

**FORD FORD**  
**MADOX**

THE FEATHER

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*The Feather:*

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Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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# Ford H. Madox Hueffer

## The Feather

TO JULIET

—

'True, I talk of dreams,  
Which are the children of an idle brain,  
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,  
Which is as thin of substance as the air.'

# THE FEATHER

ONCE upon a time there was a King who reigned over a country as yet, for a reason you may learn later on, undiscovered – a most lovely country, full of green dales and groves of oak, a land of dappled meadows and sweet rivers, a green cup in a circlet of mountains, in whose shadow the grass was greenest; and the only road to enter the country lay up steep, boiling waterfalls, and thereafter through rugged passes, the channels that the rivers had cut for themselves. Therefore, as you may imagine, the dwellers in the land were little troubled by inroads of hostile nations; and they lived peaceful lives, managing their own affairs, and troubling little about the rest of the world.

Now this King, like many kings before and after him, had a daughter who, while very young, had, I am sorry to say, been very self-willed; and the King, on the death of his wife, finding himself utterly unable to manage the Princess, handed her over to the care of an aged nurse, who, however, was not much more successful – but that is neither here nor there.

For years everything went on smoothly, and it seemed as if everything intended to go on smoothly until doomsday, in which case this history would probably never have been written. But one evening in summer the Princess and her nurse, who had by this time become less able than ever to manage her charge, sat on a terrace facing the west. The Princess had been amusing

herself by pelting the swans swimming in the river with rose-leaves, which the indignant swans snapped up as they fluttered down on the air or floated by on the river.

But after a time she began to tire of this pastime, and sitting down, looked at the sun that was just setting, a blinding glare of orange flame behind the black hills. Suddenly she turned to the nurse and said:

‘What’s on the other side of the hills?’

‘Lawk-a-mussy-me, miss!’ answered the nurse, ‘I’m sure I don’t know. What a question to ask!’

‘Then why don’t you ask some one who has been there?’

‘Because no one ever has, miss.’

‘But why not?’

‘Because there’s a fiery serpent that eats every one who comes near the hills; and if you’re not eaten up, you’re bound to tumble down a precipice that’s nearly three miles deep, before you can get over the hills.’

‘Oh, what fun! Let’s go,’ said the Princess, by no means awed. But the nurse shook her head.

‘No, miss, I won’t go; and I’m sure your pa won’t let you go.’

‘Oh yes, he will; let’s go and ask him.’

But at that moment a black shadow came across the sun, and the swans, with a terrified ‘honk, honk,’ darted across the water to hide themselves in the reeds on the other side of the river, churning dark tracks in the purple of the sunlit water’s glassy calmness.

‘Oh dear! oh dear! it’s a boggles, and it’s coming this way,’ cried the nurse.

‘But what is a boggles, nurse?’

‘Oh dear, it’s coming! Come into the house and I’ll tell you – come.’

‘Not until you tell me what a boggles is.’

The nurse perforce gave in.

‘A boggles is a thing with a hooked beak and a squeaky voice, with hair like snakes in corkscrews; and it haunts houses and carries off things; and when it once gets in it never leaves again – oh dear, it’s on us! Oh-h-h!’

Her cries only made the thing see them sooner. It was only an eagle, not a boggles; but it was on the look-out for food, and the sun shining on the Princess’s hair had caught its eyes, and in spite of the cries of the nurse it swooped down, and, seizing the Princess in its claws, began to carry her off. The nurse, however, held on to her valiantly, screaming all the while for help; but the eagle had the best of it after all, for it carried up, not only the Princess, but the nurse also.

The nurse held on to her charge for some seconds, but finding the attempt useless she let go her hold; and since it happened that at the moment they were over the river, she fell into it with a great splash, and was drifted on shore by the current.

Thus the Princess was carried off; and although the land far and wide was searched, no traces of her were discoverable. You may imagine for yourself what sorrow and rage the King

indulged in. He turned the nurse off without warning, and even, in a paroxysm of rage, kicked one of his pages downstairs; nevertheless that did not bring back the Princess.

As a last resource he consulted a wise woman (ill-natured people called her a witch) who lived near the palace. But the witch could only say that the Princess would return some day, but she couldn't or wouldn't say when, even though the King threatened to burn her. So it was all of no use, and the King was, and remained, in despair. But, since his Majesty is not the important personage in the story, we may as well leave him and return to the Princess.

She, as you can think, was not particularly happy or comfortable, for the claws of the eagle pinched her, and besides, she was very frightened; for, you see, she didn't know that it wasn't a boggles, as the nurse had called it, and a boggles is a great deal worse than the worst eagle ever invented.

Meanwhile the eagle continued flying straight towards the sun, which was getting lower and lower, so that by the time they reached the mountains it was dark altogether. But the eagle didn't seem at all afraid of the darkness, and just went on flying as if nothing had happened, until suddenly it let the Princess down on a rock – at least, that was what it seemed to her to be. Not knowing what else to do, she sat where the eagle had let her fall, for she remembered something about the precipice three miles deep, and she did not at all wish to tumble down that.

She expected that the eagle would set to and make a meal off

her at once. But somehow or other, either it had had enough to eat during the day, or else did not like to begin to have supper so late for fear of nightmare; at any rate, it abstained, and that was the most interesting matter to her. Everything was so quiet around that at last, in spite of herself, she fell asleep. She slept quite easily until daylight, although the hardness of the rock was certainly somewhat unpleasant. When she opened her eyes it was already light, and the sun at her back was darting black shadows of the jagged mountains on to the shimmering gray sea of mist that veiled the land below. Her first thought was naturally of the eagle, and she did not need to look very far for him, since he was washing himself in a little pool close by, keeping an eye on her the while.

As soon as he saw her move he gave himself a final shake, so that the water flew all around, sparkling in the sunlight; after which he came towards her by hops until he was quite close – rather too close, she thought. Nevertheless she did not move, having heard somewhere that, under the circumstances, that is the worst thing to do; she also remembered animals cannot stand being looked at steadily by the human eye, therefore she looked very steadfastly at the eyes of the eagle. But the remedy did not seem to work well in this case, for the glassy yellow eyes of the bird looked bad-tempered, and it winked angrily, seeming to say, ‘Whom are you staring at?’ And then it began to stretch out its bill towards her until it was within a few inches of her face. This was more than she could stand, and she said sharply, ‘Take your

head away.’

The eagle, however, took no notice whatever of this; and seeing nothing better to do, she lifted up her hand and gave it a smart box on the ear, or rather on the place where its ear should have been. The eagle drew back its beak in a hurry and scratched its head with one claw as if it were puzzled. After a moment’s reflection it put out its head again, and once more the Princess lifted up her hand; but when the eagle saw that it jumped backwards in a hurry, as if it did not care to receive a second box on the ear, and began to stride sulkily away as if it thought it better to wait a while. When it reached the edge of the rock – for I have forgotten to tell you that they were on a flat rock at the top of a mountain – it sat preening its feathers in a sulky manner, as if it imagined itself a very ill-used bird; moreover, although it seemed inclined to remain there a long time, I need not tell you that the Princess had no objections. However, after a time even the waiting began to grow unpleasant; but suddenly a peculiar sound, as of something shooting through the air, came from below, and the eagle gave a leap and fell down a mass of tumbled feathers with an arrow quivering in their centre, and, with hardly a shudder, it was dead.

The Princess, as you may imagine, was a good deal startled by this sudden occurrence, but I cannot say she was very sorry for the eagle; on the contrary, she was rather glad to be rid of him, and it suddenly came into her head that the man who had shot the arrow might possibly be somewhere below, and in that case

might come up and save her if she called to him. So she tried to get up, but she was so stiff that she could hardly move, and when she did stand up she had pins and needles in one of her feet, and had to stamp hard on the ground before it would go away. So that it was some time before she got to the edge and looked over. Now it happened that, just as she bent carefully forward to look down the side, the head of a man appeared over the edge, and his hands were so near her that he almost caught hold of her foot as he put them up to help himself. As she drew back a little to let him have room, he suddenly noticed her, and almost let go his hold in astonishment.

‘Hullo, little girl,’ he said; ‘how did you come here? It’s rather early in the morning for you to be up. But who are you when you’re at home?’

‘I’m the daughter of King Caret.’

‘King how much?’

‘King Caret, I said; and I should be glad if you would help me down from this height, and show me the way back.’

‘How on earth can I show you the way back when I don’t know who King Caret is?’

‘But surely you must know who he is?’

‘Never heard of him. What’s he like, and what’s he king of?’

‘He’s the King of Aoland.’

‘And where’s Aoland?’

‘I don’t know – it’s somewhere over those mountains – the eagle brought me here, you know.’

‘Ah! the eagle brought you here, did he? It’s a little habit he’s got; he’s carried off no end of my kids and young sheep, so I suppose he thought he’d try a change and carry off one of King Turnip – I mean Caret’s. But if he brought you from over the mountains you won’t get back in a hurry, I can tell you; you’d have to jump up a precipice three miles high, and then you’d be eaten by old Kinchof the dragon.’

‘Oh dear! then I shall never get back!’

‘No, I’m afraid you won’t. But don’t begin to cry now – there, there – and I’ll take you to King Mumkie; he’s the king of this country, you know.’

‘What an awful name – Mumkie!’

‘Yes, it is rather unpleasant, isn’t it? And then, he’s a usurper – he drove the last king out and made himself king instead. He used to be a cat’s-meat man, but he got up an army and drove the other off the throne, and now *he’s* turned into a gardener – his name’s Abbonamento.’

‘Oh, never mind what his name is, only get me down – I’m awfully hungry; for you see I’ve been up here all night.’

‘Oh! all right. But I say, how are you going to get down – you can’t climb, can you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answered; ‘I’ve never tried.’

‘Then you can be sure you can’t. The only thing seems to be for me to carry you down.’

But the Princess did not seem to relish the idea at all.

‘You might let me drop, you know; it’s rather steep.’ And it

was pretty steep, too – about as steep as the wall of a house, and a good deal higher than a very high house. However, it seemed to be the only thing to do, so she let herself be carried down. The man took her on one arm, and yet seemed to climb down about as easily as if he were going downstairs. However, the Princess did not notice that, since she kept her eyes shut hard, for, to tell the truth, she was rather nervous.

But at last they were at the bottom, and he let her down on to the ground.

‘Now, what are you going to do?’ he said.

‘I don’t know at all. What can I do?’

‘You’d better go and see King Mumkie and ask him what to do.’

‘But he has got such a dreadful name; it sounds as if he was awfully ugly,’ she said.

‘But he’s not at all; he’s just like me, and I’m sure I’m handsome enough for any one.’

The Princess looked at him now for the first time; for you see, she had not noticed him very much while she was on the mountain. But now she could hardly repress a shudder; for he was awfully ugly. To begin with, he was big enough for any giant, and then his hair was of a purple hue, and his eyes of a delicate sea-green that flashed in the shade like a cat’s; and then his nose was awfully red, and shaped like a mangel-wurzel; and his teeth, which were long and bright green, shone in the sun like danger-signals. Altogether he was not prepossessing; and the Princess

could hardly help smiling when he said that the King was as handsome as himself. However, he went on:

‘My name’s Wopole; I’m King Mumkie’s falconer, and so I can tell you all about him. Come, let’s go towards the town.’

And as there seemed nothing else to do, she set out with him, but he walked so fast that she could hardly keep up.

‘How slowly you do walk!’ he grumbled in a bad-tempered manner; ‘can’t you keep up? Come along, I can’t wait all day.’ And he went on faster than ever, so that she had to run to keep up with him. Suddenly he stopped as if he had been shot.

‘Confound it, I’ve forgotten to bring the eagle, and I shall have to go all the way back and get it. Oh – ouch!’ And he began to howl in such a dreadful manner that the Princess felt quite relieved when he turned and ran towards the hill at the top of his speed, howling all the way.

‘What on earth shall I do now?’ thought the Princess. ‘If I wait for this dreadful giant, goodness knows what may happen, and then his king has such an unpleasant name; at any rate, I should like some breakfast, for I’m awfully hungry. I think I’ll go on towards the town, and see if I can’t find some one who’ll show me the way home.’

So she went on down the lane for some way, until, coming to a place where a stream went across the path, she knelt down and scooped up a little water in the palm of her hand and drank it; for, you see, the sun was very hot now, and the heat made her throat feel quite dry and parched. When she had finished she went and

lay down in the long grass that bordered the road, for she was rather tired. She intended to wait till some one came along, only she was quite resolved not to go with the giant at any rate. So she lay quietly in the shade listening to the loud humming of the bees and the chirp of a linnet that was pluming itself, swinging on a bough above her head.

She had not been waiting long before she heard a dreadful noise behind her coming down the road, and in a few minutes she recognised the voice of the giant, who seemed to be in a terrible temper. Gradually the sound of his voice and his footsteps came nearer. The Princess did not know what to do, for if she tried to run away he would only catch her up; so she lay perfectly still, hoping he would pass her without seeing her. And that is just what did happen; for, in a few moments, he came rushing round the corner shouting out, ‘Stop! stop! will you?’ And as his eyes were fixed on the road far in advance, of course he did not notice her, and was soon round another bend in the road. The Princess noticed that he had the eagle hanging with its claws round his neck, and the jolting, as he went by, had shaken one of its large tail feathers out, and as soon as she had got over her fright, she went and picked it up out of the dusty road.

Just as she picked it up, the clatter of feet running along the road came to her ears, and for a moment she feared that the giant had returned; but soon a cow trotted round the bend and stopped at the stream to drink, presently another, and then a third. Each of them took a long look at the Princess, and then bent down its

head to take a draught out of the stream. Just then an old man came round the corner, and when he saw the cows had stopped he called out:

‘Gee on, Lightfoot; now, Daisy; come up, Cherry,’ and the cows gave their heads a toss, and walked slowly through the stream.

The Princess hurried to one side of the road, for, like many people, she had an instinctive dread of anything like a cow or a bull.

The old man noticed it and smiled.

‘Oh, you needn’t be afraid, miss, they won’t hurt you,’ he said; but all the same, she didn’t care to go too near them. ‘They’ve just been frightened by Wopole, King Mumkie’s falconer,’ he went on. ‘Wopole came running round the corner suddenly, and almost knocked Lightfoot – that’s the dun cow – over. He was roaring out “Where is she?” awfully loud. I pity her when he gets her, whoever she is.’

‘But who is *she*?’ asked the Princess.

‘I don’t know – how should I?’

‘Oh, I only thought you might know. But what will he do with her when he gets her?’

‘I don’t know; fry her in lard or something – that’s what they generally do to strangers in the town now.’

‘Oh dear!’ said the Princess; ‘how am I to get away from him?’

The old man looked at her curiously.

‘Oh! you’re her,’ he said.

‘I rather think I am. But how am I to get away?’ she answered.

‘If you’ll come with me I’ll take you to my cottage over there, and they’ll never think of looking for you there.’

But the Princess did not exactly like the idea.

‘Aren’t you one of these people?’ she asked; ‘because I don’t relish being fried in lard, or oil, or anything else.’

But the old man shook his head.

‘Good gracious me, no!’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t let them roast the last stranger that came to the town, and so they turned me out.’

‘Oh,’ said the Princess, ‘then you must be King Abominable.’

‘I am Abbonamento.’

‘Then I suppose I shall be safe with you?’

‘Quite safe, if you like to come; only just help me to drive the cows.’ And the old man called to his animals who were browsing in the grass at the wayside, and they trudged quietly on till they came to a gate in the hedge. This they waited for the old man to open for them, and then went through the meadow until they came to a little farmhouse half hidden by trees.

‘This is my house,’ the King said. ‘Just wait a moment till I have put the cows in the byre, and then I’ll come back and let you in; for you see my wife’s away at the market, and there’s no one else at home.’

So the Princess stopped where she was, and the old man went whistling round to the back of the house driving his cows before him.

It was a very small house, with the thatched roof coming so

low down that you could touch it almost with your hand, and the windows were quite overshadowed by it. Over a little arbour of trellis-work before the door ran a rose-tree of deep red flowers, and the roses were full of bees that came from the hives arranged on benches under the eaves, and a few chickens were asleep on one leg under the porch.

In two or three minutes the door opened, and the old man appeared, and the chickens walked lazily away.

‘I entered by a back door,’ he explained. ‘Come in and make yourself at home.’

The inside of the house was just as small and homely as the outside, and the rooms were refreshingly shady and cool after the hot sunlight without.

‘Sit down,’ said the old man, pointing to an arm-chair; and the Princess did as she was told.

‘Now,’ said he, ‘if you will tell me where you come from, I will try to find out how to take you back.’

So she told him all her story, and he listened very attentively. When she had finished he said:

‘It’s lucky for you that Wopole forgot the eagle, or goodness knows what would have happened to you; but how you’re to get back I don’t know. It’s my opinion you never will, for no one was ever known to pass those mountains safely yet.’

I don’t know what else he would have gone on to say, but by this time the Princess had begun to cry bitterly.

‘Oh dear me!’ said the old man, ‘what a fool I was to go and

tell her all that. Now goodness knows what'll happen. Oh dear, oh dear, Princess, don't go on weeping like that, or you'll melt altogether; do leave off.'

But the Princess did not seem at all inclined to leave off, and she might have melted altogether, only just then the door opened, and an old woman with a market-basket on her arm and a big umbrella in her hand came into the room, but stood transfixed with her eyes and mouth wide open when she saw the Princess.

'My! Abbonamento, what's the little girl crying for? and where does she come from? and what does it all mean?'

And she picked up her umbrella, which she had dropped, and leaned it against the table, and put her market-basket on a chair. This she did very slowly, and all the while the old king was telling her what had happened, so that by the time she had finished her preparations she knew nearly as much about it as he did. When he had finished she shook her head.

'Poor girl! poor girl! So you come from the land on the other side of the mountains. I know it.'

The Princess had by this time left off crying, and when she heard the old lady say 'I know it' she said:

“‘Kennst du das Land  
Wo die Citronen blühen?’”

But the old lady shook her head.

'That's Greek, and I never could understand Greek. If it had

been German or French now – but just translate it for me, will you?’

So the Princess translated it for her.

“Knowest thou the land where blooms the lemon-flower?”

But the old lady shook her head.

‘I don’t know so much about the lemon-flower; but my grand-aunt Thompson had a sister whose daughter had a servant who’d seen the dragon eat up the last man that ever tried to cross the mountains.’

‘But I don’t see how that is to help me to get back – do you?’

‘No, I don’t exactly; but perhaps something will turn up to help you. Won’t it, Abbonamento?’

Abbonamento nodded.

‘But what shall I do in the meanwhile?’ said the Princess; ‘for, you see, I don’t want to be fried in lard, as you say the townsmen are in the habit of doing.’

‘You’d better stop with us,’ said Abbonamento. ‘Eh, wife, what do you say?’

And his wife said:

‘Oh yes, certainly; it’s the only thing to do. Do stop.’

‘Well, I suppose I must,’ said the Princess. ‘Only, shan’t I be rather in the way?’

But the King answered:

‘Oh, not at all, quite the other way. You’ll be very useful. You can milk the cows, and pluck the fowls, and feed the pigs, and all sorts of things.’

‘But what will the people of the town say if they see me?’ asked the Princess.

‘The people of the town – oh, they never come near me, although they are glad to buy butter and milk and eggs of me in the market. They think it seems grand to say they buy their things of a king; but they never trouble about me at all except for that.’

Just at this moment the old lady, thinking it her turn to say something, said:

‘By the bye, you have not told us your name yet.’

‘Would you like it in full, or only what I’m generally called?’ asked the Princess.

‘Oh, say it in full, unless you’ve any objection.’

‘Well, you see, it’s rather long; it generally takes about a quarter of an hour to say, only if you want it particularly I’ll tell you.’

But the Queen answered:

‘Ah! well, perhaps we’ll wait for a time, until we’ve got leisure to listen to it. Meanwhile you might tell us what the short of it is.’

‘They generally call me the Princess Ernalie. Now you might tell me your name, if you don’t mind.’

‘They generally call me Queen Araminta. If you like, and are not too tired, I’ll show you the farm, and then we’ll have dinner.’

So the Princess went through the yard to the cows’ byre, and from the stalls to the pig-sties, and from the sties to the poultry-run, and thence to the orchard, and from the orchard to the flower-garden, and after that home again.

So it was arranged that the Princess Ernalie was to stop with the King and Queen until something should turn up. But nothing ever did turn up, and the days lengthened into months, and the months into years, and still she stayed with the old couple; and as time went on she seemed to do almost all the work of the farm, for the old King and Queen were beginning to get too old and weak for hard work. And gradually she began to forget about her native land, and it seemed as if the farm were to be her home for ever. And every year she grew taller and more beautiful; but that's a habit that princesses have pretty often. So five years passed quietly away, and nothing seemed likely to disturb the peace of the household.

Every morning regularly she got up at five o'clock to drive the cows to the pasture, and then she fed the poultry, and, if it happened to be a Thursday or Saturday, she went with the Queen to take the butter and eggs to market; besides which she had to milk the cows and cook the dinner, and all sorts of things, so that she was gradually turning into a simple country maid.

During all the five years no one from the town ever came near the house, and so you may imagine how surprised she was one morning when she got up and opened her bedroom window to see a man coming across the clover-field towards the house. She watched him come right up to the door, and then, when she heard him knock, ran down to tell the King and Queen that a man was knocking at the door.

'Who on earth can it be?' asked Abbonamento.

‘It’s not the tax-collector, is it?’ asked Araminta.

‘Oh no, it’s not him; he’s an old man, and this one is quite young,’ answered the Princess.

‘Nor the water-man?’

‘No, it’s not him either. There he is knocking again.’

Indeed, the knocking was becoming quite furious.

‘He’s a very impatient young man, whoever he is,’ said Abbonamento. ‘You’d better go and tell him not to make such a noise. Let him in – be quick, or he’ll knock the door down!’

And it seemed so likely, that Ernalie ran down as fast as she could and opened the door.

‘Why can’t you open the door faster?’ said an angry voice; and then Ernalie saw a young man looking at her in a state of great surprise. ‘Why, who are you?’ he asked. ‘Is this not the house of their Majesties King Abbonamento and Queen Araminta?’

‘They used to be King and Queen at one time,’ answered Ernalie.

‘They ought to be now,’ said the young man with a frown.

‘That’s quite another thing,’ retorted Ernalie.

‘Oh, is it?’ said he, with a smile this time. ‘But who on earth are you, if I may ask?’

‘I am Her Royal Highness Princess Ernalie of Aoland; and who on earth are you, if I may ask?’

‘I am Prince Treblo of this country,’ answered he.

‘I suppose you are the son of King Mumkie, then?’ said she.

‘Good gracious, no!’ said the Prince.

The Princess was just about to say, ‘Then whose son are you?’ when the old King burst into the room. He had evidently got up in a hurry, and he was only attired in his flowered dressing-gown.

‘My long-lost chee-yld!’ he exclaimed, as he threw himself into the stranger’s arms. ‘Araminta! Araminta! come along, it’s Treblo.’

And the Queen came rushing down in haste, as you may imagine. Over the rest of this affecting scene we will draw a curtain – that’s what they generally do with affecting scenes – in books, at least.

The Princess Ernalie easily perceived that she was a little – as the French say —*de trop*; that is, finding that ‘three was company and four none.’ So she left the room and went upstairs to comb her hair and wash her face and hands, and make herself look smart generally; for she thought that would be only right on the day on which the eldest son of the house came home – especially as he was very handsome.

Now it happened that as she was bending down to pick up her best shoes from under her toilet-table, one of them had gone a little far back, and as she drew it out she noticed that something lay behind the shoe, and she drew that out too. You may perhaps remember that she had picked up out of the road an eagle’s feather which Wopole had let fall as he hurried by with the eagle on his back. Well, then, it was this feather that she now drew out from under the toilet-table. It had lain there since she had first entered the room five years ago. Now this doesn’t say much for

the cleanliness of the floors, but in those unsophisticated days they never thought of sweeping any hidden spot in the floor. This habit, curiously enough, survives even now among some people. However, to return to the Princess Ernalie.

When she picked up the feather she stood upright again and examined it carefully.

‘Why, how nice,’ she said. ‘It’s the old eagle’s feather. Now that’ll come in handy; my hat rather wanted a new feather, and it’ll just suit the colour of my hair and eyes.’

So she went to the looking-glass and held the feather close against her hair. But to her astonishment nothing was to be seen in the glass – not a vestige of herself; it seemed as if she had vanished altogether.

‘Why, what’s the matter with the glass?’ she said. ‘Something seems to have gone wrong with it.’ So she put the feather on the table and went to rub the glass, but when she looked at it she was there all right again.

‘That’s queer,’ she thought; ‘I can’t have been right in front of the glass.’ So she took up the feather and went in front of the glass. This time she saw herself very well, but as soon as the feather touched her hair she vanished just as before.

‘Good gracious!’ she said; ‘what is the matter with the glass?’ So she tried again, and the result was always the same – whenever the feather touched her hair she vanished. ‘It must be something the matter with the feather.’ So she examined it quite closely, and she found rolled round the quill end of it a small piece of paper

on which was written:

‘Guard well the feather, for whoso toucheth his hair therewith – though he be but feather-brained – shall be invisible, yet shall he see all.’

Ernalie read it over once or twice from beginning to end.

‘The writing says “his” hair; but it seems to act just as well with “her” hair – that is, my hair. What fun I shall have now. I think I’ll try it on at once on the King. But then, it might frighten him. No, I’ll wait, and try it on Treblo; and that reminds me I think that they’ve had enough of it all to themselves now. I’ll go and see if I can do anything for them.’ So she locked the feather up in one of the drawers, and then, putting on her shoes, went downstairs.

Now it happened that just as she had almost reached the bottom step her heel came out of her shoe, and as she stopped to put it firmly on again she heard the voice of the stranger saying:

‘By the bye, mother, who was that girl who opened the door to me?’

‘Oh! that’s Ernalie,’ answered the Queen’s voice.

(It seemed as if the shoe took some time to get on again.)

‘So she told me; but who is Ernalie?’ he asked again.

‘Oh! you’d better get her to tell you that too when she comes down. Well, what do you think of her?’

‘Oh, she’s – she’s just lovely,’ answered he.

(‘Listeners never hear any good of themselves,’ thought the Princess. However, the shoe had come on just at that moment,

and she entered the room.)

‘Speak of the – ahem!’ the King was just saying, when the Prince interrupted him.

“‘Speak of angels, and you hear the rustling of their wings,’ you mean,’ he said.

‘Thank you for the compliment, if it was meant for me,’ said the Princess.

‘Oh! don’t mention it – it’s nothing when you’re used to it,’ said Treblo, who, to tell the truth, seemed rather confused.

‘And are you used to calling young ladies angels?’ said his father sharply. ‘I suppose it’s some of the foreign manners you’ve learnt.’

‘Suppose we change the subject,’ retorted his son, and the subject was changed.

Ernalie retired again. She wanted to look after the dinner, so that it might not be late, and so nothing else in particular happened, for Treblo went round the farm with his father, and Araminta went into the kitchen to help Ernalie with the dinner. When the goose was turning on the spit, and the apple-tart had been put into the oven, the Princess had time to ask some questions about Treblo, and the Queen told her that he had been sent out of the way by Mumkie, in order that he might not attempt to put his father on the throne again; but after seven years he had come back safe, having had all sorts of adventures, and he now felt quite confident that he would be able to restore his father, for he was very popular with the army that had just returned from

the war, and as to the people of the town, they cared very little who was king – in fact, they rather preferred Abbonamento to Mumkie. So Araminta was quite cheerful over it, for she much preferred living in a palace to living in a cottage.

Things went merrily through the day, and at dinner-time they drank the health of the King and Queen of the country, and altogether they seemed very happy. After dinner the King composed himself for his afternoon nap, and the Queen took down a volume of sermons and began to read. Ernalie went out to milk the cows and take the eggs from the hens' nests. As to the Prince, he said he was going out to take a walk.

Before going out the Princess slipped up to her room, and took the eagle's feather from the drawer where she had locked it up. She intended to try if she were invisible to the cows and poultry. So she put it in her sunbonnet and went out. It really seemed as if it was quite correct about the feather, for as soon as she got out of the door a bee ran right against her, and then a sparrow that was chirping on a rail allowed her to catch hold of it before it took any notice of her approach. However, she let it go, and it flew away, looking very astonished indeed, as you may imagine.

She reached the pasture, and opened the gate, calling to the cows:

'Daisy, Daisy; come, Lightfoot; Cherry, come!'

The cows looked up from the ground, and came towards the gate, looking very astonished indeed; but when they got quite close and saw no one they stopped, and however much she called

them they refused to move.

‘This will never do,’ she said; ‘I must really let them see me, or they won’t come.’

So she took the feather from her bonnet, and called again. This time the cows seemed quite ready to come, and they trotted along to the gate and crowded round her to be stroked. So she shut the gate again and told the cows to go on – for they understood her quite well – and then she went on after them. When they got to the dairy she milked them one after the other as they came in their regular order to the stool. She was milking the last one – Cherry, the best of them all – and she leaned her face against its side, and listened to the ‘thud, thud,’ of the milk as it streamed into the pail with a foam like the sea in a rage. She was in fact almost lulled to sleep by it, when she was startled by a voice behind her. It was so sudden that she almost upset the milk-pail in her fright.

‘It seems to be easy work milking,’ said the voice, and she looked round and saw it was the Prince, who had come quietly up behind, and was leaning over the fence at her back, looking on lazily at her.

‘Oh! how you startled me, Prince,’ she said.

‘Did I?’ he answered. ‘I am very sorry for that; but you needn’t call me Prince yet. I’m not a Prince, you see, and then you’re the adopted daughter of my parents, so you ought to call me your brother.’

‘Oh, really!’ said she. ‘However, you soon will be a Prince, and then I shan’t be able to call you brother, shall I?’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you will be a Prince, and I am only a dairymaid.’

‘But you’re a Princess, aren’t you?’ he asked.

‘I was a Princess once,’ she said, with a sigh; ‘but –’

‘You shall be again,’ he said.

‘But how do you know?’ she asked.

‘I know – oh, well, let’s change the subject. As I said before, it seems to be easy work milking. You might let me try?’

But she said:

‘It wouldn’t be any good. Cherry wouldn’t let any one but me touch her. Besides, I’ve just done, and I’m going to carry the pails to the house.’

‘Let me carry them for you?’ he said quickly.

‘Oh, thanks; if you’ll take two, I’ll take the other two, and thus we shall do it all in one journey,’ she answered.

So he did as he was told, and the pails were put safely in the house.

‘Now I must go and get the eggs,’ she said.

‘Can I be of any use?’ asked the Prince.

But she answered:

‘Oh no, there’s nothing for you to do, thanks.’

But he went with her all the same. I suppose he thought he might be of some use. So she let him hold the basket for her, and the eggs were also put safely in the house. Just, however, as he had put them down, a shrill whistle sounded twice from behind the garden hedge, and the Prince said:

‘Oh, that’s a friend of mine. You must excuse me for a few moments,’ and he went towards the hedge.

‘I wonder who his friend is,’ she said to herself. ‘I think I’ll put the feather on again and go after them. It would be a good way of trying my feather on men.’

So she took the feather out of her pocket again, and put it in her bonnet, and then ran after him. He had got over the fence some time before she reached it, but he was still in sight on the other side, and with him his friend was walking. He seemed to be a soldier, so far as she knew. They were talking very earnestly; but, from where she was, she was not able to hear what they said. So she too got over the fence, and went towards them; but she reached them rather too late to hear anything much that they did say. What she did hear was this, from the soldier:

‘Then you will come to-night at half-past twelve?’

‘Yes,’ answered the Prince.

‘We’ll have everything ready, and it will be easily done. If I were you I wouldn’t tell the King or Queen, it would only make them nervous, and we’re sure to succeed.’

‘Very well,’ said Treblo; ‘at half-past twelve.’

(‘Half-past twelve,’ thought the Princess; ‘what on earth is he going to do at that time of night? It sounds funny. I think I’ll go with him to look after him.’ For, you see, Ernalie was rather inquisitive, as you may have found out by this time.)

So the soldier went one way, and Treblo went back to the house whistling ‘When the king shall enjoy his own again.’

But the Princess ran on in front of him and reached the house first, so that by the time he was there she had taken the feather out of her bonnet and was quite visible again.

He came in quite naturally, as if nothing had happened, and the rest of the day went off quietly enough.

They went very early to bed at the farm, and the house was quiet by half-past eight.

Just before they went to bed Ernalie asked the Prince:

‘Do you like walking at night much?’

‘It depends upon the night very much,’ he answered.

‘Such a night as this, for instance,’ said she.

‘Oh yes – “a moonlight night for a ramble,” don’t you know?’ he said, laughing.

‘About half-past twelve, I suppose.’

The Prince looked astonished and shocked.

‘Half-past twelve!’ he said, with his eyes wide open; ‘why, I’m never out after eight. My mother says the night air’s not good for me.’

‘Oh, is that it?’ said the Princess. ‘However, I’m tired; good-night.’ And she went to her room and lay down on her bed with all her clothes on. It was rather hard work keeping awake for such a time, but at last she heard the kitchen clock strike twelve, and she knew it was twenty past. So she got up as quietly as possible and put on the feather, for, you see, she didn’t want any one to see her. It seemed very ghostly getting up so late at night, and although she stepped very lightly, the stairs creaked

loudly. She went into the sitting-room and sat on a chair waiting for the Prince to come down. She had to wait close on half an hour; for, you see, the Prince had heard the clock strike too, but didn't know it was twenty minutes slow. However, at last he came downstairs holding the candle in his hand. He hadn't put his boots on for fear of waking any one, and so he, too, sat down on a chair to put them on. This was rather unpleasant for the Princess, for of course she had to keep as quiet as a mouse for fear of making him suspicious; for, you see, it was so quiet that the least breath she took could be heard. At last the putting on of his boots was finished, and he stood up, saying to himself out loud, 'Now, where's my hat?' and then he looked straight at the Princess and said, 'Ah, there it is,' and he began to walk towards her.

'What can he want?' thought the Princess; and then she looked down at the chair – for, you see, she could see right through herself – and she discovered she was sitting on his hat. By this time he was quite close to her and bending down to pick his hat up, so she jumped sideways off the chair as fast as she could; but even then, as he put his hand out, he caught hold of hers, which had not time to get out of the way. As soon as his hand closed on it, however, he let go as if it had stung him.

'Good gracious! what is that?' he said in astonishment. And he did look so funny that she had hard work to keep from laughing at him. However, he calmed down in a minute, and again tried to take up his hat. This time you may be sure that the Princess's hand was no longer there, for she had taken herself and it over to

the other side of the table. So he took up the hat and looked at it.

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