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"'All persons who dispute our prophecies are burned at the stake'"



The Feathers of Olrun

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"So did it come about that as King Hoel rode a-hunting under the hunter's moon he came upon a personable young fellow in decent black, who was wandering at adventure in the high woods of Dun Vlechlan; and the king remembered what had been foretold"



THEY of Poictesme narrate that in the old days Manuel was a swineherd, living modestly in attendance upon the miller's pigs. Manuel was content enough; he knew not of the fate which was reserved for him.

Then, toward the autumn of the year, Manuel came from his wattled hut by the Wolflake to his sister Math, who was the miller's wife.

"And whatever is the boy groaning about?" said she.

"I have cause, and cause to spare." He told her of how he had surprised a fair maid bathing in the Wolflake, and of what had befallen.

Math nodded.

"Take shame to yourself, young rascal! Well, that would be Oldrun, the Unattainable Princess. Thus she comes from the far land of Valland in, they say, the appearance of a swan; and thus she bathes; and thus she slips into the robe of the Apsaras when it is high time to be leaving such impudent knaves as you have proved yourself to be."

"Yes, yes, a shift made all of shining white feathers, Sister. Here is a feather that was broken from it as I clutched at her."

Math turned the feather in her hand.

"Now, to be sure! And did you ever see the like of it! Still, a broken feather is no good to anybody; and, as I have told you any number of times, I cannot have trash littering up my kitchen."

So Math dropped the shining white feather into the fire, on which she was warming over a pot of soup for Manuel's dinner, and they watched this feather burn.

After which Manuel said, sighing:

"Even so my days consume, and my youth goes out of me, in a land where there are no maids so lovely as Olrun."

"No really nice girl," Math considered, "would be flying about the tree-tops and the tall, lonely mountains and the low, long marshes, with nobody to keep an eye on her. It is not proper, and I wonder at her parents."

"But, Sister, she is a princess!"

"Just so; therefore I burned the feather, because it is not wholesome for persons of our station in life to be robbing princesses of anything, though it be only of a feather."

"Sister, that is the truth. It is not right to rob anybody of anything, and in taking that feather I have committed a crime."

"I do not doubt she thought you were attempting some crime or another," Math said sagaciously. "Therefore I burned the feather, lest it be recognized, and bring you to the gallows or to a worse place. So why did you not scrape your feet before coming into my kitchen? And how many times do you expect me to speak to you about that?"

Manuel said nothing, but he thought a great deal. In the upshot he went into the miller's chicken-yard and caught a goose and plucked from its wing a feather. Then Manuel put on his Sunday clothes, and, without taking leave of any one, set forth for the far land of Valland.

So did it come about that as King Hoel rode a-hunting under the hunter's moon he came upon a personable young fellow in decent black, who was wandering at adventure in the high woods of Dun

Vlechlan; and the king remembered what had been foretold.

Said King Hoel to Manuel the swineherd:

"What is that I see in your pocket wrapped in red silk?"

"It is a feather, King, wrapped in a bit of my sister's best petticoat."

"Now, glory be to God, friend, and at what price will you sell me that feather?"

"But a feather is no use to anybody, King, for, as you see, it is a quite ordinary feather."

"Come, come," the king said shrewdly, "do people anywhere wrap ordinary feathers in red silk? Friend, do not think to deceive King Hoel of the Peohtes, or it will be the worse for you. I perfectly recognize that feather as the feather which was molted in this forest by the Zhar Ptitza Bird in the old time before my grandfathers came into this country. For it was foretold that such a youth as you would bring to me, who have long been the silliest king that ever reigned over the Peohtes, this feather, which confers upon its owner perfect wisdom; and for you to dispute the prophecy would be blasphemous."

"I do not dispute your silliness, King Hoel, nor do I dispute anybody's prophecies in a world wherein nothing is certain."

"One thing at least is certain," remarked King Hoel, frowning uglily, "and that is that among the Peohtes all persons who dispute our prophecies are burned at the stake."

Manuel shivered slightly and he said:

"It seems to me a quite ordinary feather; but your prophets, most deservedly, no doubt, are in higher repute for wisdom than I am, and burning is a discomfortable death. So, since you are assured that this is the Zhar Ptitza's feather, I will sell it to you for ten sequins."

King Hoel shook his little gray head and said:

"That will not do at all, and your price is out of reason, because it was foretold that for this feather you would ask ten thousand sequins."

"Well, I have no desire to appear irreligious. So you may have it at your

own price rather than let the prophecies remain unfulfilled."

Then Manuel rode pillion with a king who was unwilling to let Manuel out of his sight, and they came thus to King Hoel's vine-covered palace. Heralds, in bright red tabards that were embroidered with golden thistles, proclaimed the fulfilment of the prophecy as to the Zhar Ptitza's feather, and the priests of the Peohtes gave thanks in all their curious underground temples. The common people, who had for the last score of years taken shame to themselves for living under such a foolish king, embraced one another and danced and sang patriotic songs at every street-corner: the Lower Council met, and voted that out of deference to his Majesty All Fools' day should be stricken from the calendar; and the queen declared there were two ways of looking at everything, the while she burned a quantity of private papers. Then at night were fireworks, the king made a speech, and Manuel was paid ten thousand sequins.

Thereafter Manuel abode for a month at the court of King Hoel, noting whatever to this side and to that side seemed most notable.

Hoel now wore the feather from the wing of the miller's goose affixed to the front of Hoel's second best crown, because that was the one he used to give judgments in. And now that it was noised abroad that King Hoel had the Zhar Ptitza's feather, the Peohtes came gladly to be judged, and the neighboring kings began to submit to him their more difficult cases, because everybody knew that King Hoel's wisdom was infallible, and beyond the criticism of ordinary persons.

And now that doubt of himself had gone out of his mind, Hoel lived untroubled, and his digestion improved, and his loving-kindness was great, because he could not be angry with the pitiful creatures haled before him, when he considered how little able they were to distinguish between wisdom and un-wisdom where Hoel was omniscient; and all his doings were merciful and just, and his people praised him. Even the queen conceded that, once you were accustomed to his ways, and exercised some firmness about being made a door-

mat of, and had it understood once for all that meals could not be kept waiting for him, she supposed there might be women worse off.

So every one was satisfied in King Hoel's realm except Manuel, whose conscience troubled him about his debt to Olrún, the Unattainable Princess. "For it is not right," he reflected, "to rob anybody of anything, and perceive that wisdom weighs exactly the weight of a feather."

He went into King Hoel's chicken-yard and caught a goose and plucked from its wing a feather. Manuel went glitteringly now in brocaded hose, and with gold spurs on his heels; and he rode on a tall, dappled horse when he departed from King Hoel's realm, for Manuel nowadays had money to spare.

Now Manuel came into the country of wicked King Wencelas, and toward All-hallows they bring him to the king in the torture-chamber. The king was not idle at that time, and he looked up good-temperedly enough from his employment; but almost instantly his merry old face was overcast.

"Dear me!" said Wencelas, and I had hoped you would not be bothering me for a good ten years!"

"Now if I bother you at all it is against my will," declared Manuel, very politely, for there were one or two things that he did not like the looks of in this torture-chamber.

"That is as it may be. In the meantime what is that I see in your pocket wrapped in red silk?"

"It is a feather, King, wrapped in a bit of my sister's best petticoat."

Then Wencelas sighed, and he arose from his interesting experiments with what was left of Sir Guivert, the seneschal, to whom the king had taken a sudden dislike that morning.

"Well, after all," said Wencelas, "I have had a brave two-score years of it, with my enormities and my iniquities, and it is not as though there were nothing to look back on. So at what price will you sell me that feather?"

"But surely a feather is no use to anybody, King, for, as you see, it is a quite ordinary feather."

"Come, come," said King Wencelas,

as he washed his hands, "do people anywhere wrap ordinary feathers in red silk? Friend, do not think to swindle me out of sainthood by any such foolish talk. I perfectly recognize that feather as the feather which Milcah plucked from the left pinion of the Archangel Oraphiel when the sons of God were on more intricate and scandalous terms with the daughters of men than are permitted nowadays."

"Well, sir," replied Manuel, "you may be right in a world wherein nothing is certain." Manuel had deduced from one or two things in the torture-chamber that it was better not to argue with this King Wencelas.

"How can I help being right, when it was foretold long ago that such a youth as you would bring this very holy relic to turn me from my sins and make a saint of me?" said Wencelas, peevishly.

"It appears to me a quite ordinary feather, King; but probably your prophets are wiser than I," conceded Manuel, looking sidewise at the result of the king's experiments.

"Do you name your price for this feather, then?"

"I think it would be more respectful, sir, to refer you to the prophets, for I find them generous and big-hearted creatures."

Wencelas nodded his approval.

"That is very piously spoken, because it was prophesied that this relic would be given me for no price at all by a great nobleman. So I must forthwith write out for you a count's commission, I suppose, and must write out your grant to fertile lands and a stout castle, and must date your title to all these things from yesterday."

"Certainly," said Manuel, "it would not look well for you to be neglecting the fulfilment of such a famous prophecy with that bottle of ink at your elbow."

So King Wencelas sent for the Count of Poictesme, and explained to him as between old friends how the matter stood, and that afternoon the count's head was severed from his body. Poictesme now being a vacant fief, King Wencelas ennobled Manuel and made him Count of Poictesme. Thereafter Manuel abode for a month at the court of King Wencelas, noting whatever to

this side and to that side seemed most notable.

First the king's heralds rode every whither in fluted armor to proclaim the fulfilment of the old prophecy as to the Archangel Oraphiel's feather. Never before was there such a hubub in Lacre Kai, for the bells of all the churches sounded all day, and all the people ran about praying at the top of their voices and forgiving their relatives and kissing the girls and blowing whistles, because Lacre Kai now harbored a relic so holy that the vilest sinner had but to touch it to be purified of iniquity. And that day King Wencelas dismissed the evil companions with whom he had rioted for two-score years in all manner of wickedness, and Wencelas lived henceforward as became a saint. He builded two churches a year and fared edifyingly on roots and herbs; he washed the feet of three poor persons daily, and went in sackcloth; and he made abbesses of many of his former acquaintances, because he knew with certainty that people are made holy by contact with holiness and that sainthood is retroactive.

The feather from the wing of Hoel's goose King Wencelas had affixed to the unassuming skullcap with a halo of gold wire which Wencelas now wore in the place of a vainglorious earthly crown; so that perpetual contiguity with this relic might keep him in augmenting sanctity. And now that doubt of himself had gone out of his mind, Wencelas lived untroubled, and his digestion improved on his light diet of roots and herbs, and his loving kindness was great, because he could not be angry with the pitiful creatures haled before him, when he considered what lengthy and ingenious torments awaited every one of them either in hell or purgatory, while Wencelas would be playing a gold harp in heaven.

So Wencelas dealt tenderly and generously with all. Half of his subjects said that simply showed you; and the rest of them assented that indeed you might well say that, and they had often thought of it, and had wished that young people would take profit by considering such things more seriously.

In a word, every one was satisfied ex-

cept the Count of Poictesme, whose conscience troubled him about his debt to Olrún, the Unattainable Princess. "For it is not right," he reflected, "to rob anybody of anything, and I perceive that absolute righteousness is a fine feather in one's cap."

He went into the chicken-yard behind the red-roofed palace of King Wencelas and caught a goose and plucked from its wing a feather. Thereafter the young Count of Poictesme rode out of Lacre Kai on a tall, dappled horse, and a retinue of six lackeys in blue-and-yellow liveries came gallantly cantering after him.

IN such estate it was that Count Manuel came, on the morning of Christmas day, into Valland. This land, reputed sorcerous, in no way displayed to him any unusual feature save that the king's marmoreal palace was fenced with silver pikes whereon were set the embalmed heads of young men who had wooed the Princess Olrún unsuccessfully. Manuel found these rather droll-looking, because snow had fallen during the night, so that each head seemed to wear a nightcap.

They brought Manuel to King Kiar, who was holding his Christmas feast in his warm hall. Kiar sat on a fine throne of carved white ivory and gold, beneath a purple canopy, and beside him, upon just such another throne, not quite so high, sat Kiar's daughter, Olrún, the Unattainable Princess, in a robe of watered silk which was of seven colors and was lined with the dark fur of barbiolets. In her crown were chrysolites and amethysts. It was a wonder to note how brightly they shone; but they were not so bright as Olrún's eyes.

She stared as Manuel came through the hall, wherein the barons were seated according to their degrees. She had, they say, her reasons for remembering the impudent young fellow whom she had encountered at the Wolflake. She blushed, and spoke to her father in the whistling and hissing language which the Apsaras use among themselves; and her father laughed long and loud. Said Kiar:

"Things might have fallen out much worse. Come tell me now, Count of



"So he gave her the feathers he had plucked from the third goose"

Poictesme, what is that I see in your breast-pocket wrapped in red silk?"

"It is a feather, King," replied Manuel, wearily, "wrapped in a bit of my sister's best petticoat."

"Aye, aye," said Kiar, with a grin that was becoming even more benevolent, "and I need not ask what price you come expecting for that feather. Well, you are an excellently spoken-of young nobleman, who have slain no doubt a reasonable number of giants and dragons, and who have certainly turned kings from folly and wickedness. For such fine rumors speed before the man who has fine deeds behind him that you do not come into my realm as a stranger; and, I repeat, things might have fallen out much worse."

"Now listen, all ye that hold Christmas here!" cried Manuel. "A while back I robbed this princess of a feather, and the thought of it lay in my mind heavier than a feather, because it is not right to rob anybody of anything. So I set out toward Valland to restore to her a feather. And such happenings befell me by the way that at Michaelmas I brought wisdom into one realm, and at All-hallows I brought piety into another realm. Now what I may be bringing into this realm of yours at Heaven's most holy season, Heaven only knows. It seems to me a quite ordinary feather. Yet life in the wide world, I find, is a queerer thing than ever any swineherd dreamed of in his wattled hut, and people everywhere are nourished by their beliefs as the meat of pigs can nourish nobody."

Kiar said, with a wise nod:

"I perceive what is in your heart, and I see likewise what is in your pocket. So why do you tell me what everybody knows? Everybody knows that the robe of the Apsaras, which is the peculiar treasure of Valland, has been ruined by the loss of a feather; so that my daughter can no longer go abroad in the appearance of a swan, because the robe is not able to work any more wonders until that feather in your pocket has been sewed back into the robe, with the old incantation."

"Now, but indeed does everybody know that!" said Manuel, in a sad taking.

"Everybody knows, too, that my daughter has pined away with fretting after her lost ways of outdoor exercise, and the healthful changes of air which she used to be having. And, finally, everybody knows that, at my daughter's very sensible suggestion, I have offered my daughter's hand in marriage to him who would restore that feather, and death to every impudent young fellow who dared enter here without it, as my palace fence attests."

"Oh! oh!" thought Manuel, "but seemingly it is no wholesome adventure which has come to me unasked."

"So, as you tell me, you came into Valland; and, as there is no need to tell me, I hope, who have still two eyes in my head, you have achieved the adventure. So why do you keep telling me about matters with which I am as well acquainted as you?"

"But, King, how do you know that this is not an ordinary feather?"

"Count of Poictesme, do people anywhere—"

"Oh, spare me that vile bit of worldly logic, King, and I will concede whatever you desire."

"Then do you stop talking such nonsense and give my daughter her feather."

Manuel ascended the white throne of Orlun. Queer things had befallen Manuel, but nothing stranger than this could ever happen, he reflected, than that he should be standing there with her and holding her small hand in his. For this was the Unattainable Princess whose loveliness had kindled a dream and a dissatisfaction in the heart of a swineherd to lead him forth into the wide world and through the puzzling ways of the wide world and into its high places; so that at the last the swineherd was standing, a-glimmer in satin and gold and in rich furs, here at the summit of a throne, and at the last the hand of the Unattainable Princess was in his hand, and in his heart was misery.

"Is it the truth," asks Manuel of Orlun, speaking not very steadily, "that you are to marry the man who restores the feather of which you were robbed at the Wolflake, and can marry none other?"

"It is the truth," she answered in a

small, frightened, lovely voice, "and I no longer grieve that it is the truth."

But Manuel thought of how composedly his sister had declared that a feather was no good to anybody, and of how his sister had burned the shining feather, with him sitting by and thinking about cabbage soup.

"Well, but," said he, "all water that is past the dam must go its way, even though it be a flood of tears. A feather I took from you in the red autumn woods, and a feather I now restore to you, my Princess, in this white palace of yours, not asking any reward, and not claiming to be remembered by you in the gray years to come, but striving to leave no debt unpaid. And whether in this world, where nothing is certain, one feather is better than another feather, I do not know."

So he gave her the feather he had plucked from the third goose, while the trumpets sounded as a token that the quest of Olrún's feather had been fulfilled, and all the courtiers shouted in honor of Count Manuel.

"Now it well may come about," thought Manuel, "that I must straightway take a foul doom from fair lips, and that presently my head will be drying on a silver pike; for she cannot fail to perceive this is a goose-feather, with no magic about it. Even so, one never knows; and I have learned that it is well to put all doubt of oneself quite out of mind."

And Olrún looked at what was in her hand, and saw it was a goose-feather, in nothing resembling the feather which, when she had fled in maidenly embarrassment from Manuel's love-making, she had plucked from the robe of the Apsaras and had dropped at Manuel's feet in order that her father might be forced to proclaim this quest, and the winning of it might be predetermined. Then Olrún looked at Manuel. Now before her this man's blue eyes were as bright and steadfast as altar candles before a saint; she saw that this man expected her to declare the truth, when the truth would be his death-sentence; and she had no patience with him whatever.

Said Olrún, with that lovely, tranquil smile of hers:

"Count Manuel has fulfilled the quest. He has restored to me the feather from the robe of the Apsaras. I recognize it perfectly."

"Why, to be sure," says Kiar. "Still, do you get your needle and the recipe for the old incantation, and the robe too, and make it plain to all my barons that the power of the robe is returned to it by flying about the hall a little in the appearance of a swan; for it is better to conduct these matters in due order and without any suspicion of irregularity."

Thought Manuel:

"Now again it may be that I am lost despite her dear pity upon me. With my own eyes I saw the burning of that shining feather which alone can restore the robe's magic, and it does not stand to reason that a goose-feather can help to turn anybody into a swan. Yet I, who am to-day a count, with plenty of money in my pockets, and with a puzzled head none too securely fastened to my shoulders, would wager nothing either way."

And Olrún said:

"My Father, I am surprised at you! Have you no sense of decency at all? For you ought to know it is not becoming for an engaged girl to be flying about Valland in the appearance of a swan, far less among a parcel of men who have been drinking all morning. It is the sort of thing that leads to a girl's being talked about."

"Well, now, that is true, my dear," said Kiar, "and the sentiment does you credit. So perhaps I had better suggest something else."

"Indeed, my Father, I see exactly what you would be suggesting. And I believe that you are right; it is not well for any married woman to be known to possess any such robe. There is no telling what people would be saying of her, nor what disgraceful tricks she would not get the credit of playing on her husband. For you, who have the name of being the wisest king that ever reigned in Valland, know perfectly well how people talk, and how eager people are to talk and to put the very worst construction on everything; and you know, too, that husbands do not like such talk. Certainly, I had not thought of these

things, my Father, but I believe that you are right."

Kiar stroked his thick, short beard, and said:

"Now, truly, my Daughter, whether or no I be a wise king, though, as you say, of course there have been persons kind enough to consider, and in petitions, too— However, but be that as it may, and putting aside the fact that everybody likes to be appreciated, I can imagine no gift which would at this high season be more acceptable to any husband than the ashes of that magical robe."

"This is a saying," Olrun here declared, "well worthy of King Kiar; and I have often wondered at your striking way of putting things."

"That, too, is a gift," Kiar said, with proper modesty, "which to some persons is given, and to others not; so I deserve no credit for it. But, as I was saying when you interrupted me, my dear, it is well for youth to have its fling, because, as I have often thought, we are young only once; and so I have not ever criticized your jauntings in far lands. But a husband is another pair of shoes. A husband does not like to have his wife flying about the tree-tops and the tall, lonely mountains and the low, long marshes, with nobody to keep an eye on her, and that is the truth of it. So, were I in your place, and wise enough to listen to the old father who loves you, and who is wiser than you, my dear—why, now that you are about to marry, I would destroy this feather and this robe in one red fire, if only Count Manuel will agree to it. For it is

he who now has power over all your possessions, and not I."

"Count Manuel," said Olrun, with that lovely, tranquil smile of hers, "you perceive that my father is insistent, and it is my duty to be guided by him. I do not deny that, upon my father's advice, I am asking you to let perish a strong magic which many persons would value above a woman's pleading. But I know now"—her eyes met his, and that which Manuel found in the eyes of Olrun was to him a joy well nigh intolerable—"but I know now, very certainly, that you, who are to be my husband, and who have brought wisdom into one kingdom and piety into another, have brought love into the third kingdom; and I perceive that this third magic is a stronger and a nobler magic than that of the Apsaras. And it seems to me that you and I would do well to dispense with anything which is second rate."

"I am of the opinion that you are a singularly wise woman," said Manuel, "and I am of the belief that it is far too early for me to be crossing my wife's wishes in a world wherein all our sins are nourished by our beliefs."

All being agreed, the Yule log was stirred up into a blaze, which was duly fed with the goose-feather and the robe of the Apsaras. Thereafter the trumpets sounded a fanfare to proclaim that the king's collops were cooked and peppered, his wine-casks broached, and his puddings steaming. Then the former swineherd went in to share his Christmas dinner with the king's daughter Olrun, whom people everywhere had called the Unattainable Princess.

