

The Grubby Feather Gang

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Eskdale Publishing
www.antonywootten.co.uk
Eskdale Publishing, UK

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Eskdale Publishing,
North Yorkshire

www.antonywootten.co.uk

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A Catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN: 978-0-9537123-8-0

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Feather Gang

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.