



The Legend of Nothing

a storybook
by Clayton Bess

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Centuries ago, or it might have been only yesteryear, a daughter was born to a queen and king in the land of Land. They named the daughter Iola, but around Land she became known as “Nothing”.

“The princess has nothing,” the people would say, and this became Iola’s title, “Her Highness Has-Nothing”. In turn this title was shortened to just “Nothing”.

Nothing had a brother, you see. Prince Brae. Brae would be the one to inherit the kingdom, not Nothing. For this was in the days when men ruled the world and women did the wash.

Even though Nothing grew up in the shadow of Prince Brae, the eclipse was neither total nor permanent. It is true that the people of Land could not see her brilliance, but it was there inside her all the same, shining, waiting, shining.

When Nothing was eleven, Land was invaded by the people of Ring. The Ring King and his soldiers landed just ten miles down the coast and prepared to march on the palace of Land the next day.

The King of Land was off on a hunting party in the darkwood Forest with most of the palace guards. Word must be got to him at once to return and defend the palace. But the army of Ring lay between the palace and the king in the Darkwood Forest. The messenger would have to ride through the enemy lines, which would be very dangerous, or ride over thirty miles out of the way through the Mountains of Yore, which would take too long.

Prince Brae said, “I will do it! I will ride Steam through the lines of Ring. I will ride so fast they will see only my dust.”

He put on his finest armor and saddled Steam, the white stallion, the largest and strongest horse in Land. Brae chose his father's silver and gold parade saddle and pranced Steam through the town, waving his plumed helmet at the cheering people. Brae blew kisses. Girls swooned.

Nothing knew Brae and Steam would not make it to the Darkwood Forest. He was so vain he would stop in every village on the way to collect praise. The soldiers of Ring would hear of his coming long before he reached them and would lie in ambush. Steam was so heavy with silver and gold and Brae's armor that even this strongest of stallions would not be able to outrun the horses of Ring.

Nothing stripped herself to leggings and a blouse, tied back her hair and ran to the stables where she mounted the barebacked Wind, the wiry, wild filly Nothing had found trapped in Cave Canyon, a horse-breaker's lasso around her neck. The other end of the lasso was caught between two boulders. The filly was starved nearly to death and injured from thrashing upon the hard ground.

Nothing severed the rope with the sword the queen had given her and released the filly. Nothing gave her food and nursed her back to health. In return, Wind gave Nothing her devotion.

Now Nothing and Wind struck out for the Mountains of Yore. It was the long way, and a hard journey, but if anyone could make it to the king in time, Nothing on Wind could.

All afternoon and night she rode, whispering into the filly's ear, "Run, Wind. Run like the wind. Run, Wind."

The muscles of Wind rippled beneath Nothing's legs. The breathing of Wind filled Nothing's ears. The beat of the hooves of Wind marked the time, second after second after minute after minute after hour after hour. Day melted into night melted into gray morning. The

sun was fresh upon the horizon, and Nothing and Wind were sore and exhausted when they pounded together into the king's camp in the Darkwood Forest.

“My father!” Nothing cried to the sentry. “I must see my father at once!”

The king woke at her cries and called her to his tent. She told him in few words of the Ring invasion, and before the sun had climbed another inch, the king had turned his hunting party into a war party and set out on a double march for the palace.

Nothing tied Wind onto the back of the supply wagon that trailed the line of soldiers. She climbed inside the wagon. She was spent and fell promptly into a deep sleep, lulled by the steady creak of the wheels and the rattle of the pots and pans.

Late that afternoon, the army of Land overtook the army of Ring just as their attack on the palace was launched. Taken by surprise from behind, and sandwiched between the king's war party and the palace troops, the soldiers of Ring didn't stand a chance.

Nothing woke at the first sounds of fighting. She climbed onto the roof of the supply wagon for a better view of the battle and cheered her father on. But then she froze. She saw, on a high hill to her left, another supply wagon. Beside it sat the Ring King, mounted on Steam. The silver and gold of her father's saddle glinted in the setting sun. Nothing knew then that Brae had not made it through the lines of Ring.

As she watched, the Ring King took a last survey of his failing army, then reared Steam, turned, and made off into the woods at a gallop. His driver swung the supply wagon around and lurched after him.

In that moment Nothing realized that Brae must still be alive and inside the supply wagon. The Ring King would not kill the enemy prince. He would keep him safe until after the battle. If his army lost, then he would still have the prince for ransom.

“That wagon must be where he is holding Brae,” Nothing said to herself as the wagon disappeared into the woods. “And now he is making for the safety of his boats until he can make a deal for Brae’s life.”

She looked around for her father to tell him, but the king was on the battlefield rounding up the last of the soldiers of Ring. There was no time to lose. She must follow the Ring King before he was lost from sight. She leapt on Wind. The filly had run the entire day and night before, and had walked through the morning and afternoon march, but she had spirit. She galloped after the Ring King almost like a fresh pony.

Nothing tailed the Ring King and his wagon at a distance, watching them without letting herself be seen. Not knowing the countryside, the Ring King was forced by darkness to stop and make camp in the woods. He gave the driver the first watch, then rolled himself in his cloak and lay by the fire to sleep.

Nothing waited until the night was at its blackest, then crept toward the wagon. But she was too eager. She carelessly brushed by a bush, and a dry branch caught in her leggings and snapped.

“Who’s there?” the guard shouted, and he and the Ring King were upon her with their swords drawn.

“Oh, please, sir!” Nothing cried. “Don’t hurt me. I only wanted to share your fire.”

“Why, it’s nothing but a girl!” the Ring King said in anger and disgust. Nothing snuffled and truckled and bowed before him until he gave in. “Oh, very well,” he said. “I don’t suppose we have anything to fear from a girl. You can sleep over there, but shut up that crying.”

He lay back on the ground with his sword beside him. Nothing curled up opposite him and pretended to go to sleep. From under her eyelids she watched the two men and listened closely to their noises. The Ring King’s breathing grew deeper and more regular until finally it became a snore. The sound of it worked on the driver like a lullabye. In a mere moment his head nodded, then he was snoring too.

Nothing rose and moved without a sound to collect first the Ring King’s sword, then the driver’s. She climbed into the wagon. It was dark inside and she couldn’t see a thing. She crept over sacks of grain and felt her way through the clutter of pots and pans until she came across a big lump that moved under her and grunted.

“Hey! Get off me,” the lump cried.

Nothing found a mouth and slapped her hand over it. “It’s me, hush,” she whispered, and the lump hushed. It was Brae. Nothing listened for an alarm from the two men outside, but the duet of snores continued.

She untied Brae, and the two of them slid out of the wagon together with the rope and two swords. They advanced on the sleeping men and very carefully looped one end of the rope around the Ring King’s feet and the other end around the driver’s feet. They took two more lengths of rope from the wagon and began to tie the Ring King’s hands, when he woke with a cry and jumped to his feet. The driver jumped to his feet also, and the rope that bound their feet together went taut and tumbled them both to the ground on top of each other.

Brae raised the Ring King's sword high, while Nothing brandished the driver's sword.

"Stay where you are!" Nothing cried.

"Or you lose your heads!" Brae added. The two men lay stock-still staring up at their captors with their mouths open. "Now put your hands behind your backs, and my sister there will tie them together. Don't try anything."

The Ring King was shaking with fury as Nothing bent to tie his hands. She winked at him. "Don't tremble. I won't hurt you. I'm nothing but a girl."

They put the two men into the wagon, tied Wind to the back of the wagon, and drove through the night to the palace where they were welcomed with great cheers and tears of joy. All the people of Land had thought they had been lost in the battle. Prince Brae was glorified and called a hero.

But Princess Iola was still called Nothing, for she was nothing but a girl.

And as she grew up, she became nothing but a woman. No matter how clever or courageous she was, she was never more than nothing. Today everyone knows that it was Nothing who ended the plague in the land of Land by careful quarantine and ministering of medicines; and it was Nothing who ended the years of flood and drought when she built the dam on the River Rapid and created the Lake of Lore: and it was Nothing who made peace with the people of Ring and Rout. But in those days the people of Land were blind. They always gave the credit to the king or to Brae, who always took it while Nothing stood quietly by.

When Nothing was thirty-three, her father passed from life into death. Within two weeks her mother followed her husband, perhaps out of love, perhaps out of grief or perhaps out of nothingness.

Then Brae was king, and all of Land was his. Nothing was nothing, and nothing was hers.

Brae was a poor king, but when he took his sister's advice, the affairs of state went well.

When he was too stubborn to listen, they did not.

He married, but his wife gave him no child. So he said she was no good. He got rid of her and married again. His second wife gave him no child. So he got rid of her and married again.

And again, and again. A wife a year, a year a wife, but still Brae had no child.

Brae told Nothing she must marry too. Nothing said no.

“If my wives cannot give me a son, then I command you to give me a nephew to inherit my kingdom.”

Nothing said softly, I shall marry if and when it seems right to me.”

Brae brayed, “A woman is made to be a wife and mother.”

Nothing said nothing more.

And the days and years went by. Brae and Nothing grew old together. His nature grew stormier but his health grew frailer. One day he fell sick and could no longer leave his bed.

Nothing came to him where he lay and said, “I am very sorry, Brother, you are not well enough to govern any longer, and you have no heir. I am taking the kingdom.”

“You?” Brae laughed. “You're nothing more than a woman.”

Nothing answered, “On the contrary, I am nothing less than a woman.”

The people welcomed Nothing as ruler, for in these many years the wisdom and fairness of her deeds had begun finally to shine out over the land. And she ruled well. While Brae lived, she was considerate of him, consulting him on many matters and keep him informed of her actions. After Brae died she became Queen Iola.

She was generous where the kings before her had been tightfisted. She took money from the royal treasury and distributed it among the poor of the land, taxing the people more fairly and selling the royal jewels to swell the treasury. She created a cabinet of advisors of women and men from every corner of the land and arranged for a congress to rule after her death.

She took no money from the treasury for herself and now, having no royal jewels, not even a crown, the people began to say of Queen Iola, "The queen has nothing." Her fame reached other countries and from afar she was known by the title, "Her Majesty Has-Nothing".

Finally this title, too, was shortened to just "Nothing". And she died as she was born.

And even still, people all around the globe know the legend of Nothing and mourn her passing. That is why today, when you hear a baby cry, and you ask its parent why, the parent will reply, "Oh, that baby is just crying for Nothing."

The End