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opening extract from

# Princess Mirror-Belle and the Flying Horse

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published by

## Macmillan

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# Chapter One

## The Flying Horse

"There!" said the nurse with the blue belt, looking proudly at the hard white plaster on Ellen's right arm. "All ready for your friends to write their names on it."

Ellen had fallen off her bike and broken her arm, and Mum had taken her to hospital. The arm wasn't hurting nearly as much as it had at first, and Ellen liked the idea of her friends writing their names on the plaster.

"Can I go back to school tomorrow?" she asked eagerly.

"No," said the nurse. "The doctor

wants you to stay in hospital tonight, just so we can keep an eye on you. It's because you had concussion."

"What's that?"

"It's when you bang your head and forget things."

It was true that Ellen's head had hit the pavement when she fell off her bike, and for a minute or so she hadn't been able to remember where she was or what had happened.

"I'm always telling her to wear her cycle helmet," said Mum to the nurse.

Ellen looked at the floor and felt guilty. "Sorry," she muttered. "But I feel fine now."

"All the same, we need to keep you in to be on the safe side." The nurse turned to Mum and added, "I expect you'll be

able to take her home tomorrow, after the doctor's done his ward round."

A porter appeared with a wheelchair. "Sit in this, old lady," he said to Ellen, and, "You'll have to walk, young lady," to Mum.

It seemed strange to Ellen that she should need a wheelchair when it was her arm and not her leg that she had broken, but she was too shy to say so. The porter wheeled her in and out of a lift and then along a corridor into a room with six beds in it.

"This is Jupiter Ward," he said. "You'll get five-star treatment in here." He parked the wheelchair at the reception desk.

A nurse with a red belt welcomed Ellen and Mum. "I'm Sister Jo," she told them. She showed Ellen her bed, which had a curtain you could draw all round it. Then she fitted a plastic

bracelet on to Ellen's left wrist. It had her name on it.

"You'll need to put these on too." Sister Jo was holding out some hospital pyjamas.

"But how will I get the top on over the plaster?" Ellen asked.

"Don't worry – we think of everything," said Sister Jo. When Mum helped Ellen put the pyjamas on they found that the right sleeve had been cut off and the armhole widened so that the plaster could fit through it.

"I'd better go back home now," said Mum.

Ellen felt a bit scared. "I don't want you to go," she said.

"You'll be fine. It's only for one night. And I'm sure you'll make friends with the other children."

But looking around Jupiter Ward, Ellen could see only one other child, a

boy who was asleep. Three of the beds were empty and the other one had its curtains drawn around it.

"Hardly anyone seems to be breaking any bones these days," said Sister Jo. "If it wasn't for you, Ellen, I might lose my job!"

Ellen smiled, and found she felt less scared. She hugged Mum goodbye with her left arm and made her promise to bring in a bunch of grapes and a library book the next day.

"Now, down to business," said Sister Jo when Mum had gone. "You need to choose what you want to eat tomorrow. Are you left-handed by any chance?"

"No," said Ellen, puzzled. "Do you do different meals for left-handed people then?"

Sister Jo laughed. "No – but it might be a bit difficult

for you to fill this in." She showed Ellen a yellow card with some writing on it. "It's got the different food choices for breakfast and lunch," she said.

Ellen chose cornflakes and orange juice for breakfast, and chicken pie and fruit salad for lunch. Sister Jo ticked the boxes for her.

"I'm going off duty now," she said. "I'll be back tomorrow lunchtime, but you might be gone by then."

Ellen was sorry to see Sister Jo go. Another nurse took her temperature, and then a different one brought her some cocoa and yet another one took her to the bathroom. It was bewildering having so many different people to look after her and Ellen suddenly felt tired. One of the nurses tucked her up in her new bed.

"Just ring this bell if you want anything in the night," she said.

*

Ellen was woken by a light tap on her shoulder. At first she thought it was Mum, but then she opened her eyes, saw the nurse and remembered where she was. Although she hadn't felt ill enough to ring the bell, it hadn't been a good night. Because of the plaster she couldn't sleep on her right side like she usually did, and it was hard to find a comfortable position. Then she had been woken up very early to have her temperature taken, after which she had fallen into a much deeper sleep.

"We couldn't wake you up when the breakfast trolley came round," the nurse said now. "But don't worry – we've saved yours for you. You should have time to eat it before Doctor Birch comes."

"Have I got time to go to the bathroom too?" asked Ellen.

"Yes. Do you want someone to come and help you?"

"No, thanks." But once Ellen was in the bathroom she found it was quite awkward washing and cleaning her teeth with only her left hand.

"I'll have to learn to write left-handed too," she said aloud.

"That's a good idea," came a voice from the bathroom mirror. "Who knows? That way you might start doing the letters the right way round at last."

Ellen knew that voice very well. It belonged to Princess Mirror-Belle.

Princess Mirror-Belle looked just like Ellen's reflection, but whereas most reflections stay in the mirror, Mirror-Belle had a habit of coming out of it. Although she looked like Ellen, she was not at all like her in character. Ellen was quite shy, but Mirror-Belle was extremely boastful and was full of stories about the palace and the fairy-tale land she said she came from.

Mirror-Belle was dressed in hospital pyjamas just like Ellen, but her plaster was on her left arm.

"Well, don't just stand there staring," she said. "I'll need a bit of help getting out of here." She stuck her right arm out of the mirror and added, "Don't pull too hard. I don't want to break this one as well."

Although Ellen wasn't really sure that she wanted Mirror-Belle in hospital with her, it seemed too late to change things,

so she grasped her hand and helped her to wriggle out on to the washbasin and down to the floor. "Did you fall off your bike too?" she asked.

"Certainly not," replied Mirror-Belle. "Would you expect a princess to ride around on anything as common as a bicycle? No . . ." She hesitated for a second and then went on, "I fell off my flying horse."

"You never told me you had a flying horse."

"Well, I'm sorry, Ellen, but I can't tell you all the things I have. It would take too long and it would just make you jealous."

"Were you wearing a riding hat?" asked Ellen. But Mirror-Belle wasn't listening. She had opened the bathroom door and was sauntering into Jupiter Ward.

Ellen was about to follow her, but then

decided to hang back. Somehow she couldn't face trying to explain to the nurses about Mirror-Belle.

She peeped out of the bathroom door and saw her mirror friend climbing into her own bed and ringing the bell above it.

One of the nurses came scurrying to her bedside.

"What is this food supposed to be?" Mirror-Belle asked, pointing to the breakfast tray on the table beside her bed.

"It's what you ordered. Cornflakes and orange juice."

"Cornflakes? What are they? Take them away and bring me a lightly boiled peacock's egg."

The nurse tittered. She seemed to think this was a joke.

"Don't laugh when I'm giving you your orders," said Mirror-Belle. "It's very rude. You can take the orange juice away

too. I'd rather have a glass of fresh morning dew with ice and lemon."

"You're not getting anything else," said the nurse. "Anway, the breakfast trolley's gone now."

"Then call it back again this second."

The nurse picked up the untouched breakfast tray and scurried off with it, nearly bumping into a man in a white coat with a stethoscope round his neck. Ellen guessed that he must be Dr Birch.

"I think she's taken a turn for the worse," murmured the nurse with the tray.

The doctor went over to the bed and drew the curtains round it. Ellen, still peeping out of the bathroom, couldn't see him any longer, but she heard his voice.

"It's Ellen, isn't it?" the doctor was saying.

"No, it's Princess Mirror-Belle. I hope you're properly trained to look after royalty. That stethoscope looks very ordinary. The palace doctor has one made of silver and snakeskin."

Dr Birch chuckled. "My little niece likes playing princesses too," he said. "Very well, Your Royal Highness. Now, I want you to tell me everything you can remember about your accident. I see from your notes that you fell off your bike."

"Then your notes are wrong," said Mirror-Belle. "I fell off my flying horse. I'm a very good rider, actually, so I can't quite think how it happened. I suspect that my wicked fairy godmother was up to her tricks again – loosening the saddle or something."

"So you have no memory of any bike

ride? Maybe that's because you banged your head on the pavement."

"I did no such thing!" said Mirror-Belle indignantly. "There aren't any pavements where I live. I landed . . . um . . . in a stork's nest on the palace roof. Luckily there weren't any stork's eggs in it at the time, otherwise—"

"Just a minute!" interrupted the doctor. His voice sounded quite different

suddenly – urgent and excited. "It says here that you broke your right arm."

"I do wish you'd stop reading those stupid notes and listen to me instead," complained Mirror-Belle.

"It's not just the notes. The X-ray shows it quite clearly too. The right arm was broken, but they've plastered the left one!"

"It sounds as if you should sack the plasterer as well as the note-taker."

"How does your right arm feel? Does it still hurt?"

"Now you mention it, it is a little sore. I think that must be from where the storks pecked it. They didn't realize who I was, you see. They probably thought I was a cuckoo who was about to lay its egg in their nest."

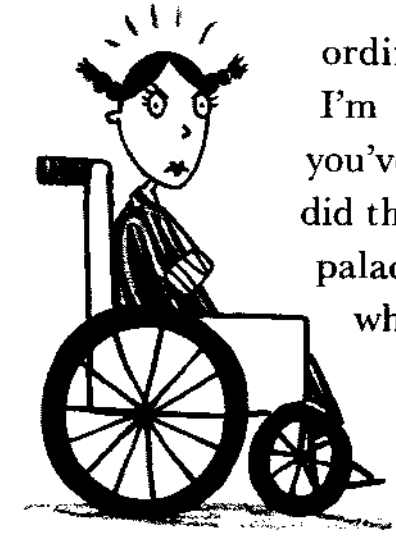
Doctor Birch obviously wasn't interested in storks or cuckoos, because Ellen saw him emerge from behind the curtains,

almost run to the reception desk and pick up the telephone. His back was turned and Ellen could only catch a few words, such as "mistake", "urgent" and "emergency". She guessed that he was speaking to someone in the plaster room.

This had gone too far, Ellen decided. She really ought to explain everything to the doctor and nurses. She was just braving herself to stride out from the bathroom when she saw someone familiar come into Jupiter Ward. It was the same porter who had wheeled her there yesterday, and he was pushing an empty wheelchair.

"You again, old lady?" she heard him say to Mirror-Belle.

Ellen didn't think Mirror-Belle would like being called "old lady" and expected her to tell the nice porter off, but instead Mirror-Belle answered, "Ah – at least someone recognizes that I'm not just an



ordinary little girl. And I'm delighted to see that you've brought this splendid throne for me. Even the palace thrones don't have wheels!"

"Nothing but the best for you, old lady," said the porter, and he wheeled her out of Jupiter Ward.

Oh dear! Ellen had to stop this. If Mirror-Belle's left arm really was broken, it wouldn't do for the plaster to be taken off.

Maybe the easiest person to explain things to would be the nice porter. Ellen stepped out of the bathroom and glanced around the ward. The doctor was talking to the nurse at the reception desk. They were gazing deeply into each other's eyes and didn't notice Ellen as she slipped out

of the ward. She was just in time to see the porter pushing Mirror-Belle into a lift.

"Stop!" she cried, but the doors had already slid closed.

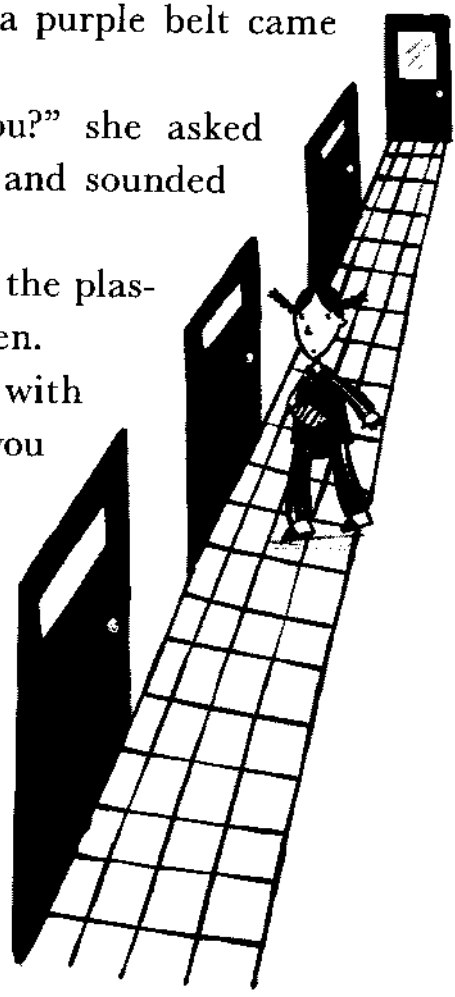
There was another lift and Ellen pressed the button to call it. It took a long time to come, but at least it was empty when it arrived, so no one could give her funny looks or ask what she was doing on her own.

If the plaster room was where her own arm had been plastered, Ellen was pretty sure it was on the ground floor, so she pressed the G button. But when the lift stopped and she got out, there was no sign of Mirror-Belle or the porter. Ellen found herself in a long corridor with lots of doors leading off it. She looked at the notices on some of the doors but they weren't much help because she couldn't understand what the words meant: one said "Endocrinology", another said

"Haematology" and a third "Toxicology". Ellen was just wondering whether one of these "ology" words was a special medical way of writing "plaster room" when the Haematology door swung open and a nurse with a purple belt came out.

"Can I help you?" she asked Ellen. She looked and sounded quite kind.

"I'm looking for the plaster room," said Ellen.

"Isn't anyone with you? Where have you come from?"

Ellen hesitated, wondering what to tell the nurse. She decided on the truth, even though she doubted if she would be believed.