FORD FORD MADOX

THE QUEEN WHO FLEW

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The Queen Who Flew

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Содержание

Ford Madox Ford
The Queen Who Flew / A Fairy Tale

TO

A PRINCESS OF THE OLD TIME

BEFORE US

THIS TALE

IS DUE AND DEDICATED

Over the leas the Princess came,
On the sward of the cliffs that breast the sea,
With her cheeks aglow and her hair aflame,
That snared the eyes and blinded them,
And now is but a memory.

Over the leas, the wind-tossed dream,
Over the leas above the sea,
Passed and went to reign supreme.
– No need of a crown or diadem
In the kingdom of misty Memory.

THE QUEEN WHO FLEW

Once upon a time a Queen sat in her garden. She was quite a young, young Queen; but that was a long while ago, so she would be older now. But, for all she was Queen over a great and powerful country, she led a very quiet life, and sat a great deal alone in her garden watching the roses grow, and talking to a bat that hung, head downwards, with its wings folded, for all the world like an umbrella, beneath the shade of a rose tree overhanging her favourite marble seat. She did not know much about the bat, not even that it could fly, for her servants and nurses would never allow her to be out at dusk, and the bat was a great deal too weak-eyed to fly about in the broad daylight.

But, one summer day, it happened that there was a revolution in the land, and the Queen's servants, not knowing who was likely to get the upper hand, left the Queen all alone, and went to look at the fight that was raging.

But you must understand that in those days a revolution was a thing very different from what it would be to-day.

Instead of trying to get rid of the Queen altogether, the great nobles of the kingdom merely fought violently with each other for possession of the Queen's person. Then they would proclaim themselves Regents of the kingdom and would issue bills of attainder against all their rivals, saying they were traitors against the Queen's Government.

In fact, a revolution in those days was like what is called a change of Ministry now, save for the fact that they were rather fond of indulging themselves by decapitating their rivals when they had the chance, which of course one would never think of doing nowadays.

The Queen and the bat had been talking a good deal that afternoon – about the weather and about the revolution and the colour of cats and the like.

"The raven will have a good time of it for a day or two," the bat said.

But the Queen shuddered. "Don't be horrid," she said.

"I wonder who'll get the upper hand?" the bat said.

"I'm sure I don't care a bit," the Queen retorted. "It doesn't make any difference to me. They all give me things to sign, and they all say I'm very beautiful."

"That's because they want to marry you," the bat said.

And the Queen answered, "I suppose it is; but I shan't marry them. And I wish *all* my attendants weren't deaf and dumb; it makes it so awfully dull for me."

"That's so that they shan't abuse the Regent behind his back," the bat said. "Well, I shall take a fly." The truth was, he felt insulted that the Queen should say she was dull when she had him to talk to.

But the Queen was quite frightened when he whizzed past her head and out into the dusky evening, where she could see him flitting about jerkily, and squeaking shrilly to paralyze the flies with fright.

After a while he got over his fit of sulks, and came back again to hang in his accustomed bough.

"Why – you can fly!" the Queen said breathlessly. It gave her a new idea of the importance of the bat.

The bat said, "I can." He was flattered by her admiration.

"I wish *I* could fly," the Queen said. "It would be so much more exciting than being boxed up here."

The bat said, "Why don't you?"

"Because I haven't got wings, I suppose," the Queen said.

"You shouldn't suppose," the bat said sharply. "Half the evils in the world come from people supposing."

"What are the 'evils in the world'?" the Queen said.

And the bat answered, "What! don't you even know that, you ignorant little thing? The evils in the world are ever so many – strong winds so that one can't fly straight, and cold weather so that the flies die, and rheumatic pains in one's wing-joints, and cats and swallows."

"I like cats," the Queen said; "and swallows are very pretty."

"That's what *you* think," the bat said angrily. "But you're nobody. Now, I hate cats because they always want to eat me; and I hate swallows because they always eat what I want to eat – flies. They are the real evils of the world."

The Queen saw that he was angry, and she held her peace for a while.

"I'm not nobody, all the same," she thought to herself, "I'm the Queen of the 'most prosperous and contented nation in the world,' though I don't quite understand what it means. But it will never do to offend the bat, it is so dreadfully dull when he won't talk;" so she said, "Would it be possible for me to fly?" for a great longing had come into her heart to be able to fly away out of the garden with the roses and the marble bench.

"Well, it certainly won't be if you suppose you can't," the bat said. "Now, when I was a mouse, I used to suppose I couldn't fly, and so, of course, I couldn't. But, one day, I saved the life of a cockchafer that had got into a beetle-trap, and he told me how it was to be managed."

"How?" the Queen said eagerly.

"Ah, you like cats," the bat said, "and you'd tell them the secret; and then there'd be no peace for me. Ugh! – flying cats!" And the bat shuddered and wrapped his wings round his head.

"Oh, but I promise I won't tell," the Queen said eagerly; "indeed I do. Dear bat, you are so wise, and so good, and so handsome, do tell me."

Now, the bat was rather susceptible to compliments, and so he unshrouded his head, pretending not to have heard, though he had.

"What did you say?" he said.

And the Queen repeated her words.

That pleased him, and he answered, "Well, there's a certain flower that has two remarkable properties – one, that people who carry it about with them can always fly, and the other, that it will restore the blind to sight."

"Yes; but I shall have to travel over ever so many mountains and rivers and things before I can find it," the Queen said dismally.

"How do you know that?" the bat asked sharply.

"I don't know it, I only supposed it; at least I've read it in books."

"Well, of course, if you go supposing things and reading them in books, I can't do anything for you," the bat said. "The only good I can see in books is that they breed bookworms, and the worms turn into flies; but even they aren't very good to eat. When I was a mouse, though, I used to nibble books to pieces, and the bits made rare good nests. So there is some good in the most useless of things. But I don't need a nest now that I can fly."

"How did you come to be able to fly?" the Queen asked.

"Well, after what the cockchafer told me, I just ran out into the garden, and when I found the flower, as I hadn't any pocket to put it in so as to have it always by me, I just ate it up, and from that time forward I have been able to fly ever so well."

The Queen said, "Oh, how nice! And is the flower actually here in the garden? Tell me which it is, please do."

"Well, I'll tell you if you'll bring me a nice piece of raw meat, and a little red flannel for my rheumatism."

Just at that moment the sound of a great bell sounded out into the garden.

"Oh, how annoying!" the Queen said. "Just as it was beginning to be interesting! Now I shall have to go in to dinner. But I'll bring you the meat and the flannel to-morrow, and then you'll tell me, won't you?"

The bat said, "We'll see about it," and so the Queen arose from her seat, and, stooping to avoid the roses that caught at her, went out towards the palace and up the marble steps into it.

The palace was an enormous hall, all of marble, and very, very cold.

The dining-room itself was a vast hall, as long as an ordinary street, with a table as long and as broad as the roadway thereof, so that the poor little Queen felt rather lonely, sitting at one end of it, with the enormous vessels all of gold, and the great gold candlesticks, and the long line of deaf and dumb domestics that stood and looked on, or presented their dishes kneeling.

Generally the Regent's wife, or, if he hadn't one, his sister or mother, acted as the Queen's governess, and stood behind her chair. But that evening there was no one at all.

"I suppose they've cut her head off," the Queen said resignedly. "I wonder what the next one will be like. But I shan't be bothered with her long, if the bat tells me how to fly. I shall just go right off somewhere, and see mountains, and valleys, and rivers, and seas; and hundreds and hundreds of wonderful things out of books. Oh, it will be lovely! And as to the Regents, they can just cut each other's heads off as much as they like."

And so, having dined, she went to bed, and lay a long time awake thinking how delightful it would be to fly.

The next morning, at breakfast, she found a note to say that the Lord Blackjowl desired an early audience with her on the subject of the Regency.

"I suppose I *must* go," the Queen said. "I do hope he won't be much wounded, it's so nasty to look at, and I *did* want to go into the garden to see the bat."

However, she went down into the audience chamber at once, to get it over. The guard drew back the curtain in the doorway and she went in. A great man with a black beard was awaiting her, and at her entrance sank down on one knee.

"Oh, get up, please," she said. "I don't like talking to men when they kneel, it looks so stupid. What is it you want? I suppose it's about the Regency."

The Lord Blackjowl arose. His eyes were little and sharp; they seemed to look right through the Queen.

"Your Majesty is correct, as so peerless a lady must be," he said "The nobles and people were groaning under the yoke of the late traitor and tyrant who called himself Regent, and so we took the liberty, the great liberty, of – "

"Oh yes, I know what you want," the Queen interrupted him. "You want to be pardoned for the unconstitutionality of it. So I suppose I shall have to pardon you. If you give me the paper I'll sign it."

The Lord Blackjowl handed her one of many papers that he held in his hand.

"If your Majesty will be graciously pleased to sign it here."

So the Queen sat down at a table and signed the crackling paper "Eldrida – Queen."

"I never sign it 'Eldrida R.,'" she said. "It's ridiculous to sign it in a language that isn't one's own. Now I suppose you want me to sign a paper appointing you Regent?"

The Lord Blackjowl looked at her from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"That was included in the paper your Majesty has been graciously pleased to sign."

"But I didn't know anything about it," the Queen said hotly. "Now that's deceiving, and I shall never be able to trust anything you give me to sign without reading it. I've a good mind to take it back again."

"I assure your Majesty," the lord answered, with a low bow, "I merely wished to save your Majesty the trouble of twice appending your gracious signature when once would suffice."

"But why didn't you tell me what was in it?" she asked, a little mollified.

"Merely because your Majesty took the words out of my mouth, if I may so say."

The Queen said, "Well, and what else do you want me to do?"

"There are sundry traitorous persons of the faction of the late Regent, whose existence is dangerous to the peace of the realm, and against whom I wish to issue writs of attainder if your Majesty will consent."

"Yes, I thought so," the Queen said. "How many are there?"

"Three thousand nine hundred and forty," the Regent said, looking at a great scroll.

"Good gracious!" the Queen said. "Why, that's five times as many as ever there were before."

The Regent stroked his beard "There is a great deal of disaffection in the land," he said.

"Why, the last Regent said the people were ever so contented," the Queen answered.

"The last Regent has deceived your Majesty."

"That's what they all say about the last Regent. Why, it was only the other day that he told me that you were deceitful – and you *are*– and he said that you had thrown your wife into a yard full of hungry dogs, in order that you might marry me."

"Your Majesty," the Regent said, flushing with heavy anger, "the late Regent was a tyrant, and all tyrants are untruthful, as your Majesty's wisdom must tell you. My wife had the misfortune to fall into a bear-pit, and, as for my daring to raise my eyes as high as your Majesty – "

"Why, you're looking at me now," the Queen said. "However, it doesn't matter. You can't marry me till I'm twenty-one, and I shan't be that for some time. By-the-by, who's going to be my next governess?"

"Your Majesty is now of an age to need no governess. I think a tutor would be more suitable – with your Majesty's consent."

"Well, who's to be my tutor, then?" the Queen said.

"I had purposed according that inestimable honour to myself," the Regent answered.

"Oh, I say! You'll never do!" the Queen remarked. "You could never darn a pair of stockings, or comb my hair. You'd be so awfully clumsy."

"Your Majesty has no need to have your royal stockings darned; you can always have a new pair."

"But that would be so fearfully wasteful!" the Queen said.

"Your Majesty might give the other pairs to the poor."

"But what *are* 'the poor'?"

"The poor are wicked, idle people – too wicked to work and earn the money, and too dirty to wear stockings," the Regent said.

"But what would be the good of my stockings to them?" the Queen asked.

"It is the usual thing, your Majesty," the Regent said. "But will your Majesty be pleased to sign these papers?"

The Queen said, "Oh yes, I'll sign them, if you'll just go down into the kitchen and ask for a piece of raw meat, about the size of my hand, and a piece of red flannel about large enough to go round a bat. Oh, and what's a good thing for rheumatism?"

The Regent looked a little surprised. "I – your Majesty, I really don't exactly know."

"Oh, well, ask the cook or somebody."

"Well, but – couldn't I send a servant, your Majesty?" the Regent said.

"No, that wouldn't be any good," the Queen said. "If you're to take the place of my governess you'll have to do that sort of thing, you know."

The Regent bowed. "Of course I shall be only too grateful for your Majesty's commands. I merely thought that your Majesty might need some assistance in signing the papers."

But the Queen answered, "Oh no, I can manage that sort of thing well enough myself. I'm quite used to it; so be quick, and remember, a nice juicy piece of raw meat and some red flannel, and – oh, opodeldoc; that's just the thing. Be quick! I don't want to keep the bat waiting."

The Regent went backwards out of the room, bowing at every three steps, and, as he was clad in armour from top to toe, he made a clanking noise – quite like a tinker's cart, if you've ever beard one.

So, left to herself, the Queen signed the papers one after the other. They all began —

"By THE QUEEN, A PROCLAMATION, E.R

"Whereas by our Proclamation given this 1st day of May —

But the Queen never read any further than that, because she could never quite understand what it all meant. At the last signature the happened to make a little blot, and somehow or other the ink happened to get into one of her nails, and that annoyed her. It *is* so difficult to get ink out of one's nails.

"I don't care if I never sign another Proclamation," she said; "and I hope I never shall. Now, look here," she continued to the Regent, who at that moment entered. "If you were a governess I should be able to make you get this ink out; but how can I ask a man to do that?"

"I will make the attempt, if your Majesty pleases," the Regent said.

"Well, but you haven't got any nail-scissors," the Queen replied.

"I might use my sword," the Regent suggested.

But the Queen shivered. "Ugh! fancy having a great ugly thing like that for it!" she said. "Oh, well, you've brought the things! Here are your papers. They're all signed; and, if you want anything else, you'll have to come into the garden."

And she took up the meat and the flannel and the opodeldoc and went into the garden, leaving the Regent with the idea that he had made rather a bad business by becoming the Queen's attendant. But he was a very determined man, and merely set his teeth the firmer.

Under the overhanging rose tree the Queen sat awaiting the bat's awakening.

"It never does to wake him up," she said. "It makes him so bad tempered."

So she sat patiently and watched the rose-petals that every now and then fluttered down on the wind.

It was well on towards the afternoon, after the Queen had had her dinner, before he awoke.

"Oh, you're there?" he said. He had made the same remark every day for the last two years – which made seven hundred and thirty-one times, one of the years having been leap-year.

The Queen said, "Yes, here I am!"

The bat yawned. "What's the weather like?" he asked.

The Queen answered, "Oh, it's very nice, and you promised to tell me the flower that would make me fly."

"I shan't," the bat said. "You'd eat up all the flies – a great thing like you."

The Queen's eyes filled with tears, it was so disappointing.

"Oh, I promise I won't eat *any* flies," she said; "and I'll go right away and leave you in peace."

The bat said, "Um! there's something in that."

"And look," the Queen continued, "I've brought you your meat and flannel, and some stuff that's good for rheumatism."

The bat's eyes twinkled with delight. "Well, I'll tell you," he said. "Only you must promise, first, that you won't tell any one the secret; and secondly, that you won't eat any flies."

"Oh yes, I'll promise that willingly enough."

"Well, put the things up here on the top of the seat and I'll tell you."

The Queen did as she was bidden, and the bat continued —

"The flower you want is at this moment being trodden on by your foot."

The Queen felt a little startled, but, looking down, saw a delicate white flower that had trailed from a border and was being crushed beneath her small green shoes.

"What! the wind-flower?" she said. "I always thought it was only a weed."

"You shouldn't think," the bat said. "It's as bad as supposing."

"Well, and how am I to set about flying?" the Queen asked.

And the bat answered sharply, "Why, fly. Put the flower somewhere about you, and then go off. Only be careful not to knock against things."

The Queen thought for a moment, and then plucked a handful and a handful and yet a handful of the wind-flowers, and, having twined them into a carcanet, wound them into her soft gold-brown hair, beneath her small crown royal.

"Good-bye, dear bat," she said. She had grown to like the bat, for all his strange appearance and surly speeches.

The bat remarked, "Good riddance." He was always a little irritable just after awakening.

So the Queen went out from under the arbour, and made a first essay at flying.

"I'll make just a short flight at first," she said, and gave a little jump, and in a moment she flew right over a rose bush and came down softly on the turf on its further side, quite like a not too timid pigeon that has to make a little flight from before a horse's feet.

"Oh, come, that was a success," she said to herself. "And it really is true. Well, I'll just practise a little before I start to see the world."

So she flew over several trees, gradually going higher and higher, until at last she caught a glimpse of the red town roofs, and then, in a swift moment's rush, she flew over the high white wall and alighted in the road that bordered it.

"Hullo!" a voice said before she had got used to the new sensation of being out in the world. "Hullo! where did you drop from?"

"I didn't drop – I flew," the Queen said severely; and she looked at the man.

He was stretched on the ground, leaning his back against the wall, and basking in the hot sunlight that fell on him. He was very ragged and very dirty, and he had neither shoes nor stockings, By his side was a basket in which, over white paper frills, nodded the heads of young ferns.

"Why, who are you?" the Queen said. And then her eyes fell on his bare feet. They reminded her of what the Regent had said that morning. "Oh, you must be the poor," she said, "and you want my stockings."

"I don't know about your stockings, lady," the man said; "but if you've got any old clothes to spare, I could give you some nice pots of flowers for them."

The Queen said, "Why, what good would that do you?"

And the man answered, "I should sell them and get some money. I'm fearfully hungry."

"Why don't you have something to eat, then?" the Queen said.

And the man replied, "Because I haven't got any money to buy it with."

"Why don't you take it, then?"

"Because it would be stealing, and stealing's wicked; besides, I should be sent to prison for it."

"I don't understand quite what you mean," the Queen said. "But come with me somewhere where we can get some food, and you shall have as much as you like."

The fern-seller arose with alacrity.

"There's a shop near here where they sell some delicious honey-cakes."

"I can't make it out," the Queen said to herself. "If he's hungry he can't be contented; and yet the Regent said every one was contented in the land, because of his being Regent. He must have been mistaken, or else this man must be one of the traitors."

And aloud she said, "Is there a bill of attainder out against you?"

The beggar shook his head. "I guess not," he said. "Tradesmen won't let the likes of me run up bills."

It was a remark the Queen could not understand at all. They crossed the market-place that lay before the palace door.

"There's no market to-day because the people are all afraid the revolution isn't over yet."

"Oh, but it is," the Queen said; "I made the Lord Blackjowl Regent to-day."

The beggar looked at her with a strange expression; but the Queen continued —

"I don't see what harm the revolution could do to the market."

"Why, don't you see," the beggar said, "when they get to fighting the arrows fly about all over the place, and the horses would knock the stalls over. Besides, the soldiers steal everything, or set fire to it. Look, there's a house still smouldering."

And, indeed, one of the market houses was a heap of charred ruins.

"But what was the good of it?" the Queen asked.

And the beggar answered, "Well, you see, it belonged to one of the opposite party, and he wouldn't surrender and have his head chopped off."

"I should think not," the Queen said.

The streets were quite empty, and all the shutters were closed. Here and there an arrow was sticking into the walls or the doors.

"Do people never walk about the streets?" the Queen asked.

"It wouldn't be safe when there's a revolution on," the beggar answered.

Just at that moment they arrived before the door of a house that, like all the rest, was closely shut up. Over the door was written —

"JAMES GRUBB,

Honey-cake Maker."

Here the beggar stopped and began to beat violently at the door with his staff.

The sound of the blows echoed along the streets, – and then from within came dismal shouts of "Murder!" "Police!" "Fire!"

But the beggar called back, "Nonsense, James Grubb; it's only a lady come for some honey-cakes."

Then, after a long while, there was a clatter of chains behind the door, and it was opened just an inch, so that the Queen could see an old man's face peeping cautiously out at her. The sight seemed to reassure him, for he opened the door and bobbed nervously. At other times he would have bowed suavely.

"Will your ladyship be pleased to enter?" he said. "I want to shut the door; it is so dangerous to have it open with all these revolutions about."

The Queen complied with his request, and found herself in a little dark shop, only lighted dimly through the round air-holes in the shutters.

"Give this man some honey-cakes," she said; and the honey-cake maker seemed only too delighted.

"How many shall I give him, madam?" he said.

"As many as he wants, of course," the Queen answered sharply.

The beggar proceeded to help himself, and made a clean sweep of all the cakes that were on the counter. There was a big hole in his coat, and into that he thrust them, so that the lining at last was quite full.

The honey-cake maker was extremely pleased at the sight, for he had not expected to sell any cakes that day.

When the cakes had all disappeared there was an awkward pause.

"Now I'll go on again," the Queen said.

"But you haven't paid," the honey-cake maker said in some alarm.

"Pay!" said the Queen. "What do you mean?"

"Paid for the cakes, I mean," the honey-cake maker said.

"I don't understand you," she answered. "I am the Queen; I never pay for what I eat."

"She *is* the Queen," the beggar said; "and if you don't take care she'll have your head off."

The honey-cake maker jumped back so suddenly that he sat down in a tub of honey and stuck there doubled up with his knees to his chin.

"O Lord! O Lord!" he said. "What shall I do? what shall I do? – all my cakes gone, and never to be paid!"

"You won't want to be paid if your head's cut off," the beggar said.

But the Queen answered, "Nonsense. No one's going to cut your head off; and I dare say, if you ask them at the palace, they'll pay you, whatever it means. Just pull him out of the tub," she continued to the beggar, for the unfortunate honey-baker, not being able to move, remained gasping in the tub.

So the beggar pulled him out, and, for all his fright, his business spirit did not desert him.

"Will your Majesty deign to sign an order for payment?" he said.

And the Queen answered, "Good gracious, no, I won't; the ink always gets into my finger-nails."

The honey-cake maker bowed lower still. "At least, your Majesty, deign to give me your signet-ring as a token."

"Oh, I'll give you that," the Queen said; and she drew it from her finger.

The honey-cake maker suddenly smote his forehead with his hand, as though an idea had struck him.

"You might carry that ladder out for me," he said to the beggar, indicating a ladder that lay along the passage wall.

The beggar did as he was asked, and placed it against the house.

"Whatever is he going to do now?" the Queen thought to herself, and, being in the street, awaited the turn of events.

Presently the honey-cake maker came out, carrying a pail of black paint and a large brush, and, thus equipped, ascended the ladder and began to paint, under the

"JAMES GRUBB,

Honey-cake Maker,"

"to Her Majesty the Queen and the R —"

But he had got no further than that, when, with tumultuous shouts, a body of soldiers came rushing round a corner, and, seeing the honey-cake maker on the ladder and his door open, they at once tumbled pell-mell into the shop.

No sooner did the unfortunate maker of cakes see this, than, in his haste to descend the ladder, his foot slipped, and he came to the ground, with the paint out of the pot running dismally all over his head.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.