

The Grubby Feather Gang

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Upside-down

1916

George decided the world looked slightly better upside-down. The trees on the ridge seemed to be dangling into the blue sky, and the horses looked as if they were standing on the green ceiling of the world like the spiders on the wooden beams in his kitchen. Maybe, if the world really did turn upside-down, all the bad things would fall off it and all the good things would somehow, magically, stay put.

He could feel the weight of his own blood in his head and face, and his arms hung heavily beneath him. Strangely, he didn't really mind. Not many people got to see the world like this. It was almost worth being bullied.

"Are you ready to give in yet," said Stan, "or should I let you fall?"

George was beginning to lose track of how long he had been hanging there, upside-down, from the opening high in the outside wall of the barn. Like a trapeze artist, his legs were bent over the opening's jagged wooden edge onto the floorboards of the hayloft, where Stan was holding him there by sitting on his ankles.

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There was a long drop beneath him to the stony ground, but if he fell, perhaps that would be an end to it: no more being bullied by Stan; no more feeling sick that everyone in the village hated him; no more worrying about his dad and mum fighting all the time, about the women calling his dad a coward because he hadn't gone to fight in the war, about the children at school keeping away from him as if he smelt.

"Let me fall, I don't care," George said. "If I die, you'll go to prison."

"You wouldn't die," Stan protested, as if he'd thought this through carefully.

"I bloomin' well might. It's a heck of a long way down."

"No it's not," Stan said, sounding hurt, as if he hadn't meant to put George in danger. That was the strange thing about Stan: he acted like the bully, but sometimes he talked like the victim.

"It is," George said, calmly. "If I fall now, I'll burst open like an egg, and you'll go to prison." George couldn't help himself. He always knew how to get Stan riled, and he couldn't resist, even now. "They'll probably hang you."

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"Right, that's it, I'm going to drop you unless you give in right now, you runt," Stan said crossly. "I can't hold you anymore, you're too fat."

"Can't be a runt *and* fat," George informed him.

"*You* can," Stan snapped back, and he slackened his grip. George felt his heart lurch as his legs came free, and he realised he wasn't ready to die yet. Stan wasn't ready to let him either, and, after a brief shriek of panic, George felt Stan's full weight slamming his calves back down onto the floorboards. "Hah!" Stan laughed. "You screamed like a girl! No wonder your dad's a coward."

George decided not to comment on the fact that that didn't make sense. He wouldn't be drawn into a conversation about his father. Those always got him confused and angry, and made him feel like crying. So instead he said, "Wait, Stan, I think I can see your mum coming over the hill."

"Where?" Stan said, sounding a little worried.

"Oh hang on, my mistake," George went on. "It's only a cow." He'd never even seen Stan's mum and he felt a bit guilty about insulting her, but not for long.

"Right, that's it," Stan said again. George felt Stan shifting himself so that he was sitting on George's shins, holding him in place with his body

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weight. Then George saw him leaning out over the top of him, his silly face looming there like an approaching zeppelin.

"Ugh, you could have warned me I was going to have to look at you," George said. "I've just eaten."

"Eat this," Stan said, and for a moment George wondered what he was doing. But when he saw the foamy glob appearing at Stan's lips he quickly realised.

"That's disgusting!" George squawked, pressing himself against the barn wall in a desperate attempt to avoid the foul ball of spit which Stan was about to let drop. "Ugh, you're disgusting!" George said as the globule hung over him on an ever-weakening strand of saliva. "I don't want your germs! I don't want your lurgy! I don't want to catch stupid-disease!" George was shielding his face with his arms, and the bloated spit ball broke free, landing on his elbow and splashing itself across his cheek. He wiped it away wildly. Stan let out a loud, triumphant laugh. "Eargh!" George yelled. "Help! It burns! It burns!" It didn't burn, but it was foul. "The spit of a moron! It's infecting me! I can feel my brain melting! I'm turning stupid already!"

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"Shut up," Stan said. "Shut up, runt, or I'll do it again." And he began the preparations by noisily hawking something horrible into his mouth.

"Alright, alright!" George cried, defeated. "I'll do your stupid homework."

"Well, why didn't you just say that in the first place?" Stan said, forming the words awkwardly round the bolus of gob he was keeping in his mouth as a precautionary measure. He swallowed it and said, "Come on, I'll help you up."

A minute or two later, George was sitting on the boards of the barn's hayloft, rubbing the backs of his legs, and allowing the blood to redistribute itself around his body now that he was the right way up again. Stan pulled his maths book from his satchel. "Here y'are," he said, handing it to George. Reluctantly, George took it and slid it into his own satchel. In all honesty, he actually quite liked long-multiplication.

"Okay," Stan said, sounding all friendly now. As he climbed down the ladder from the hayloft, he said, "Give it to me at the gate tomorrow. See ya!" and off he ran leaving George sitting there in the gloom, alone.

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Or at least, he thought he was alone until he heard a little voice saying, "You ain't gonna let him get away with that, are you?"

George almost jumped out of his skin. "Who's there?" he said timidly.

There was a rustle from the mound of hay which took up much of the space up here in the hayloft, and the small, ragged figure of a girl emerged from within it. She took a few moments to brush away the hay, pulling some from her wild, curly hair and smoothing her tatty dress. "I saw the whole thing," she said.

"You saw... Why didn't you do something?"

"Why didn't *you* do something?" she snapped straight back at him. "Are you a coward?"

George thought about that. Then he said, "Yes, I think so."

"What?" the girl said, horrified. "Well, don't be!"

"Don't be a coward?"

"Yes!"

"But... I can't make myself suddenly be really strong and fight him. He's stronger than me. I'm fat and short. I can't help that."

"Actually," the girl said, her tone softening, "you ain't a coward. If you was a coward, you wouldn't of

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spoken to him like that. You wouldn't of called his mum a cow, and told him he was stupid, would ya?"

"I dunno," George said, thinking about that for a moment. "But still, you could have done something. Why didn't you help me? You could have gone and got someone."

"I ain't here to fight your battles for you. I wanted to see what you'd do."

"Oh." George said. "What if he'd dropped me? What if I'd fallen to my death?"

"Well, I'd have thanked my lucky stars for the ringside seat!"

"Oh, that's kind," George said, sarcastically. He looked at the girl. She was about his age, grubby and feral looking, with straw sticking out of her hair and an old dress that was full of holes. She had a chirpy expression though, almost pretty. There was something about her that made him feel like grinning. "What's your name?" he said.

"Emma. What's yours?"

"George."

From down below in the barn there came a loud, plaintive meow. "Oh, Azar," Emma cried in apparent irritation, and leaned over the edge of the hayloft. "What you doing here? Leave me alone

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won't you?" To George, she explained, "Bloomin' cat follows me everywhere. I hate cats!"

"I love them, but they make me sneeze," George said. "My dad's a vet, so I get to see lots of cats, but I start sneezing if I stroke them. Come on," and he climbed down the ladder, his satchel slung across his body.

The cat, a scrawny white thing that looked as if it had never learned to clean itself, meowed at him, and he meowed back. He wanted to stroke it but knew his eyes would puff up and water, and his throat would itch, and he'd have a sneezing fit. Emma arrived beside him. "Go home, Azar," she said crossly, and waved the cat away, but it ignored her completely and curled itself affectionately around her leg. "Azar!" she scolded, but crouched down and scratched it softly behind the ears anyway. "Go home," she snapped. "Stop following me you mangy fleabag," she said as she stroked its long back.

"Where do you live?" George said, wondering why he'd never seen her before.

"Here. This is my uncle's farm. I was hiding in the hay from my aunt. She gets me doing chores."

"Why have I never seen you at school?"

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"I've only been here for a few days. Going to start school tomorrow." They were outside now. There was a cool spring breeze, and the budding trees seemed to glow in the light of the afternoon sun.

"Oh, I'll see you there then," George said, unsure of how he felt about his strange new classmate.

"Probably," Emma said, and off she ran, along the rutted lane, the white cat skipping and bouncing along behind her.

George's Plan

As usual, George's mother seemed in a good spirits until his father arrived home from his rounds. He came in smiling, and his cheerfulness filled the room, but George's mother barely spoke to him. They all had their dinner in virtual silence, although his father winked at George every now and then to tell him it would all be alright, but George wondered if his mother would ever stop being cross. Dad wasn't the only man in the village to refuse to go away and fight. It wasn't his fault men were dying in France.

After dinner, George had to fetch wood for the range, take out the ashes and sweep the kitchen floor, but he got on with these and his other chores without complaint. He didn't want to anger his mother tonight. Then, he slipped away upstairs to his tiny room. He opened the window to let in some cool air. The sun was dipping now, but he didn't need to light a candle yet. He sat on his bed and pulled the books from his satchel. He laid his and Stan's books out beside him. First, as dusk descended on the village, he worked his way through the twenty long-multiplication sums in his

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own book. He packed that away in his satchel, and opened Stan's book. He had a plan which would ensure Stan would never make him do his homework again. He'd done homework for Stan before, and had always done it correctly, but that tradition would end tonight. Sum after sum he completed neatly and tidily, but with completely the wrong answer. Smiling to himself, engrossed in his happy fantasy of the punishment that would be inflicted on Stan for his hopelessness, he didn't notice his mother's footsteps on the stairs, and he jumped when the door opened.

"Hello my love," his mum said, coming into the room.

"Hi Mum."

"Homework?"

"Yep."

"Let me see. I like to know how you're doing." George froze. He really didn't want her to see him doing someone else's homework. She wouldn't like that. But there was nothing he could do. He watched as his mum picked up Stan's book. Maybe she wouldn't notice. George held his breath as she perched on the bed beside him, her long dress rustling, and he could see her mind working as she silently checked the sums.

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"Um..." she began after a moment. She lowered the book and looked at George, then raised it again and checked a few more, then dropped it into her lap. "These are... These are all wrong, my love," she said softly, danger lurking beneath her gentle tone. "Are you just not trying? I know you can do these." George said nothing. His mum picked up the book again and began leafing through the pages. She gazed down on page after page of the sums Stan had done in class. Stan's work was messy and full of mistakes which Mr Haxby, the schoolmaster, had corrected. She hardly seemed to be breathing now, and George noticed the room had become cold and dark.

Suddenly, as if struck by a realisation, George's mum glanced at the cover of the book. Stan's name must have leapt out at her. She turned her face towards George, an unreadable expression on her lips. "George, my love," she breathed, "tell me why you are doing Stan's homework."

"Um..."

"George," she said with a note of warning.

"He held me upside down from the hayloft, Mum!" George blurted.

"What?"

"Don't say anything, Mum. Don't tell Mr Haxby."

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"Why would I do that?" she said, darkly. George felt himself shrivel under the weight of her judgement.

"I don't know..."

Very slowly, she put the books down, stood, and went over to the window. She leaned against the sill, her back to him, and the deepening twilight glowed around her. Without turning, she said, "George, there are bad people in this world, and if you let them walk all over you once, they will do it again and again. You do know that, don't you?"

George nodded. "I have got the sums all wrong, to get him into trouble," he contested. But his mother looked at him with a disappointed expression. It was the same one she used on his father when he contested that he was writing letters to all and sundry to impress upon them the futility of war.

Shame burned in George's chest.

His mother stood facing him now, silhouetted against the dusk. "This is what you are to do." She came towards him, and towered over him like a thundercloud. "You are to punch him. Do you hear me?" She wasn't raising her voice, but she was driving her words into him with frightening force. "Punch him. I don't care where or how, but you

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punch him hard. Do you hear me?" George nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

George could hardly bring himself to speak.

"What are you going to do?"

"Punch him."

"Good." His mother bent forwards then, cupped his face in her hands and kissed his head. "Good boy," she said. "You have to fight bullies, George. That's something your father doesn't seem to understand." And with that, she went, leaving George feeling sick and ashamed. He'd never punched anyone in his life. He wasn't even sure he knew how. Anger sizzled inside him. He'd never had a fight with Stan, but he was pretty sure he knew what would happen if he did. Stan would win easily, just like he'd easily pushed George out of the hayloft doorway and hung him upside down. George hadn't even tried to stop him. He didn't know how.

The Feather

The next morning, George rose with a sense of anxious excitement. He knew that what he'd planned was cruel, but, as his mother had said, you have to stand up to bullies. Okay, so he wasn't going to punch Stan, but his plan would certainly teach Stan a lesson. Before breakfast, George had to run out to the milk cart to collect a small bucket of milk which he struggled to carry. Just as he was pushing the garden gate shut with his foot, a girl ran across the street towards him.

"Is your dad there?" she said. She didn't look happy. George recognised her. She was older than him by a few years, and lived just across the other side of the village green. George, guessing what was coming, lied, saying that he'd already left for a meeting somewhere.

"Oh," the girl said. Her eyes looked red, as if she'd been crying. Then, she held out a white feather. George looked at it. He knew what it meant, but he didn't take it. "It's a feather," the girl said, "for your dad."

Just then George's father came out of the house. "Oh, hello Maggie," he said warmly. "I thought that

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was you. I've heard the awful news about your brother. I'm ever so sorry."

"Coward," Maggie spat with sudden ferocious hatred. "Here, take this," and she handed him the feather.

"Thank you, my dear," George's father said, taking it from her as if it was a welcome gift.

"Men like you make me sick," Maggie went on. "My brother..." she seemed briefly to choke, and a tear broke from one eye. "My brother..." she went on bravely, "he fought... he fought to protect his country, and all you do is sit around letting others do the fighting and dying. You should be ashamed."

"Maggie," George's father said, his tone filled with sympathy for the poor girl. "I am not ashamed, but I do understand and respect your feelings. There is more than one way to fight, though."

George turned to go back inside, but his father seemed to be deliberately blocking his way, as if he *wanted* George to see the humiliating exchange.

"And what way do you fight? By writing letters to the prime minister? How are you helping our boys? I bet you think my brother deserved to be killed. I bet you think they all do."

"I certainly do not think that, Maggie," George's father said, firmly, but without even a hint of anger

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in his voice. "I wholeheartedly believe that all men who go to war are brave and courageous —"

"But wicked? That's what you think, isn't it? It's wicked to fight."

"No. It is not wicked to fight to defend your country. Your brother was a good man."

"Then why aren't you out there fighting?"

"Because I believe that war is wrong." A couple of other women who had been heading for the milk cart had gravitated towards the conversation now. George wished he could disappear into the soil, like rain. He could not believe his dad would stand there and let these women hate him and hurl abuse at him. But his father always took the abuse calmly and almost... *gratefully*.

One of the other women, angered by what she had heard, chimed in, "You believe war is wrong? So our boys and men are doing wrong are they? That is an insult to their bravery."

"I believe war is wrong, but I do believe our boys and men are good people. They are brave and good. I love and respect them for what they are doing. But, but... war is wrong, and I refuse to join in. Instead, I will —"

"Coward!" someone shouted.

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"Coward!" Maggie echoed. "You're a filthy coward."

"Instead, I will..." George's father went on, undeterred, "I will fight *war itself*. Next week, I will —"

"You make me sick," someone else shouted. Quite a crowd of women and children had gathered now, and beyond them, the old man driving the milk cart, also watched. He was too old to be a soldier, but not too old to give George's father a foul glare of hatred. "You should be put in prison for desertion," one of the women said. George felt the hot prickle of tears building in his eyes and he was determined not to let anyone see him cry. Why did his father always try to talk to these people?

"For treason!" someone else added.

"Should be shot!" came another voice, filled with spite.

"Next week," George's father calmly went on, "I will be travelling to London to lobby Parliament to find a peaceful way to end the war. There are many very clever people with very strong ideas about how we could achieve peace and end the fighting —"

"Utter rubbish!" a woman called. "Parliament aren't going to listen to you, you jumped-up fool! What makes you think you're so important?"

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"It is not just me, my dear. I am indeed a man of very little importance, but there are important, powerful men – and women, I should add – who feel exactly the same as me, and who will also be lobbying –"

The crowd interrupted as one, a cacophony of jeers and noise. Someone threw a clod of soil which hit George's father's arm, some of it splashing into the milk. Through the film of tears which George refused to let fall, he saw the white feather held delicately in his father's fingers. His father always kept the feathers he was presented with. They were a symbol of cowardice, but he kept them, and displayed them on the mantelpiece as if they were trophies. George could not understand why. He turned away from the angry women, and blinked heavily, finally letting the tears drop to the ground. He screwed his eyes up as if they were sponges he was wringing out, to make sure all the tears had gone, and then he saw his mother coming out of the cottage.

"Go home, all of you," she said in her level, yet fearsome, tone. But her power had little effect on the crowd.

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"Have a word with yer man, Liz," one of the women instructed her. "He's a good-for-nothing." And the shouting began again.

George's mother didn't reply to that. His father nodded, thanked Maggie for the feather, and, turning away from the baying crowd, the three of them headed inside.

George heaved the heavy bucket of spoilt milk up onto the table, and his father began the ritual of nailing the fresh feather onto the long piece of wood on the mantelpiece which was already adorned with many others. George's mother stood there with her clenched fists on her hips, watching him. George felt the crushing weight of dread building in the room, and his father stepped back to admire his handiwork.

"I suppose you're happy now," George's mother said. "Got another one to add to your collection."

"Soon I'll have a whole chicken," George's father joked, as always. His mother was not amused. His father turned. He took a step towards her, reached forwards and took her hands gently in his. To George's relief, she allowed him to uncurl her fingers and kiss them. George felt the dread easing off, as if a window had been opened letting the bad feelings escape into the morning air. "My love,"

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George's father said. "Those feathers... They certainly do not make me happy. But, as I've told you before, they make me *question* myself. Every time I see that row of white feathers, I am forced to ask myself, 'am I doing the right thing?'"

"And you continue to believe you are?"

"Indeed I do, dear wife."

At this, his mother snatched her hands away. Dread surged back into the room as she glared at him and shook her head. She needed no words, her feelings were palpable, and George's father looked defeated as he watched her storm out, slamming the back door so hard the cottage shook.

"George," his father said, slowly lowering himself into the rocking chair beside the fire. "I know how hard this must be for you. Those people out there, they are right. They *really are right*," he said, and he laughed a little. "But so am I. I don't know what you think of me. Do you think I'm a coward, my son?" George did not know what to say. He thought the answer was probably 'yes', but he loved his father even so, and was glad he hadn't gone to fight in the war. So, he shook his head. "Hmmm," his father said. "I'm not so sure I believe you. And it breaks my heart to imagine you might think that of me, and worse, that you might be right to think it."

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But... I still have to do what I believe is right. I will not fight in the war. But I will fight *war itself*, in whatever way I can."

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