

The Mark of Strangeness

By Jeffrey R. Paine

Once upon a very long time ago, sometime after young Prince Charming and his beautiful wife Belle had completed their fairy-tale adventure, gotten married, and settled down to live happily ever after in their small suburban cottage, between the edge of the deep, dark woods and the Big Shining City, with its castle and towers and gardens, upon the big hill, it happened.

They had children.

This in itself was not such an unusual thing: princes and princesses had been marrying and having children for a very long time. The Darkling-Lords next door, for example, had a brood 'o young-uns who were forever getting into mischief and testing the patience of their parents, Will and Ima Darkling-Lords. The girls were just as rambunctious as the boys, and the whole bunch showed a knack for organization and acquisition that would likely assure them successful careers in banking and investments, real estate speculation, or the family business of being Evil Overlords of Faraway Lands.

The Hunters across the street (that is, Melvin and Goldilocks) had a daughter and two young sons, all of whom showed an aptitude for chasing down poor, defenseless and not-too-bright furry animals, slaughtering them, and bringing them home for dinner. Once they had finally gotten the idea that it was supposed to be wild animals from the woods and fields that they were to hunt, and NOT household pets or those beasts of burden and food that were kept fenced in on farms, the neighbors had put away their torches and pitchforks,

and things had pretty much settled down again to quiet suburban idyll. Although, the family was always asked to bring a vegetable dish or dessert to the neighborhood potlucks, instead of meat.

Joe and Belle Charming, while both having their own virtues, some of which they shared only between themselves, felt at a loss as their children grew. While the twins—the girl called the girl “Bella,” (the letter ‘a’ indicating she was born first) and the boy “Joebee” (the ‘bee’ indicating the letter ‘b’ and that he was born second)—were just as cute as buttons, neither showed any tendency toward any particular skill, and they were concerned, because, while being cute as a button and having the ability to charm people does have its advantages, it’s not much of a career.

Joe, for example, while an all-around swell guy and lots of fun at parties, was employed at what he found to be the rather boring job of Close Friend of the Crown Prince. And Belle, while rather handy around the house with tools (taking there after her father, the inventor) had as her main attribute her girl-next-door, scrubbed-clean beauty and charming attitude.

Occasionally, they had wondered what life had in store for their children. Perhaps, they thought, they would become famous scientists or inventors or great ambassadors. Or, perhaps, the stage would be their calling, acting, singing or performing. But, ominously, or so the parents thought, there had been no signs at birth, no veiled prophecies, no visits by evil witches or other harbingers of doom or greatness. Just their human godparents, offering their blessings and savings bonds. And no signs of anything beyond normal abilities of any child during their first years.

“Your twins are awfully cute,” said the doctor at their second-birthday checkups, “and you can relax knowing that they are quite normal.”

“Normal?” thought Joe.

“Normal?” thought Belle.

They looked at each other gravely. They looked at the twins. Bella was drooling prodigiously; Joebee had fallen asleep sitting up again. They looked at the doctor, who nodded and smiled at them.

“The grandparents are...going to be disappointed,” Joe said.

“Doctor,” said Belle. “With our charming and talented genes, shouldn’t they, uh, have more potential? Shouldn’t they already be displaying some...uh...talents?”

“Everyone wants their children to be special,” the doctor said. “More so here than even in Lake Woebegon. But even here in the Enchanted Kingdom, not everyone gets to be the Chosen Ones, the big stars of the fairy tales. But even without fate stepping in to set their course early, there’s a more wonderful magic that can determine their lives.”

“There is?” the Charmings cried in unison. “What is it?” asked Joe.
“What must we do?” asked Belle.

“Simply love your children, and they will grow to live enchanted lives, just as enchanted as the most wondrous fairy stories of old,” the doctor said.

On the way home, the young parents agreed that they would need to do something more for their children. That night, while he was grilling beastburgers, Joe looked up at the sky, and said, "We want our children to be special. Please let them be special."

And when she said her prayers before going to sleep, Belle added, "And we want to know that our children will have a good life, will be able to make their way in the world. We want some sign. Please."

So it came to pass, many months later, that in the summer of their third year, Belle, as usual, was tinkering on the picnic table while the twins were playing on the lawn nearby.

Suddenly, a dark cloud moved in front of the sun, plunging the yard into darkness. At the same moment, a plump old woman, dressed in a long-outdated but incredibly blue pantsuit, stepped through the garden gate, strode quickly to the children and bent low over them, peering at them intently.

"Yep, those two sure are gonna be strange," the old woman cackled as she pulled out her magic marker. Before their mother could move or say anything, the hag had reached forward, making quick strokes across the foreheads of the little boy and girl. The pair simply sat, looking up blankly and open-mouthed, at the grandmotherly figure who had just assaulted them. Bella was drooling again. Joebee sneezed as the sun sprang out from behind the darkening cloud. He always sneezed when suddenly exposed to the sun.

“Oh, what have you done? What am I to do?” the mother fairly shouted at the old woman.

“Raise them,” the witch said. “The marks will take care of the rest. They’ll make their ways in the world. They’ll be quite special.”

“But why?” asked Belle, picking up the children, although it was too late to protect them from the witch. “Why did you mark them?”

“I did what you and your hubby wanted,” said the witch. “Or don’t you remember? You wanted them to be special. Well, now they’re special.”

“You have put the Mark of Strangeness upon them!” Belle screamed. “You didn’t even stop to ask permission! Now they shall be marked for life.”

“Yes, ducks,” the old crone crooned. “You really should be careful what you wish for. Remember that we live in an Enchanted Kingdom, and wishes and prayers sometimes have a way of coming true. Every mother and father wants their children to grow up to be unique, revered, recognized, powerful, or just generally famous or successful...or at least happy. As you can now just barely see, the positives of such a situation are usually countered by some negatives. And their ‘specialness’ could be much, much worse, you know.

“But relax, sweetie! In this case, everyone will always know that your babies are unique in all the world, and they will all know that you are their mother, and that this is what you wanted for your children!”

With a dawning horror, the younger woman realized the folly of her desires. Everyone wants their children to be someone recognized, but the reality of such distinctness as having the Mark of Strangeness is a terrible thing, indeed.

“No,” she cried, “you must undo this thing!”

The old woman shook her head. “Too late, it’s done. It cannot be undone. The marker is permanent, you know,” she said, pointing at the ‘Permanent, Non Water-Soluble’ label on the side of the marker.

Grief for her children shook her. Tears welled up and fell. Her breathing was ragged. Joebee sneezed as the sun again emerged from behind a passing cloud. A sudden resolve steeled her.

“Then you must mark my face as well,” Belle said.

“Well, I’m impressed, and no mistake,” the old woman said. “But no can do, sweetie, as it’s not allowed. Although I must admit I’m tempted to try it anyway. You are the first parent to seek that solution in a long, long time. Most people these days are too afraid, too much looking out for their own personal interests, to wish to take on the burden of strangeness themselves.”

“So my children are going to be...forever...different,” Belle said, sadly but without further tears.

“Yes, dearie. It’s a test. It’s a necessity. And one day, if the spirits smile and you are willing to undergo the trials that I have known, then you, too, will understand.”

And with that, the old woman turned and left. The mother stood watching the old woman walk toward the Woods. Her oblivious children started hitting at each other and kicking to get down. She lowered them to the ground, watched them hitting each other for a pensive moment or two, then knelt and hugged them to her.

“My darlings, I am so sorry for what I have done to you, what I have brought on you,” said. “But I will love you all the stronger now that you have the Mark of Strangeness.”

And they, having no comprehension of the gravity of the situation, responded with giggles of glee.

That night, when Joe Charming came home, he immediately—well, almost immediately, but right after he had given Belle a quick kiss, flipped on the TV, cracked open a can of beer and planted himself in his recliner—noticed the marks on this children’s foreheads.

“Good wife,” he called to Belle. “What are these marks on the childrens’ foreheads, and how soon is dinner, I’m starving?”

“They’re the Mark of Strangeness, dear,” she called out to him from the kitchen. “In about ten minutes the roast beast will be done, sweetheart.”

“Where’d they get them, anyway? They didn’t have them this morning, or whenever the last time I looked was, my vision of loveliness,” he said.

“No, dearest husband, they didn’t. A plump old witch came by just before lunch and marked them with her magic marker.”

“Oh,” he replied.

Then, after a moment, “Uh, pumpkin of my heart, why?”

“Why what, schnookums?”

“Why the Marks of Strangeness. Did the witch say anything about why?”

“Oh, you silly!” Belle said, appearing in the doorway with a mixing bowl under one arm and a wooden spoon in the other. “We wanted our children to be different, unique, noticed, successful, didn’t we?”

“We did?” he asked back, considering. “Well, yes, I guess we did. But why did we get it? Everyone wants that, but we don’t know anyone else whose children have been marked, do we?”

“No, my prince, we don’t,” Belle replied. “No one in the kingdom has been marked in years, at least, not that I’ve heard of.”

“Yeah, I remember that guy in school who was marked. I think he was the last one. What a weirdo!” Joe said.

“Yes, dearest to my heart, who is my every breath. Dinner is ready. Whatever happened to old Johnny, anyway?”

“Didn’t you hear, oh you who do so much for me?” he said, as he rose from his recliner, downed the remaining contents of his first beer of the night, belched, and resumed his story. “I’m famished; we had to work right through lunch. Anyway, he got bit by an alligator a few years back, took off both his legs, and he’s been bounding around on the third leg ever since! He’s even an inch taller!”

Belle shrieked with laughter as he caught her up into his arms and kissed her.

“Now, my love-beast, not in front of the children,” she said, allowing one of his hands to cup the curve of her delectable behind, but directing his other hand away from the equally desirable curve of her breast. The children, of course, remained completely unaware of their parents’ play.

“You’ll just have to be dessert later, my saucy little tart,” he said with a wink. Belle turned and wiggled her pleasantly rounded hindquarters, batting her eyes suggestively over her shoulder as she returned to the kitchen for more dishes. He, in turn, scooped up the children and set them in their high chairs and strapped them in.

With that, the young couple returned to the normal routine of dinner: feeding themselves, each other, and the twins. And later, after the children had been played with and snuggled off to sleep, with visions of sugar plums dancing

on their heads (a normally harmless condition, except when the sugar plums missed a step and poked the young children in the eye), young Princess Charming most certainly did become dessert, while panting and moaning in a most unlady-like manner.

So, the sudden appearance of the Marks of Strangeness upon their children became the talk of the town for a year and a day, but eventually, interest waned. As is usual, other wondrous things happened throughout the Enchanted Kingdom, and slowly the marks became just another of the many things that made up the happy little community.

As the years passed, the Charmings added to their collection of children; indeed, nine months to the day after the Marks of Strangeness arrived, so did a son, whom they decided to name Mark. Other children followed at fairly regular intervals, and from time to time, the Charmings were occasionally pulled into others' storybook lives as bit characters. Joe, for instance, was once the Crown Prince's Man-at-Arms when he went to slay the Dragon that was harassing the kingdom's northern borders. Belle got to warn several children not to wander into the woods on their way to *their* adventures with trolls, wolves and evil witches. Later, some of her inventions played roles in still other stories.

The neighbors' families also grew up, and took their places in the world: Stephen Darklin-Lord became a dictator in a far-away land, while his sister Linda became a plant manager for a major corporation, eventually working her way up to Vice-President of Production. Little Goldie Hunter, the fastest of their brood, became a track star in high school and college, and later came this/close to making the Olympic team.

Early on, Mark Charming showed a knack for, along with being terribly handsome and charming, dissecting peoples stories and getting them to confess to what really happened. Clearly, his future lay in the law or the clergy, or perhaps journalism. He finally settled on the job of Chief Inquisitor in Stephen Darkling-Lords' government. The other children showed their own unique tendencies and abilities.

For example, June, their fourth child (born in March...you figure it out) showed a distinct tendency toward being lucky: if she needed to roll an eleven in monopoly, an eleven she rolled. If the cable lifting a piano snapped, it waited to do so until just after she had passed. If she needed a seven of hearts to fill out that straight flush, she indeed won the jackpot. But she used her luck judiciously, and always made sure everyone shared in her good fortune. She might have a productive career in elected office.

But still, the twins—now in their teens—showed distinctive evidence of abilities beyond being attractive and charming.

Still, some people feared and detested the twins, while others respected and revered them. They were teased in school, but others stood up for them. Some avoided the Charmings like the plague (which, of course, hadn't passed through the kingdom in hundreds and hundreds of years, so really they avoided the twins the way they thought they might try to avoid the plague, if the plague were to return to the kingdom), while others sought them out, seeking perhaps a little of the mystery and magic that so obviously was theirs.

All because of the Marks of Strangeness.

They grew older, graduated from school, took jobs (he as an artist, making magical moving pictures that amazed and entertained millions of children, and their parents; she as an accountant with the Kingdom's Central Bank), had adventures, eventually fell in love, married, and had families of their own.

Everyone said that the twins lived charmed lives, or that they lived cursed lives, that the marks of strangeness neither helped or hindered their lives; for they were passed up or promoted because of their marks, or included or excluded because of their marks, or liked or disliked because of their marks. They had a large group of friends, and a large group of enemies. Liked or disliked, they were sought out by the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, the wise and the by-far-more-numerous not-so-wise.

In her later years, Belle was one day sitting on the porch, enjoying a sunny spring morning, tinkering with another new contraption that, when patented and marketed, would rake in millions of dollars and ease the lives of millions of persons, when she was startled out of her reverie by the cackling laugh of an old crone.

“So, young mother, what have you to say for yourself now?” It was the same plump old witch that had marked her children so many years before. The witch seemingly had not changed one bit in all that time, and indeed seemed to be wearing the same shocking blue pantsuit, but Belle had aged, become a grandmother and was to soon become a great-grandmother.

“Whatever do you mean?” Belle asked.

“When you were young, you wished for your twins to be special, unique, famous, successful. I marked them with strangeness. Was it worth it?”

Belle realized that now, as a mother of several children, all of whom were mostly successful, or at least happy, in their lives, and as a grandmother several times over, it seemed that her youthful wishes had been in vain.

“I wouldn’t have done anything different,” Belle said, “had you not marked my children.”

The crone laughed.

“The Marks of Strangeness really did nothing to them, did they?” she asked the old witch, already knowing the answer.

“I hear in your voice already that you know this,” the witch said with a laugh. “You have grown wise with the years.”

“They are just average people, aren’t they,” Belle said. “This I recognized long ago when, Joe Junior showed no mathematical ability whatever and Little Belle showed a good understanding. And when Junior could draw likenesses of great beauty by third grade, while his sister was still—and still is—drawing stick figures. And when they were both dismayed at the behavior of others, when first they fell in love and were rejected, and found themselves the subjects of love, and had to do the rejecting.

“Yes,” said the witch. “So, what do you suppose would have happened differently, without the marks of strangeness?”

Belle shrugged. “Little,” she said. “Some who have avoided them might have been their friends, and vice versa. Some opportunities would not have presented themselves, but others would have. Some doors would have been closed, but others opened.”

“And so, the value of your desire?”

“None at all,” Belle said. “Their natures being what they were, and the love and guidance that I and my beloved husband gave them, the result would have been little different. Impatient youth! Had we but waited, we would eventually have seen their uniqueness, and as it turned out, the marks on their faces only turned out to be skin deep, and of little import, anyway.”

“Much magic and wizardry is this way, existing only in the mind, and unnecessary,” the old woman said.

With that, the old woman bid Belle adieu, and with a laugh, began walking down the road into the city, pausing a moment as she proceeded to pet a cat, sniff a flower, and to convert a pumpkin and mice into a sporty carriage with a 350 V-8 engine. After that, she disappeared a little more quickly.

As the tires squealed around a last corner, she was gone; but Belle heard the brief shrill of the siren as the local gendarmes clocked her doing well over 75 in a 35 zone.

With a smile and humming a tune, Belle returned to her tinkering. Then she abruptly stopped and laughed. She lifted an unexpected object from her small work table:

“Permanent, Non Water-Soluble” was written on its side.