

The Wondering Wanderings of
Marmaduke Mogg



Free Sample Story

Catherine Day
Duncan Wherrett

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The White Marble Cat

The story of the White Longhair Odd-eyed Cat

Far away, in a land on the edge of summer and the edge of winter, a princess lived in a beautiful honey-coloured palace and was much loved by her father, the King. When there were no audiences to give, no cases to judge, no meetings of the privy council to direct, no banquets to attend; when all the documents had been signed, the couriers dispatched and the palace guard reviewed, the King and the princess would walk together in the terraced gardens. He was happy above all else to be able to spend time with his daughter, while she delighted in listening to the legends of their country and the true stories of peace and war that he told so compellingly.

When affairs of state swept up in their time-consuming grip even these short hours, the princess would talk and laugh with her companions in rooms whose walls were richly painted with scenes as full of life as the green forests and blue seas, in halls with gilded wooden ceilings and in courtyards surrounded by white marble colonnades and enlivened with fountains. And when the sun beat down, criss-crossing the rooms with elaborate geometric patterns cast by the latticed wooden shutters, the princess liked to rest in her private chamber with its cool, green marble floor. She would play her golden harp, or read in books the ancient legends she loved so much. A chandelier adorned with seven times seventy crystal pears of every colour the finest artist could imagine hung from the ceiling, and sometimes she would simply lie quite still for an hour or two watching the ever-changing gleams of light through the coloured fruits as the chandelier moved in the faint air currents.

Sometimes her gaze would rest on her most treasured possession: a white marble cat which she kept on a silver table by her bed. It sat

with its tail curled round its toes. Its polished, sculptured flanks were as sleek as a real cat's and its head was held proud and high – as well it ought, for around its neck was the most precious jewelled collar in the kingdom. Set in gold were a ruby, emerald, sapphire and diamond; moonstone, topaz and amethyst; turquoise, opal and amber. These were jewels that hid in their brilliance the history of the realm, for some had been won in great battles, others had been worn in ancient crowns when the kingdom was still young, and yet others, so the stories said, had belonged to fairies and wizards.

And it happened that after many years of peace and prosperity, rumours of armies gathering beyond the borders arrived with the season of winds and rainbows. The king found fewer moments to walk in the gardens with the princess, but spent, instead, long hours with grim-faced messengers, and whole days riding the kingdom with his military commanders. It seemed that nothing could hold back the invaders, who were conquering lands from the East. Men came to arms from all over the kingdom, ready to resist the tall, dark prince with the red helm and his force of foot and horse bearing red shields and great swords with hilts of red gold. But the king and his countrymen held unvoiced uncertainty in their hearts, for it was said that the king's astrologer had seen in a remote valley a rainbow, whose ends did not curve, shining, to the earth, but plunged into wild heaps of black rocks, on which sat two great, black, red-crested birds.

Within a few weeks, the invaders had marched across the borders and set their standards in town squares and at river crossings. It seemed that nothing could stop them from reaching the capital. One night, the king, with a few trusty men, left his army in the green lowlands where they were encamped, riding until daybreak and on until nightfall until he arrived in the city. He went straight to the palace at the top of the hill, then up the stairs to the highest tower to look out over the land. He spoke not a word. His cloak billowed from his shoulders in the evening air and his brow was furrowed as he looked long through a glass. No-one moved but the princess, who went to stand quietly beside her father, seeing in the distance with her naked eye tiny sparks of light, which the king distinguished, magnified, as the camp fires of

the enemy. In three minutes, he had made his decision. He would go alone to summon help, thinking thus to draw less attention to himself than if he travelled with a group of his men.

“Come, my dear. We will seek help from the King of the Isles. Put on the dress of a country girl and I will assume the costume of a miller and thus let us try to pass as simple folk across our borders and so in person reach our neighbour’s court.”

So, the brave king, not wishing to take a single man from the defence of the kingdom and after instructing his knights and nobles, slipped secretly out of the palace grounds through the gardens and orchards, passed through the streets, quiet but for the sudden appearance of armed men on horseback hurrying with urgent messages, then out beyond the city walls to the moon-bright countryside, hoping that no-one would stop a miller’s daughter and her father. No-one did and, finding a mule and cart prepared for them at a farm not far away, they set their backs on the city and went forward as fast as the mule could go, wishing that they could reach the port and its ships in the space of time it took the mind to travel there.

Again, night and day passed, but suddenly, at sunset, a group of brown-cloaked travellers rode down on them from the trees on a hillside and the hearts of the king and the princess fell in despair as they saw the reddish gleam of evening light on the red-gold sword hilts beneath the strangers’ cloaks.

It seemed that all was lost. There was no escape, for these men seemed to know who the miller and his daughter were. They did not even trouble to look at the sacks of flour, nor the small bundle of clothes in the cart, but in silence made them mount a horse and, keeping close about them, cantered off to the south and then the east. Occasionally, the shadow of a crested bird flicked across the moonlit ground.

Eventually, after many, many days’ journey, the king and the princess found themselves in a land of dank, low hills, scattered with grey rocks, devoid of full-grown trees and flowers, where grey clouds often covered the sky and mists cut out the horizons and seemed to halt the passing of time. They were received with courtesy enough in a grey, stone castle and, although they were fed and clothed and were free

to walk at will through its halls and ride out into the country around, the watchful eyes of their captors never left them for a moment. They learned that the wish of the prince of the red helm was to finish his conquests and then marry the princess to secure forever his grasp on her father's kingdom.

However hard the king and the princess thought, they could find no way of leaving this remote castle unseen. However many tales of heroic deeds and legends the king told until he knew no more to tell, in none could they find an answer to their plight. Their only memento of home was the marble cat with the jewelled collar that the princess had hidden in the bundle of clothes when they had left their palace and which she had managed to keep with her.

Just as she had loved to touch its smooth, white marble coat and admire the sparkle of the coloured stones at home, the more now did she love to look deep inside the jewels, especially when a rare ray of sunlight shafted through the clouds and mists and struck reflections from them. Her favourites were a magnificent turquoise, for it reminded her of the clear blue sky on a brilliant winter's day when snow shone on the ground and ice crystals sparkled in the air; and also a beautiful jewel of pure amber, which glowed like the sunshine of a warm, peaceful summer's evening.

One day, when the king and the princess were discussing the old stories for the hundredth time, an eagle appeared on the window ledge. "I have come from the high places of your own land, for I listened to your stories, and with every telling I followed your thoughts until they led me here. Give me the ruby from the collar of the marble cat and I will bring you a map to show you the way back to your country."

The king and the princess were astonished and allowed hope to take root in a small corner of their hearts. They could not tell if the eagle were in truth their friend, but the loss of the ruby was worth the trial. Having done as the eagle commanded, they waited until the second day when, again, he appeared at the window to set before them a beautifully-drawn map. Only then did they realize the great distance that their captors had brought them.

“How can we pay for food along our way, even if we manage to escape from this castle?” asked the princess.

“Give me the emerald from the collar of the marble cat and I will bring you coins of silver to help you on your journey,” replied the eagle. Again, the princess did as she was bid and next evening the eagle fulfilled his promise.

“How shall we protect ourselves against the mists and rains of this dreary land?” asked the princess.

“Give me the amethyst from the collar of the marble cat and I will bring you warm clothes”, said the eagle.

And so, on alternate nights, the princess prised the precious jewels from her beloved cat’s collar in exchange for a tinder box to make fire; for a bow and arrows to hunt food where it was unsafe to pass through villages; for a sword for the king to hang at his side and a dagger for the princess; for dyes to change the colour of their hair; and then for a great key to open the castle gates.

“Give me the clear blue turquoise and I will order grey horses swifter than the mounts of your captors to be brought to the castle walls.”

The king was very sad, for this was one of the oldest jewels of his kingdom’s treasure and the princess could hardly bear to give up the only reminder of the blue of the free skies of home.

“You must give it to me now, or forever lose your chance,” said the eagle. So she gave it to him with a great wrench of her heart. The eagle, as ever, kept his word. “And now,” he said, “give me the glowing amber jewel and I will bring you cloaks made in the workshops of the maidens of the mists.” The princess looked at the marble cat, now sad and forlorn without the jewels in his collar. Even his marble eyes seemed duller and she cried out, “How can I give you the last reflection of the sunshine of our kingdom. If they catch us, we shall have nothing left to remind us of all we have lost and our memories will grow fainter as time passes.”

The king, too, cried out, “The amber jewel is the oldest of all. If we lose that, we shall have lost the last link with the legends of our past.”

“Trust me. You have only this chance,” repeated the eagle, spreading his wings. The king and the princess looked sadly at each other.

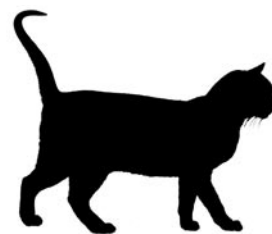
The princess could not bear to take the last jewel from her marble cat, but, turning away her eyes, gave it to her father, who removed the jewel. Before they had time to turn back to one another, the eagle had gone, leaving the room even more cheerless without the gleam of the jewels, while the holes in the marble cat's collar were as blank and meaningless as his white marble eyes.

The next night, the eagle brought the cloaks. "Speed you well. My task is done," he said and flew off, leaving a chill of apprehension in their minds as they thought that all was now up to them.

At dawn, they picked up the eagle's gifts, wrapped the cloaks about them and stole downstairs, the key magically fitting each lock as they went. Any who were awake would not have seen them pass as the mist and greyness of the uncertain early morning light merged with the grey of the cloaks that were the gifts of the maidens of the mists. Below the castle walls, as the eagle had said, grey horses awaited them, eager to show their speed. The king and the princess mounted swiftly and sped off straight from the gateway, just as their map showed. But, so featureless was the landscape that when the castle was lost in the distance and they felt that several hours had passed, they became uneasy as to which direction was the right one, for not a gleam of sun showed to cast a shadow nor tell the time of day.

They stopped and, as the mists shifted, they saw a white cat with beautiful long, white fur, sitting proudly on a rock nearby. "Your way lies yonder," it said, turning its head to the right. "Do not worry. Whenever you are unsure, I shall be near."

When it turned back to face them, they saw that one of its eyes was a brilliant blue and the other the colour of amber. So they knew that the two most precious jewels of the time of legends were not lost, and they rejoiced and rode on.



End of Part One

The complete book of 20 exciting stories
can be purchased from Amazon via this link:

Marmaduke Mogg