



The Fourth Feather

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Dramatization of A.E.W.Mason's novel

by Christian Lanciai (2007, translated 2018)

Dramatis personae:

Harry Feversham
Jack Durrance
George Willoughby
John Trench
Ethne Eustace
Dermod Eustace, her father
Lieutenant Sutch
Colonel Dawson
Major Walters
Lieutenant Calder
Captain Peter Castleton
Idris
A German student of medicine
Abou Fatma
Ibrahim
The butler James
A messenger
An aide-de-camp
A servant
Other militaries
Other prisoners

The action takes place in England, Ireland and Sudan 1888-94.

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Act I scene 1. Harry Feversham's apartment. Party mood.

Harry I am very glad that you all could join me on my farewell dinner, my friends, since it might be the last time all the four of us will be able to meet again.

Willoughby What the devil does he mean?

Trench We are soldiers all four of us and could be summoned by death at any moment. Not even Harry is any exception. But there is something more behind.

Durrance What is it, Harry?

Harry I am getting married.

Willoughby Good heavens! Whoever with?

Harry Jack, you know who.

Jack You can't mean – Ethne?

Harry Yes. I am sorry, Jack.

Trench Surely, that's nothing to be sorry about. Not that I know the lady in question, but apparently Jack must know her, judging from his paleness at this loss.

Jack I introduced them to each other.

Trench When will the wedding be?

Harry As soon as possible. I will cross over into Ireland at the end of the week.

Jack How will this affect your career? Will you carry on or resign?

Harry Honestly I don't know, Jack. As you well know the family estate of Ethne will need a helping hand. Her father can't manage it all by himself.

Jack Does he demand your resignation?

Harry Not yet and not directly.

Trench We know what the Irish stand for. They abhor all authority, and even if he doesn't say so he will most likely be quite decided about demanding Harry's resignation.

Willoughby Hard terms, Harry. You will lose both us and your career for the sake of an Irish wench.

Harry Nothing is settled yet except our engagement.

Trench Fair enough. Can't she follow you to India?

Harry Maybe. I hope you don't take it too hard, Jack. I know that you also were keen on her.

Jack If you must resign it was perhaps better that she chose you, since I am going to Egypt to fight the fanatics of Sudan, where too many have been left as random skeletons buried in the sand.

Butler Telegram, Sir.

Harry Thank you. (*opens it, reads it and grows pale*)

Willoughby What is it, Harry?

Trench Let him recover. Someone has died.

Harry No, it's not that serious. (*to the butler*) It's all right, James. No answer. (*the butler leaves*)

Trench You look as if your whole world had been unsettled.

Harry (to himself) That this should happen now...

Jack Can we help you, Harry?
Harry No, you can't. This concerns only me and is a problem I can only resolve myself.
Willoughby Has she turned you down?
Trench Don't be ridiculous, lieutenant.
Harry Nothing can come between me and her, my friends. That's for certain if anything.
Trench We believe you.
Jack Leave him alone, boys. You can count on us, Harry, whatever it is.
Harry Thank you, I know I can. I will never fail you either. We are like the four musketeers. Nothing can separate us, no woman, no war, no service, perhaps not even death...
Willoughby He has gone metaphysical.
Trench We'll keep in touch, Harry. Thanks for the dinner.
Harry It was my sincere pleasure to see you here with me one last time. When one of us is separated perhaps we'll never be able to meet again all four. At least destiny is definitely calling me and Jack on separate paths.
Willoughby Although you loved the same woman.
Trench Shut up, Willoughby.
Jack No hard feelings, and no harm is done. As long as we are able to and stay alive we will always come back.
Trench At least we can always stay in touch somehow.
Harry Exactly, John. Let's do so. At least I will never let go of you.
Willoughby Reciprocated thankfully.
Trench Precisely.
Jack Come on, boys, let's go. Harry must manage by himself for a while.
(leaves with the boys) See you tomorrow, Harry.
Harry Yes, Jack. *(Jack leaves.)*

That this should happen now! The most inhuman thinkable stroke against all my expectations! A summons to a certain death! And they have no idea that I am just engaged. No one is guilty. But I can't accept it. *(throws the telegram into the fire.)*

Scene 2. Ireland, Donegal.

Ethne I am so happy that you came, Harry, especially concerning the circumstances.
Harry What circumstances?
Ethne Everything that has occurred, your regimental transfer to India, your resignation, our engagement, and I feel so guilty, so it's fortunate that we get the opportunity to thoroughly discuss it together.
Harry Why do you feel guilty?
Ethne Your resignation. Wasn't it for the sake of me and my father that you gave up your career?

Harry Yes.

Ethne But you didn't have to. I would have loved you just as much anyway and remained faithful to you even if you had fallen in the war against the fanatics.

Harry Do you mean to say that you would have preferred that I remained in the regiment?

Ethne Not directly, but when I have decided to love someone I will keep him in my heart forever whatever he does and even if he dies. If we had been married, Harry, and you followed your regiment to Egypt and died, I would never have remarried.

Harry Now that danger is eliminated.

Ethne You sacrificed your career for love. Do you think there is a risk that you might regret it?

Harry If there was I would never have done it.

Ethne So why did you do it really? Didn't you feel like betraying your regiment?

Harry Only my comrades. I have three friends in particular in the regiment, and we always stuck together in permanent inseparability. The last time I saw them was at a farewell dinner I offered them to break the news of my engagement. You know one of them, Jack Durrance, my best friend.

Ethne It was he that brought us together.

Harry Exactly. If you hadn't chosen me, he would have chosen you, but he felt no bitterness. His only reaction to the news was some worry about my possible resignation.

Ethne He knows you.

Harry Yes.

Ethne But you haven't answered my question. What was the real reason?

Harry We are engaged, Ethne. Would it have been right of me against you to go to a meaningless war just to perish and not give you anything besides a mourning life as a widow? Is any war worth dying for? Is life worth sacrificing just for nothing for the sake of some political quarrels?

Ethne So you question the reason for any war?

Harry And for any violence.

Ethne Then you are a pacifist.

Harry I am afraid so.

Ethne So it was more for the principle than for my sake that you left your regiment.

Harry It was for the principle of life. No life is worth throwing away and least of all on detestable wars and violence.

Ethne So you abandoned your comrades to die out there in the desert.

Harry They chose it themselves. They chose to obey orders. I chose not to accept any authority resorting to violence.

Ethne Thank you, Harry. That proves that I made no mistake about you.

(enter a messenger)

Messenger A message for Harry Feversham.

Ethne What is it?

Harry A small item sent from London.

Ethne (*probing it*) It feels rather empty. Is it some kind of a joke?

Harry I don't know.

Ethne Open it.

(Harry opens the small package, and three small white feathers fall out.)

 What's the meaning of this, Harry? It must be a joke of some kind.

Harry (*struck to the core*) I am afraid not. It's dead serious.

Ethne A secret message? A challenge? A duel? Is there nothing more in the package?

Harry Only three cards. Lieutenant Willoughby, Captain Trench and Mr Castleton.

Ethne What does it mean, Harry?

Harry In brief, the worst thing possible: I am dishonoured.

Ethne Explain to me.

Harry In the army you deliver a white feather to a proven coward.

Ethne Are you guilty of cowardice?

Harry Yes, Ethne, I am.

Ethne Your pacifism is the contrary to cowardice.

Harry If it only were that simple. It was the way in which I filed my resignation that wasn't honourable.

Ethne You must explain.

Harry During the party I gave my three friends, there was a telegram. It was from my fellow officer Castleton, one of the three gentlemen here. He informed me that my regiment was to be transferred from India to Egypt. He had information about this before it was official. That settled my decision. I didn't want to die in Egypt so newly engaged. Castleton told me to inform Captain Trench about it. I didn't. I thought it would look better if I resigned before anyone knew about the transfer to Egypt. Of course it was discovered. Trench must have met Castleton and been informed about the telegram. I have disgraced myself. You don't deceive your friends like that. This, Ethne, (*shows the feathers,*) is worse than a brand for life.

Ethne (*benumbed*) What will you do about it?

Harry What can I do?

Ethne The worst thing you can do is nothing. You have betrayed your friends and kept them ignorant about their commitment to death in Egypt while you kept that knowledge to yourself and absconded the danger. I can't marry such a man, Harry.

Harry (*stammering*) Are you breaking it up?

Ethne Totally and definitely. (*picking a white feather from her hat and giving it to Harry*) I have no choice, Harry.

Harry (*shattered*) Spare me, Ethne. I have no one else than you. What will my father say, an old honourable war veteran like all his forefathers? He will denounce me. This is the end for me.

Ethne You should have thought of that before. If it only had been pacifism, Harry, I would have adored you for it, but now you turned it into a disgraceful betrayal.

Harry (benumbed) So it's the end forever?

Ethne Harry, you have one chance left. One name is missing in the package. Jack Durrance. Only he is not accusing you of cowardice, although he must know what the others know.

Harry He is also going to Egypt. No one going there in these times knows if he will ever get back alive.

Ethne And if I know him he still believes in you. Perhaps he can show you some way for your exoneration. Until then, Harry, (*removes her engagement ring and gives it to Harry,*) I am sorry. (*leaves*)

Harry One mistake, and a number of lives are lost and ruined. Must I then die in Sudan after all? Suddenly it seems far more attractive to die there than to live here. (*leaves like escaping*)

Scene 3.

Sutch He is lost, but I must listen to him and take care of him in the best way possible. (*a knock on the door*) Come in, Harry Feversham. (*He enters.*) You are not even a common soldier any more. Thanks for your letter. The situation is clear enough. Your case is hopeless. Why did you want to see me?

Harry A long time ago, Sir, while I was still a child, you once told me, that if I ever needed someone to talk with, I should turn to you. My case isn't hopeless, Sir.

Sutch What hope do you still imagine to be seen?

Harry The fourth feather, Sir.

Sutch From your fiancée?

Harry It was from her, not from Jack Durrance.

Sutch You were very close friends, were you not? You both loved her?

Harry We were like twins and foster brothers, Sir. When Ethne chose me he stepped aside without a word and left the entire field to me.

Sutch I think he left England without knowledge of your cowardice.

Harry That is true, Sir. My case was a fact later. But he is also in Egypt. They are all four in Egypt. And I know, Sir, that he will never send me a feather.

Sutch So what will you do?

Harry That's the challenge. That was the question Ethne posed to me. You can always do something about it. I will make them all three one by one retract their feathers. I intend to follow them to Egypt, keep them under close observation and follow them at a distance, and when the right moment comes interfere and snatch them from the certain death that the campaign in Sudan must mean perhaps to most of them. If I succeed in making them all three retract their feathers, I believe that I will even be able to return the fourth one.

Sutch You are a romantic, my boy. There is nothing of your father in you, but there is plenty of your sensitive, beautiful and subtle mother, who married the

wrong kind of stonecold professional military and died too early. Do you have any contact with your father?

Harry I personally looked him up to confess the whole situation.

Sutch That could not have been very pleasant. Did he say anything?

Harry He continues to support me but forbids me to ever show myself to him again.

Sutch Did you expect anything else?

Harry No.

Sutch (moved) My son, something tells me that you can make it. If you once love a woman, you can do anything for her sake and succeed with anything. The risk is, which you should be aware of, that she will marry someone else.

Harry That's part of the challenge, Sir. She returned all my gifts and burned all my letters. She has definitely cut all ties with me and will probably try to forget me and suppress my memory. That will only provoke me to deeper faith.

Sutch You did the right thing in turning to me. What do you want me to do?

Harry Nothing, Sir. Keep quiet. I will manage this on my own. Let no one know that I have gone to Egypt. I will try to keep in touch with you alone. No one else wants any contact with me. Only if I get stuck there and definitely never will be able to return, you have all liberty to do whatever you wish, that is by the notice of my death. Until then I beseech you of absolute silence. I will need a thoroughly watertight incognito.

Sutch I understand. You can fully rely on me.

Harry That is all, Sir. Please excuse me for disturbing you.

Sutch (taking his hand) Good luck, my friend. Your outset couldn't be better, and at length I sincerely believe that you have all possibilities to succeed. But you will have to face and go through as number of hells. It's not a nice spot down there in the burning desert sun among scourging sand storms and war-crazy hysterical fanatics. Another risk, my friend, is that someone of your three friends, or maybe all, will fall and die before you have time to save them.

Harry That's the very risk I have to eliminate.

Sutch (pressing his hand once more) Good luck! (*Harry leaves.*)

The supreme shamelessness of his cowardice actually has a chance in this case to be turned to the contrary. I wonder what Jack Durrance thinks, if he knows anything at all.

Act II scene 1. Three years later.

The club.

Durrance But damn it, boys, you all knew him. He can't just disappear without a trace.

Soldier 1 I am afraid, Jack, that that's just what he did. No one knows anything about him. He resigned to get married – and was gone.

Jack But something must have happened!

Soldier 2 There was no wedding, Jack. They broke off quite suddenly after a ball. He disappeared. But I heard that the estate burned down shortly afterwards. The father appears to have been somewhat dyspeptic, and they say that Ethne now lives isolated and alone with him somewhere beyond all honour and glory.

Jack Was it an accident? Was it arson?

Soldier 2 No, it was sheer accident. The father and his fellow drank too deep and did not notice when a cooking device fell down to the floor. Half of the estate burned down, and the other half is in ruins and damaged by water. The father almost knocked it off in pneumonia and never fully recovered. The family is practically ruined. That's what I heard. I was also concerned about Harry's disappearance, but there was no trace of him anywhere. He can't be in England.

Jack Great heavens! There is a mystery here.

Soldier 2 You said it. (*Sutch happens to pass, notices Jack and tries to avoid him.*)

Jack (seeing him at once) Lieutenant Sutch! I have been looking for you!

Sutch (can't get away) Welcome back, Jack Durrance. Congratulations to your promotion and decoration. I understand you did well in Sudan.

Jack It was hot indeed, but we made it all right. Lieutenant, I must have a word with you.

Sutch I can guess your issue. Between four eyes, in that case.

Jack Excuse me, boys. (*retires with Sutch*) Lieutenant, I must know what happened to Harry Feversham. He was my best friend. We courted the same girl. I came home expecting them to be happily married, but instead I am informed that their engagement was abruptly ended and that Harry disappeared without a trace. What does it all mean?

Sutch So you know nothing?

Jack Absolutely nothing. We have had no communication.

Sutch No one else has either.

Jack Not even you?

Sutch No one knows the whole truth except Harry himself. He must face it himself on the day of his return if he ever comes back. That's all I can tell you.

Jack Then you must know some more.

Sutch Have you talked with his father?

Jack Yes. It was just casual talk about warfare. He doesn't want to talk about his son. The curtain falls directly if you try.

Sutch Unfortunately it must be the same with me.

Jack Obligation of silence?

Sutch More than that. Gentlemen's agreement.

Jack I understand. Tomb silence in other words.

Sutch Until further.

Jack And his sweetheart – didn't she find someone else?

Sutch No. She lives alone with her fading father.

Jack Then I have only one important question to you, Sir, which you must answer. Would a close friend of his prove the least disloyal to him if he courted his fiancée?

Sutch The engagement was broken. Anyone may court.

Jack That's no answer. Would it be wrong against him?

Sutch My friend, you have a splendid career ahead. You excelled in every way. I don't think she would even try to resist you.

Jack Sir, that's still no answer to my question.

Sutch Honestly speaking, my friend, I don't think he would be able to answer that question himself. But if you called on her I would be positively sure that it would make her happy.

Jack The mystery thickens.

Sutch Let it remain thick until it will disperse by itself. That's the best advice I can give you. Is it satisfactory?

Jack I guess it will have to do, Sir.

Sutch Thank you. Good luck. (*hurries along*)

Soldier 2 Well, did you learn anything?

Jack Not more than that Ethne is expecting me.

Soldier 2 Perhaps you will learn something from her.

Jack I am afraid, that at best, I will not.

Scene 2. A beautiful terrace on Ireland.

Jack Ethne, you haven't said a word about our mutual friend.

Ethne Let's mind our own business, Jack. Tell me more about your war memories.

Jack Ethne, I love you and have always loved you. You haven't turned me down or asked me to stick only to our friendship. Am I not entitled to know anything about our friend's disappearance?

Ethne I know nothing about it myself.

Jack Was it you or he that broke your engagement?

Ethne Don't pester me about it, Jack. You have been away for three years, and that's how long ago I was separated from Harry. I see no way back, not even by you.

Jack I have known you for five years, and I was the one who brought you together. Shouldn't you tell me then what separated you? Shouldn't I know if I will ever get a chance with you or not?

Ethne Jack, you are going back to Egypt for at least a year, maybe two, maybe more. You will never feel at home here. You will always long back to that weird land of deadly threats and strenuous hardship just made for the cultivation of manliness. There is no place for me there. I belong here as far away as possible from the madding crowd with its war and vanity in quiet harmonious agreement with the freedom of Dame Nature. You could never limit yourself to the restrictions of a quiet home.

Jack But I always come back. I could never let go of my lifeline with you. Nothing is impossible, Ethne, not even our marriage.

Ethne Harry resigned from his military career for his engagement with me and disappeared. Will you do the same?

Jack I was never informed about what happened to Harry. Not even you want to tell me anything.

Ethne It's a secret between Harry and me which I have no right to share with anyone else until he chooses to do so himself.

Jack So you are still stuck with him?

Ethne No, Jack, I am completely free, and so are you. So is Harry. Don't let go of me. We friends need each other, especially when we have lost a friend like Harry. Come back to me after Egypt. Can I expect you after a year?

Jack Yes, you can, but I will write to you in the meantime.

Ethne Even better. I think you had better leave now.

Dermod Eustace (entering with difficulty) May I join you for a part of the way, Jack Durrance? I would like a word with you.

Ethne Then I leave you two together. Farewell, Jack. Take no risks. *(They kiss on the cheek.)*

Dermod Well, Jack, I really only wanted to know if you by any chance knew anything about Harry.

Jack What could I possibly know about Harry? No one wants to tell me anything.

Dermod No news?

Jack None since I left.

Dermod That gives me pain, although I really shouldn't grieve about it. He gave us the cruellest imaginable blow below the belt, and I constantly both curse him and miss him at intervals. So you know nothing about the damned knave, liar and poltroon?

Jack No, Sir. I am sorry.

Dermod Maybe it's better that way, that no one ever will hear anything more about him. Thanks, Jack, for coming and for coming back. Ethne needs it. Although you know nothing about him, you are her only remaining contact with him. *(leaves him.)*

Jack The mystery keeps constantly increasing. What the hell did you do to upset so many lives including your own, Harry?

Scene 3. Suakin.

Willoughby What are you saying?

Aide He asks to speak with you personally, Sir.

Willoughby But who is he?

Aide He says you will know him when you see him.

Willoughby And he has news – about general Gordon?

Aide That's what he says.

Willoughby A madman blown in and burnt out by the desert. Show him in.

(The aid opens the door to Harry, unidentifiable as a disguised Arab)

My friend, I give you five minutes to explain your business.

Harry Don't you recognize me, George?

Willoughby Holy smoke! Harry! *(can't help himself, gets up to touch him and almost embrace him)* How did you get here? What are you doing here?

Harry Trying to make you retract your feather.

Willoughby By bringing news from a dead general?

Harry It's perhaps his last words, his answer to the Mahdi as he demanded Gordon to convert to Islam if he wanted to stay alive. The Mahdi's ultimatum is there as well. Gordon's servant concealed the documents in a wall at Berber as he thought he would never get past the Mahdi's lines alive. I met him. He told me where the documents were hidden. I went there as an Arab, but the town was burnt down. I found the ruin and General Gordon's last letter. *(produces the documents)*

Willoughby Great heavens! And you risked your life for this?

Harry You challenged me. I had to do something. Don't tell me it wasn't worth it.

Willoughby Daredevil-like but damned courageous. If you had been identified as not an Arab you would have been slaughtered or at least mutilated.

Harry I know.

Willoughby You mentioned something about a feather. Do you have it?

Harry Yes. *(brings out a tiny torn white feather)*

Willoughby Thanks, Harry, for returning it. Now we can forget it.

Harry Yours was only the first one. I have three left.

Willoughby Three? Whose was the fourth? Surely not Jack Durrance?

Harry No, George, Ethne. Jack was the only one who spared me. I think he never learned what I had done.

Willoughby That fits. He is here in Egypt now.

Harry Where?

Willoughby You will be sure to find him if you look for him. Sudan is a vast country, but people like us are very rare around here. Good luck, Harry, on your quest. I am afraid we gave you a hell of a bloody work.

Harry Thanks, George. It took me three years to get a third on the way. I hope the rest will be easier. So Jack knows nothing?

Willoughby I would think so. None of us have seen him, and we kept your case to ourselves.

Harry Thanks. Forget that you ever saw me.

Willoughby Good to see you, Harry. *(Harry leaves.)*

Some surprise. This is news indeed for the papers but hardly more than a slight notice, that can't even mention who brought it.

Scene 4. A tent in the desert. Three officers.

Colonel Dawson He has been away too long.

Calder Three weeks in the desert is not long, Colonel.

Walters Durrance is usually quick and prone to arrive too early. It's not like him to be three weeks late.

Calder He is at home here. He knows his deserts. He might have met with some challenge which has delayed him but hardly anything worse.

Dawson I feel none the less that we should send some patrol to look for him.

Walters If he is dead we will never find him. If he isn't dead he will be back.

Calder I agree excerpt with the first part, for he is not easy to kill.

Dawson You saw him last, Calder. What happened really?

Calder It was the evening before his departure. He was to go at four o'clock in the morning, but at ten he went off to Tewfikieh. At eleven he had not come back, so I waited until he came. It was shortly before midnight. He was nervous and upset and asked me to be brief since he expected a guest.

Dawson A guest at midnight?

Calder Yes.

Dawson Do you know who?

Calder No, I don't, for he never came. Durrance waited for him all night and then left at four without having slept a wink.

Walters A bad start for a dangerous mission.

Calder Still I don't think anything has happened to him.

Walters Neither do I.

Dawson Tomorrow morning I will still send a patrol to look for him.

Walters Did you learn what Durrance did at Tewfikieh that night?

Calder He rode out there just to meet one single person who appeared to have been some kind of a Greek, probably one of his spies and aids. I don't think that was the person he was waiting for. (*enter Durrance noiselessly behind Walters but stopping without moving behind his back. The colonel also does not notice him. Calder observes him, is astonished, doesn't understand his silence and immovability and goes on.*) He might even have gone riding to Tewfikieh just for a walk in the village. He was always a loner who went his own ways riding by himself.

Walters Where do you think he is now?

Calder He is standing right behind you. (*Walters and the colonel turn around astonished.*)

Calder Durrance! Where the devil have you been? We expected you for tiffin!

Walters When did you come back?

Dawson You are exactly three weeks late! (*pulls out a chair for him*)

Durrance I am afraid it was inevitable. (*reaches the chair and sits down*)

Walters You walk like a somnambulist. What happened?

Durrance All kinds of things.

Calder You heard my story. Did that affect your delay?

Durrance Not in the least. The Greek was no spy, and it was actually him I was waiting for that night. He knew a group of fools and musicians, who were begging to keep alive. I had very little talk with him. I asked him to visit me to learn how he happened to be out here, what he was doing here and what had reduced him to a musician and beggar. There was no more to it than that. (*considering his words*) Yes, there was nothing more to it.

Dawson And while we chat away we forget the most important. You must get something to it! You must have been starving for eight weeks! (*gives his servant a sign*) What have you been living on? Grasshoppers and lizards?

Durrance Just about. A drink would suit me fine.

Dawson Of course! Your standard grog is already ordered. (*The servant brings a steady grog and tea with crumpets.*) You could also have coffee and chocolate. Tea is always at hand.

Durrance Thanks, it's all right.

Dawson Well, what is the result of your eight weeks' holiday?

Durrance The Ababdeha Arabs stay calm. They pay no taxes to Egypt nor to Muhammed Ahmed. The weather was splendid, so I went further off than I should. Antelopes and gazelles everywhere.

Dawson That's good news.

Calder You have mail waiting for you since eight weeks.

Durrance Anything from Ireland?

Calder At least two letters.

Walters Love letters, no doubt.

Durrance Do you have them here?

Calder I have all your posts in my portfolio. (*opens it*)

Walters I think, Colonel, that we could leave our lieutenants alone with their affairs, especially Durrance with his.

Dawson Right'o, Major. (*rising*) Good to have you back, Durrance. (*leaves with Walters.*)

Calder (taking out the letters) Here is everything completely intact. I expect you wish to be alone with it. (*wants to leave*)

Durrance (lays his arm on him) Stay, Calder.

Calder What is it?

Durrance Read her letters to me.

Calder Good God, Durrance, what has happened?

Durrance I am blind.

Calder (softened but more at ease) I suspected something like it when you didn't move a limb although you saw right through me. But you concealed it admirably. You must already have learned something about your sixth sense. How did it happen?

Durrance I went off too hard. I was too bold. I thought I knew my desert and had learned to control it. Those damned sand storms. They keep on blowing sand into your eyes, which get swollen with pain, and with time you learn not to rub them not to make matters worse. But it gets worse all the time anyway. The sand

gets deeper in and settles there. One day when it was blasting as usual my helmet blew off my head. I went off to catch it, but the wind was too strong, and the sand kept whirling into my eyes. But I always commit the mistake of never giving up. My stubbornness brought me down to perdition. I chased my helmet, but every time I almost reached it, the wind blew it farther off. The sand kept torturing me, my sight grew constantly worse in the sand clouds, but I refused to give up. So I went on for at least half a mile. Finally I couldn't see the helmet any more. I couldn't see anything any more. The desert sun disappeared, the sun disappeared and was replaced by an eternally merciful night. My eyes didn't hurt any more. I was cured of my constantly blinding sight.

Calder Have you talked with some specialist?

Durrance Many.

Calder What do they say?

Durrance They all say the same thing, that there is hope. But not in the desert, not in Egypt, not in Africa, – anywhere, but not here.

Calder So you must get out. I will follow you. I will be your eyes.

Durrance Thanks, Calder. Be my eyes at once. What does she write?

Calder (opens one letter respectfully and carefully) "Dear Jack! You must now be sitting under the palms of some oasis under the burning desert sun, enjoying your wild freedom in the land of nowhere, while I as usual keep hanging around at home minding my duties under the daily rains but with emerald greenness around me everywhere. Unfortunately I have some bad news. My father passed away. He grew better towards the end and almost completely recovered his old quarrelsome bullishness but only spoke about Harry Feversham, never about you. He loved Harry as I loved him and couldn't forget him no matter how beastly he acted and how shamefully and irreparably he damaged everything for us. But I have constantly been thinking about you since father died. I know, Jack, that I might have hurt you and disappointed you by twice turning you down, but I believe myself to be more mature now, and most of all I write to you to tell you I will not do it a third time. Take care, and come home soon. Yours, Ethne." *(turns his eyes on Jack questioningly)*

Jack (after some while) What an irony! What a bloody atrocious irony! And I rejoiced that she twice had turned me down now when I was blind! *(laughs dryly with heart-rending hardness)* If she had known that I now was blind, she would never have turned me down! *(laughs hard again)* And then she practically proposes to me! It's too much, Calder, too much! *(breaks suddenly out into desperate heart-rending crying)*

Calder (rising) Don't cry, brave soldier. The worst is over now. You can go home, and there are specialists – *(after a short pause)* and a wife.

Jack (staggering to get up and upright) Help me to my room, Calder. *(leaning on Calder, who helps him out.)*

Act III scene 1. London.

Ethne (reading a letter) "My dearest, Your letter reached me in the same moment as I reached back to the reality more or less bereft of my senses, but only the most important one, my sight, taken away from me by the desert and its harrowing sands, for good, I am afraid. My beloved, I don't love you any less for that, but since this is a disaster that you were not aware of in your last letter, you are hereby released from your promise – I will not propose to you a third time."

Oh my dear beloved friend, how could you think that I could love you less for your handicap or that it could possibly mean an obstruction? Only the more I love you for your nobility and self-sacrifice, and your impediment, I am sure, will only bring us closer to each other, while the only matter still standing between us is Harry. He lost his career for my sake, and I will never allow two lives to get lost for my sake. Allow me at least to save yours, since I couldn't save Harry. – Here he is. (*A slight knock, and Durrance enters with a stick. Ethne wants to help him.*)

Durrance Let me manage by myself, Ethne.

Ethne Not one piece of furniture has been moved for your sake.

Durrance Yes, I remember how it was. Thanks for your consideration, Ethne.

Ethne I am yours, Jack, entirely yours, and no one else's.

Durrance Do you mean to insist on marriage?

Ethne If you don't have anything against it.

Durrance I don't want to know of any self-sacrifice for my sake from your side.

Ethne Be sensible, Jack. What do you have to live for now? A life of freedom, adventure and danger was your entire life. You only lived for travelling and moving about and getting further on. You had nothing besides your free military life. All this has cruelly been taken away from you by the very desert that you loved, the cruellest possible rival for a woman. Now you only have me. Don't be so cruel and unfair to yourself so as to willingly do without me. I could never forgive you such a thing.

Jack Ethne, unfortunately you are right, but I must warn you against me. Since the disaster two months ago my last hope has gone to ever be able to recover my sight, and I have been forced into a very restricted life as an invalid. It's not funny. You are forced by your physical limitations into a straitjacket of a life which only turns yourself into your greatest enemy by broodings, frustrations and bitterness. My remaining life will be a worse and more outrageous war than any war of violence, since it will be an interminable battle with myself to overcome my own melancholy and this new egoism that was forced on me. The egoism brought on by an invalid's handicap is worse than the invalidity itself. So if you insist on a life with me, you must be quite clear and aware of what kind of a life you are sharing.

Ethne The more you open it, the more I welcome it. You are still young and beautiful, Jack, and your handsomeness you will probably never again be able to meet in your mirror. You are rid of that egoism and vanity. But you mustn't give up,

Jack, not until you have wasted and consumed all possibilities and specialists in the ophthalmic science.

Jack Ethne, let's still remain free without bonds and obligations for security's sake. I don't want to have sex with anyone whom I cannot look into the eyes. Let's be united as souls but free from each other as bodies.

Ethne Why?

Jack Something tells me that it's necessary for both our sakes, that it's the only way for us not to risk our happiness.

Ethne Jack, are you aware that you see much better now without your sight?

Jack I am afraid so, yes.

Ethne I accept your offer, Jack, as more generous, wise and honourable than any marriage.

Jack Thanks, Ethne. Then you understand me.

Ethne I would like to try.

Jack Give me then leave to embrace you at last.

Ethne (embracing him) Welcome home, Jack. *(They embrace.)*

Scene 2. Sudan.

Castleton (dying) I am dying, Trench.

Trench Yes, I can see that. Unfortunately there is nothing I can do about it.

Castleton It was all my fault.

Trench Stop saying that.

Castleton If I only could have imagined the consequences...

Trench No one could foresee anything. The whole procedure was absolutely natural. We did everything correct. We have nothing to regret.

Castleton Why then is the memory of what we did so outrageously painful?

Trench Because you keep thinking about it.

Castleton But it feels so desperately wrong now afterwards, what we did.

Trench You worry too much about something very simple. Any officers and gentlemen would have done the same thing.

Castleton But we did it.

Trench Yes, we did.

Castleton Feversham is here in Sudan, John. I know it.

Trench (astonished) What are you saying?

Castleton I learned it from Willoughby. He sent a message from Suakin to inform us. He made Willoughby retract his feather.

Trench You are not suggesting that... he came here on his own just to make us retract our feathers?

Castleton To prove that he was no coward – for his sweetheart's sake.

Trench She must be married by now long since. You won't have to retract your feather, Peter. How did he manage to prove himself not a coward?

Castleton By action. Willoughby wanted to tell us the whole story when we would meet again.

Trench Too late now. You are dead, Peter.

Castleton I know, but you are not. He will track you down, John.

Trench That will be difficult for him, judging from the hopelessly dark aspect of our future. We are lost, John. We have lost the war, you are dying, and I will be buried alive by the mahdists here in the black prison hole of Omdurman.

Castleton He was only a pacifist, John. He only followed his conscience. And we ruined his happiness and marriage.

Trench We were soldiers and acted according to our ethics as such. And we couldn't know that his girl would scrap him just for that.

Castleton If you ever meet him, John...

Trench Yes, Peter?

Castleton Then ask him to give you my feather. (*dies*)

Trench Peter, if I ever meet him I sincerely hope that I also will have reason to retrieve my own. (*kisses him and lets go of his body*)

Idris Your friend is dead.

Trench I know.

Idris He got away. You won't. You'll be buried here alive.

Trench I know.

Idris Come on. (*making him stand up. He is shown to wear shackles.*)

Trench I will live on, Castleton, just to meet Harry and tell him about you and your regrets. Something tells me that he still was happy and right, while we did wrong and became the unhappy ones. (*is brutally taken away.*)

Intermission.

Scene 3.

Ethne I don't quite understand the meaning of your visit, colonel Willoughby. I have forgotten all about Harry Feversham long ago.

Willoughby You can't have done with him. He loved you very much and gave up his career only for your sake.

Ethne Did you come all the way from Sudan to chase me all over Ireland and track me down here just to remind me of a pain that I struggled with for five years just to survive it and get rid of it?

Willoughby I really am sorry, miss Eustace, but I have something with me from him.

Ethne Do you mean to say that you met him?

Willoughby Yes.

Ethne Alive?

Willoughby Yes.

Ethne Where?

Willoughby In Sudan, when I was commanding officer in Suakin. He wanted me to give you this. (*brings out of his wallet a slightly torn but well preserved white feather, turned yellowish.*)

Ethne (*backing in shock*) What's the meaning?

Willoughby When he left the army for being sent to Sudan, I and two others of his friends accused him of cowardice by sending him one white feather each. By his actions he made me retract my feather. He asked me to forward it to you.

Ethne How did he cure his cowardice?

Willoughby He risked his life to retrieve the last letters of General Gordon, in fact, his testament, for which he hid for two weeks in Berber at the constant risk of his life. Then he risked his life even more by smuggling the documents through the Mahdi lines across the desert to me.

Ethne General Gordon's will. I read something about it in the papers.

Willoughby The documents are worthless and mean nothing any more, but his action to save them was admirable. They shed some light on the last days of the remarkable general. Only a man who sincerely feels his faith and duty to the army and his country could do something so exceptionally outstanding.

Ethne I am very happy about this, colonel Willoughby. I can't tell you how happy I am.

Willoughby I almost thought he would have reached home before me. But I imagine he would first like to get rid of another feather.

Ethne Only one?

Willoughby Yes. Colonel Castleton fell in the defence of Tamai.

Ethne And the third? John Trench?

Willoughby I am afraid he is languishing in the prison hole of Omdurman, where the surviving prisoners were taken just to be buried alive.

Ethne So it will be difficult for Harry to get rid of the third feather.

Willoughby Very. He could hardly reach there alive without being brought out as dead.

Ethne I must make a confession.

Willoughby Well?

Ethne He has a fourth feather.

Willoughby From whom? Hardly from Jack Durrance? He went off to Egypt before it happened and has never as far as I know got wind of anything about it. I heard he had come back a blind man.

Ethne The fourth feather was from me when I broke our engagement. Your three feathers arrived just in time for the announcement of our engagement. I was never able to forgive that.

Willoughby Then I must tell you one more thing, Miss.

Ethne Well?

Willoughby I got the impression from Harry, that you picked up the three feathers for him and asked him to conserve them just to be able to return them and prove

that we were wrong., in brief, that you stalked out the course for his heroic quest. Am I wrong?

Ethne It was unconsciously in that case. At that time I could only arrive at the conclusion that you had done the right thing and that he really was a poltroon. You mustn't be. That's why I gave him the fourth feather.

Willoughby It might please you that he will never give up.

Ethne Have you seen Jack Durrance?

Willoughby No, but I would like to.

Ethne If you do, tell him nothing about all this.

Willoughby Why?

Ethne Because we are engaged, and if he learned anything about this, he would immediately let me go, and I am the only one he still has something live for.

Willoughby I understand. And if I meet him I know nothing about Feversham.

Ethne As little as he does himself. Can I trust you?

Willoughby A soldier must never go back on his word. A lady's boon is a man's duty. You can trust me.

Ethne Thank you. And thanks for your visit, Colonel Willoughby.

Willoughby (rising) Do you know if there is any hope for Jack Durrance to retrieve his sight?

Ethne It looks dark.

Willoughby I am sorry. (*bows and leaves*)

Ethne (alone) Harry, you are alive, I knew it! And what's even better, you still love me and want to heal our breach by any means and no matter how long time it will take, even if it would cost your life. This is almost too wonderful to be true. Suddenly you are resurrected, exonerated and restored! (*finds her violin and starts to tune it, taking up the bow and tries a few exercises.*)

Durrance (has entered unnoticeably) Play the Melusina waltz, Ethne.

Ethne (interrupting) Why that one?

Durrance Because I haven't heard you play it for five years.

Ethne I haven't played it for five years.

Durrance Since Feversham disappeared.

Ethne Yes.

Durrance I heard him play it in Tewfikieh.

Ethne (can't believe her ears) What are you saying?

Durrance I heard him play it in Tewfikieh.

Ethne In Tewfikieh? Whatever was he doing there?

Durrance I wondered the same thing. I also asked him. He gave no answer.

Ethne You never told me.

Durrance No. I am sorry. But you haven't taken out your violin once since I came back until now. Your violin speaks for you. Some happy news made you happy again.

Ethne Yes, Jack. Colonel Willoughby was here today and told me that he had met Harry in Suakin. Tell me about how you met him and what happened.

Durrance It was the night before I was to set out on my last mission. I was to stay away for five weeks and therefore took a turn around the city. Some miserable Greek musicians caught my attention, a violin, a cither and a dancing couple. The audience laughed and made fun of them. It was rather painful. 'Poor musicians', I thought, 'what a thankless spiritual prostitution and pearls thrown to swine who only answer with cruelty and brutality.' But then the cither played alone, and it was the Melusina overture. I couldn't believe my ears. (*You are shown the scene.*) The musician sat turned away and had a beard, was dressed like a beggar and made a very sorry appearance. I couldn't help it but went up to him and asked:

(*going up to the beggar musician*) Where did you learn the Melusina overture?

Harry (turns his face to him and is appalled) Jack!

Jack (equally surprised) Harry Feversham!

Harry No, Jack, you have never seen me here.

Jack But I am seeing you here.

Harry (tries to get away) Forget me!

Jack Never in my life! (*holds him back*) You owe me an explanation. You were always my best friend.

Harry That's why I can't and won't explain anything.

Jack Just look at you! You are completely run down! Why did you and Ethne break your engagement? What are you doing here? Have you been disinherited? Have you been exiled, voluntarily or how?

Harry I can answer you nothing, Jack, not now. If you are my friend, you will forget that you ever saw me here.

Jack How could I forget it? You are Harry, and I am Jack, and we are here, together for the first time in five years!

Harry I am sorry, Jack.

Jack Let me at least offer you some decent clothes! You have the aspect of a leper. Come to my tent at Wadi Halfa. I will wait for you there until you come. But at four o'clock I must ride away on a month's mission. The only chance is now, Harry. Take it! We have five years to catch up with!

Harry Wait for me, then. I will come if I can. (*He slips away, and the scene with him.*)

Jack (returning as blind again) I waited all night, but he never came.

Ethne So that was in February almost a year ago.

Jack Yes. Before I left Egypt I asked my friend Calder to search for him, and only today I had some worrisome news. Harry had been to Suakin and met with colonel Willoughby, another of our mutual friends, and was then seen heading for the desert towards the southwest, that is in the direction of Omdurman and Khartoum, directly into the territory of the mahdis. If he is taken prisoner by them, he can expect no mercy.

Ethne Captain Trench is prisoner in Omdurman.

Jack So he might find some company there. But why would he go there?

Ethne To save captain Trench.

Jack Do you think so?

Ethne I know it.

Jack Good, Ethne. Now I understand you. You have all the time known more about Harry than you have divulged, and when I give you news about him you know even more. I see everything clear, Ethne. You can't hide anything from me. You still only love Harry, while I am only your friend.

Ethne (covers her ears with her hands and can't bear to hear anything more, steals away.)

Jack Am I wrong? I don't know how much Harry loves you, but I know I always did and even more so when I was turned into a cripple. If Harry now comes back I will step down, for a cripple has no right to ask for any love by a woman who is in her finest bloom and fulfilment. I love you, Ethne, unto desperation and can't help it and can't stop it, since my love constantly threatens to overgrow my head. But I must control myself for your sake. Ironically enough, that's actually the only way in which I can prove to you my love – by consistent restraint, respect and prudence. Ethne? Have you nothing to say to me? (*tries to find her*) Where are you? I can't hear you. (*grotes, fumbles, finds the violin, takes it up*) She is gone. But the violin is here. (*examines it*) It's the Guarneri I gave her five years ago. I never could play myself but enjoyed the strings of her soul's music more than her beauty. Has she then escaped and left me with her soul? Isn't it pathetic. Here a blind man is standing with a violin he cannot play. Perhaps that's the true mirror of our love – invalidity and soul without body, an infinite longing but no answer from the violin, a blind fool who talks to his beloved who escaped the painfulness quite deliberately without a sound not to be noticed. Ethne, this is the supreme cruelty against a blind man. But I am glad that she cannot hear me. I lay down my soul and vest it in silence. (*lays carefully down the violin and leaves, perfectly composed.*)

Act IV scene 1. A boat on the Nile.

Calder Do you happen to be a doctor?

The German No, only a medical student. I haven't practised yet.

Calder But you did study medicine?

German Yes, that's all I studied.

Calder They have carried a patient aboard who seems in a rather bad shape on a stretcher on deck. I have investigated his case. They say that he fell down from a palm tree and had his thigh all messed up, which was then infected. They couldn't deal with the gangrene themselves, so they are sending him down to Assuan certain of his death just to get him off their hands. Could you take a look at him?

German All experience can be useful.

Calder He is lying over there. Come with me, please. (*shows him to the foredeck, where a person lies unmoving completely covered in black*) I haven't even been informed if it's a man or a woman.

German It shouldn't be too difficult to determine.
(lifts the cover of the patient exposing a very weak and seriously ill Arab, The German uncovers the leg and backs off in disgust.)

Calder Is it that bad?

German Look for yourself.

Calder (takes a look and reacts even stronger with utter disgust) It's crawling!

German I am afraid there is nothing I can do. At best the patient's life can be saved by amputation. But one thing is certain.

Calder Well?

German He did not get this injury by a fall from a tree. He has been badly wounded probably by a spear.

Calder That immediately makes the case more interesting. *(to the Arab)* Where were you wounded?

German He is too weak to answer.

Calder In Korosko? Dongola? Metemneh? Omdurman? Oh.

German He nodded.

Calder In battle? No. In an escape? Yes!

German Don't push him.

Calder Did you help anyone escape? A Brit? Yes! Captain Trench? No? Effendi Feversham? *(The Arab doesn't answer, but Calder breathes out and understands.)* The case is clear. Don't tell me that you are Abou Fatma. *(gets an answer)* Yes, you are Abou Fatma.

German We can't strain the patient any more. You must leave him alone.

Calder Very well, I learned the most important. *(to the dying Arab)* Thank you, my friend. You did well. We are taking over now. *(goes back with the German)*

German Who is Abou Fatma?

Calder Abou Fatma is the best friend in Africa of the very person I am here in Sudan to try to find. I knew that Harry Feversham was a prisoner in Omdurman. Now I know that he escaped from there.

German That's hardly an answer to my question.

Calder Abou Fatma is the person who smuggled out General Gordon's last letters of Khartoum and hid them in a wall in Berber to save them from being confiscated. Later he met with both Jack Durrance and Harry Feversham and told them both about the secret. Harry risked his life to save them and succeeded in bringing them to Governor Willoughby of Suakin. That was the first news anyone heard of Harry Feversham for five years. We have been looking for him since then. Damn it that I couldn't question Abou Fatma any further!

German I am afraid that communication you did receive from him might have been his last.

Calder I am afraid so too.

Scene 2.

Sutch I really don't understand the purpose of your visit, colonel Willoughby.

Willoughby Pardon me, Sir, but I found it best to warn you.

Sutch Of what?

Willoughby Colonel Durrance, you know, the warrior that got blind, has met with him. He asked me some unpleasant questions about Harry Feversham.

Sutch I sincerely hope you didn't answer them?

Willoughby Not for anything in the world. I am not that stupid. But I am afraid he got more out of me than I wanted. It's difficult to hide anything from the attention of a blind man.

Sutch You don't mean to say that he is after me?

Willoughby He is after the whole story, and you were Harry Feversham's only confidant.

Sutch How much does he know?

Willoughby I don't know. But he knows a great deal, perhaps more than I.

Sutch That sounds interesting.

A boy A visitor, Sir. (*delivers a card on a tray*)

Sutch (picking it up) It's he himself!

Willoughby Don't let him see me here.

Sutch Are you afraid of him? (*to the boy*) Show him in. He is blind.

Jack Thank you, Sir, I can manage.

Sutch Our old common friend colonel Willoughby also happens to be here.

Jack How nice. I hope, George, that you didn't feel too embarrassed when I looked you up.

Willoughby Not at all. It was only pleasant to discuss old memories. After all, we hadn't seen each other for quite a while. Also you knew so much that I had no idea of.

Jack And now I know even more. I think I may please you, lieutenant Sutch, by appraising you that Harry has returned to the known world.

Sutch In what way?

Jack He has got rid of another white feather.

Willoughby (to Sutch) I assure you I didn't tell him.

Sutch (to Willoughby) Was it you who retracted a white feather?

Willoughby (almost ashamed) Yes. I could do no less. Harry proved capable of the opposite of the cowardice we accused him of.

Jack And Castleton is dead. That leaves only one more white feather. It came from John Trench, who now is sitting rotting in a prison hole in Omdurman. But Harry is there with him. And both I and his betrothed Ethne are convinced that he is there to get him out.

Sutch This is really great and pleasant news. But how did you learn all this? You were never part of the feather conspiracy.

Jack No, for I was Harry's best friend. Even if I had known about his deceit I would never have sent him a white feather. A deceit is always like its own punishment of a kind you can never escape, and Harry has indeed suffered enough from it during these five years.

Willoughby You mean to say that our feathers were invalid?

Jack Completely. They only resulted in breaking a good woman's heart completely for nothing, and she has perhaps paid for it with her life.

Sutch How do you mean?

Jack She blames herself for having caused Harry's downfall as she thinks he resigned for her sake. She saw his life ruined and wanted at any cost to avoid having another's life ruined as well. That's why she gave her heart to me although she only loved Harry. She thinks my life is lost if she lets go of me since I don't have anyone else. So she sacrifices herself for me although she only feels friendship. That's why I am now going to my ocular specialist in Wiesbaden to stay there until Harry comes home.

Sutch So you think he will come home?

Jack I have done all I can to make him return home. My best friend Calder is there in Sudan with unlimited resources to get him home.

Sutch And when he comes home?

Jack He will marry Ethne. He owes it to her.

Willoughby Jack, if there is anything I can do...

Jack Just keep in touch, please. That's all you can do.

Willoughby I must go. I am very glad that I met you once more, Jack. We'll keep in touch, for sure. (*presses his hand with affection, and leaves.*)

Jack Much would have been so much easier both for me, Ethne and Harry, lieutenant Sutch, if you had told me all from the beginning.

Sutch I realize it now when it is too late. I couldn't know it then, and I was bound by my promise to Harry, whom I loved like a son, which his father never did.

Jack I just had to put some more effort into it. That was the only damage.

Sutch So the next good news we are to expect in this remarkable story of cowardice turned to its contrary is Harry's liberation of Trench from an impossible death trap in Omdurman.

Jack Yes, lieutenant Sutch, that's the last thing he has yet to do to restore general order. (*rising*) Thanks for receiving me.

Sutch Welcome back any time. (*Jack leaves.*)

He knows nothing about the fourth feather.

Scene 3. Omdurman, Umm Hagar, the Stonehouse.

(A dark hell of crowded prisoners in chains thronged together, bleeding, sick and dying and more naked than not.)

Trench How long do you think we could survive, Ibrahim?

Ibrahim We can always survive another night, as we did the last more than thousand nights.

Trench After a thousand nights and one more the Queen Sheherazade was allowed to survive. But I can't see any possibility for us to regain our lives.

Ibrahim We lived on hope for a thousand nights. If Sheherazade hadn't been spared, she could have carried on for another thousand nights telling her stories just to stay alive, for she was motivated.

Trench Are we motivated??

Ibrahim Isn't life in itself motivation enough?

Trench Not if it is abused, like we are being abused to death in here.

Ibrahim According to the Arabs, we are blessed to be so well treated here.

Trench Sometimes I wonder who are the craziest, we or they.

Ibrahim Only he is mad who is not aware of being mad. All who are aware of being mad are more or less wise or at least wiser than all those who are not aware of how mad they are.

Trench And it's very few of us who are aware of how mad those are who voluntarily live in such a mad world.

Ibrahim Only the maddest survive while the meek, humble and wise are trampled down, perish and disappear. Being mad could be an honour and an even greater honour if you are aware of your madness.

Trench Don't talk about honour with me, Ibrahim. That's the lie that lead all soldiers to perdition and make them die for their madness to choose a profession which is only about killing others.

Ibrahim You were not made a colonel for nothing, effendi.

Trench Yes, for the empty honour of slaughtering other people to cure their aggression, which thereby naturally only grows the worse.

Idris (outside) Make way! Make way!"

Ibrahim Something is happening.

(The gate is opened, the guards throw burning torches of grass at the prisoners to make them move away, panic breaks out in a hell of rattling chains, heart-rending screams of pain, howls and plaints, and a new prisoner is thrown in. The gate is closed again and immediately locked.)

Trench It's a new prisoner. He will be trampled down if we don't do something.

Ibrahim He tries to stay by the gate to be able to breathe there, but they drag him down. *(A miserable prisoner is pushed down at their feet.)*

Trench Raise him up! He mustn't fall!

Ibrahim He's got fever. He is mortally ill.

Trench We must protect him!

Ibrahim He speaks our language.

Trench Precisely! That's why!

Harry (mumbling) Am I home at last? Green forests and trickling brooks of water... Dublin and Donegal, here we are again.

Trench He is Irish!

Harry No, I was an Englishman, but that was long ago. Since then I have been anything but that – market fool, cither player, beggar, beduin, madman and slave, Greek but never a spy, only hopelessly mad.

Ibrahim Do you understand what he is saying`

Trench Not much.

Harry I don't understand myself what I am saying, for I just keep drivelling on, since I may say anything except the truth so that I don't give myself away no matter how much the fever runs away with me... Who turned out the light? The party isn't over yet. The telegram hasn't arrived yet. I still intend to marry. I am still happy. I am still at home. I am still myself, or am I? No, that was a long time ago. I sneaked about in the slums of Suakin too long waiting for my chance, three years that drove me mad of frustration and longing, but that was long ago.

Trench I suspect some tragedy here.

Ibrahim Some unhappy love affair? Some gutter career? Mental disease or self-destruction?

Trench All that and some more to it.

Harry Willoughby, you retracted your feather, but I still have three feathers more! Ha-ha! (*laughs hysterically*)

Ibrahim He is out of his mind.

Trench No, Ibrahim, it's much worse than that. I know who he is.

Ibrahim Do you know him?

Trench I have known him and am partly to blame for his misery. It was I who initiated the idea of the four feathers.

Ibrahim Now I can't follow you.

Trench (to Harry) Harry! Harry Feversham!

Harry Huh? Don't know anyone of that name.

Trench But I do, and it's you!

Harry You are looking for the wrong person. I am not myself any more.

Trench What the devil are you doing here??

Harry Looking for Colonel John Trench.

Trench It's me, Harry!

Harry What are you saying`?

Trench It's me, John Trench, who is speaking to you!

Harry I can't believe it. It's a hallucination. I can't be that fortuitous.

Trench You are delirious, Harry! You are ill! You have a fever! But we'll make it! When we are let out of here for the day we may go down to the Nile and get some water. I have survived a thousand nights in this hell, Harry, and I know how to do it! I will teach you!

Harry John Trench, are you alive? Are you real? Have I really found you? Where am I?

Trench In the Stonehouse of Omdurman, a worse black hole than that of Calcutta!

Harry I believe you, for it really looks very dark from here. So I am not just delirious?

Trench What has happened, Harry? What are you doing here?

Harry I was caught. They took me on the way. They thought I was a Turkish spy, but I was only mad. They tried to torture away my madness, but I only got madder and laughed at them. Then I was sent here as a mad Greek. Or else I would have been hanged. For me it was the same.

Trench But what did you do in this godforsaken country`

Harry Waiting on three former friends, who called me a coward, to prove that I was not. Willoughby was convinced. Castleton is dead. My last hope for some kind of exoneration is John Trench.

Trench So you mean you took those three feathers so seriously that you made your way down here to Sudan to risk your life just to prove that we were wrong?

Harry Three feathers? There were four.

Trench Whose was the fourth? Jack Durrance?

Harry Oh no. He was innocent. He was always my friend. He didn't want to hurt my relationship with Ethne, although he loved her himself. No, the three feathers arrived when I was with Ethne, so that she witnessed them and made me explain them. Then she gave me the fourth feather and banished me out of her life, out of England, out of reality from all the fellowship of all decent people, and my only chance to get back was to retrieve the first three feathers to then make her retract hers.

Trench You have my feather back at once, Harry. It was never our meaning to harm your happiness or your engagement. It was only a gentlemanly demonstration, nothing else, but you obviously took it so bloody seriously that you gave up your life to take on all reality in a bloody duel just for the sake of four white feathers. Wasn't that something of an over-dramatized over-reaction?

Harry No, for there was a lady involved in it. If there had only been three feathers I would have ignored it and allowed myself to be dishonoured, but when my heart's beloved endorsed the accusation I had to deal with it.

Trench And for that you threw yourself into the same black hole as I for an encounter with death without any meaning at all or alternatively to rot away here for life. Couldn't you have made better use of your life? You were the only wise one among us, Harry, by turning into a pacifist. We all went to hell as soldiers all four of us, Castleton was killed, Durrance went blind, Willoughby turned an idiot, and I am stuck in the worst shithole of the earth. And then you just followed us down the drain.

Harry No, John. We are to escape, you and I. All is prepared. All we need is the right opportunity. Let me just get over my fever first, so that I then can sit on a

camel for a week. I planned it all into the minutest detail. Wait until you are safely brought back to England with taking back your feather.

Trench Great heavens, Harry, I think I am dreaming.

Harry I also thought as much when I discovered that I finally had found you.

Ibrahim You have to speak more quietly. Even if no one here understands what you are saying they can read your faces and understand the expression of your voices. The prison is swarming with spies and informers.

Trench Like all prisons. We have to wait until tomorrow, Harry. Down by the river we can talk more freely. Rest now. We have to somehow get fit, if we are to fly out with your feathers.

Harry Colonel Trench as miserable as myself, emaciated and stinking of sweat and wounds and humiliated to the lowest degree in chafing shackles, just imagine that we would meet again on the same level.

Trench Thanks for getting down to me, Harry. Now perhaps we could start getting up there again to where we once were.

Harry Or else I would never have come here.

Trench Take some rest now, Harry. We shall protect you and guard you.

(Harry relaxes and falls asleep.)

Ibrahim Is it a sign at last of our redemption, effendi?

Trench It's more than that, Ibrahim. It's a motive enough to survive against all odds.

Act V scene 1.

Durrance I must congratulate you, lieutenant.

Sutch We made it together.

Durrance But you were the one who went down there out in the inhuman deserts of Sudan to complete the mission. At your age it's a remarkable feat.

Sutch But you made me do it.

Durrance So Trench is back in London.

Sutch And he will go to Ireland on an errand.

Durrance Why did not Harry come with him?

Sutch He still had some unfinished business in Sudan. Above all he didn't want to break it up with his incredible helper Abou Fatma, without whom none of Feversham's operations would have been possible.

Durrance Did you meet Calder?

Sutch Many times. It was he who gave me the contact with Abou Fatma after he had saved his life. It was a narrow escape. He was a hair's breadth from losing his leg.

Durrance Which delayed the liberation another year. Six years lost, Sutch, for Harry and Ethne, three years lost for Trench in the prison grave of Omdurman, and colonel Castleton's life. That's the story of the three feathers so far.

Sutch But also a human story of how cowardice was overcome and transformed into superhuman courage. It's also a story of friendship and solidarity transcending all limits. When the three friends sent him the three feathers, Durrance, they swore to never let anyone else know anything about it, for the sake of the regiment. The secret has been kept watertight. The trial is over, and Harry can return a hero. Except for the senders of the feathers, it's only you and me and his father who ever knew anything about it. I and his father learned it from Harry himself, but you are the only one outside the plot who has known anything. After Harry's resignation his father has never wanted to see any of his old friends.

Durrance I know. I met him. I restituted Harry completely to his mind. He was grateful and has entered a new life.

Sutch Well done.

Durrance Then we only have the fourth feather left. Do you think she will retract it?

Sutch She must. She has no choice. It was only you standing between her and Harry.

Durrance And I make no claims.

Sutch So she is free. She is stupid if she doesn't accept him now.

Scene 2. Ramelton in Ireland.

Ethne It was a pleasure indeed to meet you, Colonel Trench. I have long been looking forward to your visit. Why didn't Harry come with you?

Trench He wanted to finish his activities in Sudan first. And he wanted me to meet you first.

Ethne Of course. For the sake of the white feather. Do you have it?

Trench Of course. (*gives it over. She accepts it.*)

Ethne You cannot imagine how deeply I have hated the three of you for the sake of these three feathers. Only their return could reconcile me with life, with you and with Harry. I never asked him to restore his honour. Obviously during all these years, he only lived for that purpose for my sake, as if I had given him that challenge. On the contrary. I tried to completely eliminate and banish him from my life. I returned all his presents and gifts, I burned all his letters, and the only thing I kept of him was a worn photograph, which I had hoped never more to be tempted to regard. That photo has during the years been worn to irrerecognizability, but he is still with me. I never succeeded in getting rid of him. And now he is returning. Tell me how you did it.

Trench When he turned up with me in the prison he was dying and unrecognizable, a wreck of fever and delirium. If he hadn't rambled so freely in his dementia, I would never have recognized him. By recognizing him from his talk I was motivated to take care of him. I had lived in that snake-pit for three years and learned how to survive. When he got well I went ill. His helper disappeared, and we learned that he had been seriously wounded and was out for a year. It was a small

boy who acted as messenger between us and his Greek friends. But Harry had it all set up. He had prepared our escape to the smallest detail, and when at last Abou Fatma could act again after a year, the escape worked perfectly. With well rested camels at strategic positions, we could keep running non-stop although only in the protection of the dark. And thus we reached Suakin. I didn't want to part with Harry, but he insisted. He was like a camel himself: they carry a man wherever and forever patiently unto death, but when you try to thank and reward them they spit and wheeze and show their teeth.

Ethne Your mission is completed, Colonel Trench. Thanks for the feather.

Trench I am afraid I was the guilty one of the whole idea from the beginning.

Ethne You are all three pardoned and forgiven, Castleton by his death and you two by Harry's greatness. All hatred is forgotten. You did your duty, and Harry acted accordingly. No debts remain.

Trench Harry still has a feather left, Miss Eustace.

Ethne I know. It is mine.

Trench You will take it back?

Ethne First he will have to get home. Then we'll see.

Trench He takes for granted that you will marry someone else. Weren't you courted by Jack Durrance?

Ethne He went blind and has dropped all interest.

Trench Only because of his blindness?

Ethne Only because of his blindness.

Trench And you? Have you also dropped all interest?

Ethne Colonel Trench, that's none of your business, but to satisfy your curiosity I can tell you, that I knew Jack two years before Harry. A friend of mine, who fell in love with Jack, did everything to move Harry and me into each other's arms, and she succeeded. To the announcement of our engagement your three feathers arrived. Harry told me everything, and I gave you right and Harry wrong and thus contributed with the fourth feather. I forced myself to exclude Harry from my life, while Jack returned nobler than ever and without any part or any knowledge of the scandal. That brought a relief to me. But he returned to your bloody cursed eternal war of hell against the muslims and came home blind. It complicated matters not to me but to him: he didn't want to bind me to an invalid. All now depends on what Harry has to say when he comes back.

Trench Thank you, Miss Eustace.

Ethne I am to thank you for surviving three unbearable years until Harry could save you and all of us from the embarrassment.

Trench (takes a quiet but polite leave by humbly kissing her hand.)

Ethne (alone) Who are you, Harry, when you return? Will I be able to recognize you at all? Will you be able to recognize me? Six years is a long time, especially for love, that least of all was made for something to wait for.

Scene 3.

Durrance What's the occasion of your visit, Harry? Why do you come to me instead of going to Ethne?

Harry As a well trained scout I want to learn about the field of venture before entering it. I heard that you are engaged with Ethne.

Jack Not at all. As soon as you are married I will leave the country.

Harry Just what do you mean by that?

Jack What else is there for me to do here but to mould and rot? I was born to be free for the boundless frontiers, Harry, and even if I can't see them any more I can still feel them, hear their music and voices, be carried away by their exotic scents and colourful perfumes and enjoy their warmer mentality. I have nothing more to do, Harry, after having rejoined you and Ethne. She expects the return of her fourth feather. Have you still got it?

Harry Of course. But how did you know about it? You were the only one who had no part in the dreadful business. You didn't participate and knew nothing. Still you knew all and did everything you could from here to get me back. How did you learn about it?

Jack I found it out because I wanted to.

Harry Just like that?

Jack I was more engaged than both Trench, Castleton and Willoughby since I was closer to you. They did nothing after having sent off their feathers and broken your love, happiness and engagement. I decided to do something about it and did it.

Harry You loved Ethne before me, Jack.

Jack Yes, I did, but I became blind, a cripple, and after the latest expert diagnostics from Wiesbaden it's definitely permanent. There is no way back to life for me, Harry. There is one for you, and you honestly deserve it. I will never forgive you if you back away from it. *(a little jokingly)* Then I might send you a white feather.

Harry Although I did everything to honestly deserve it, the harm done to her and her father still feels hopelessly irreparable. I never expected her to wait for me.

Jack She is waiting for you now. Her argument for sticking to me was that she refused to let two lives be lost, yours and mine, since she felt she had already ruined yours. She thought herself to be the last thing I still had in life. It's not true. I still have my freedom, and I have given the same freedom to her. Freedom is a greater world with greater possibilities than the whole world, Harry, especially if you are alone and unchained to another. I almost feel sorry for you for not having any other choice but to marry her.

Harry I don't know if you are playacting or being serious or what you really mean, but I have reason to suspect that you are sacrificing your last possibility of happiness for us.

Jack You are as free of me as she is, Harry. Don't think of me. Think only of yourselves. It's only for her sake that you survived these six years, Harry.

Harry Yes, it is.

Jack Go to her, Harry.

Scene 4. Same terrace as in act II scene 2.

Ethne (standing on the terrace) Harry.

Harry (coming in) Ethne.

Ethne I recognize you. You have aged, but not much. You are slimmer, more mature and straight. Anyone can clearly recognize the aspect of a man who has nothing left to be ashamed of.

Harry I bring you two feathers, Ethne, if you want them.

Ethne Castleton is dead. That feather is worthless. Throw it away.

Harry He never had occasion to retract his accusation against me of cowardice, but you can do it for him.

Ethne Very well, give me his feather. Thus I have all three that ruined our engagement.

Harry And the fourth?

Ethne Before you return it I must say a few things. You have been gone for six years, Harry. During that time I gave my heart to Jack Durrance, my first wooer, who worshipped me long before I knew you, and I promised myself when he turned blind to never fail or let him go, as I failed and let go of you. I confess my guilt in your case, Harry, but I can never allow a second case.

Harry I just talked with Jack. He is on his way to Africa.

Ethne The more sacred is my promise and fidelity. You have not struggled in vain, Harry. You exonerated yourself, your honour, your name and your family in the eyes of everyone. You can be satisfied with yourself and proud of your life. But when a crime occurs in a relationship that hurts one or both striking the very depth of the soul of love, nothing can restore them to what was before.

Harry You mean to decline both me and Jack?

Ethne Jack has voluntarily declined from me. For that he is my best friend. Become also you my best friend, Harry, and decline from me.

Harry (warm) Ethne, I had actually intended to come with the same suggestion. I know how much Jack has loved you long before I saw you for the first time. I would never have been able to take you away from him. He was always my best friend, and he always had the first right to your heart. I was presumptuous to make claims on you bypassing him. I now think that what happened was the best thing. Destiny interfered to devastate our engagement, that destiny was just, and I learned my lesson. I would appreciate nothing higher than together with Jack be your best friend.

Ethne Then we understand each other. Come to embrace me, Harry, and return at last that damned last feather. (*Harry immediately rushes to embrace her, and they remain in each other's arms. Then they enter the house.*)

Jack (reveals himself, has heard it all) Now I can go away forever and leave them in their friendship to each other. I leave the desert, that robbed me of my sight, to take over this entirely this worthless crippled body, so that I can be released and free to start over from the beginning in another life, for what is a life without a perfect body? It's no life but only a slow protracted death all the way until you are at last free from the

unfair restrictions of crippling physical limitations. For an invalid life begins with death, and he is only stupid if he unnecessarily postpones it. Let me disappear in the desert like a camel who strutted on and worked hard until his last breath and he falls to disappear buried in the sands, untraceably, unnoticeably, silently and without tears. (*leaves*)

The End.

*Naini Tal, 7.11.2007,
translated without dictionary
in Verona, Easter 2018.*