it around his neck. The charm he tucked beneath his shirt.