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Opening extract from

The Wizard's Warning

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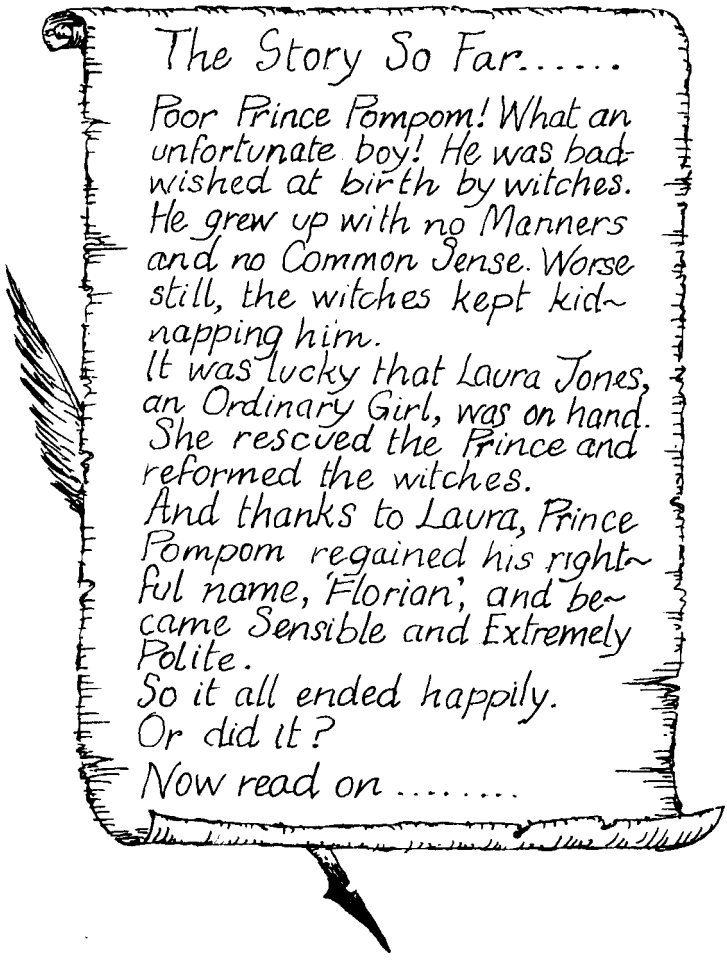
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For Amanda Fairless





The King has a Haircut

"Going anywhere nice for your holidays this year, Your Majesty?" asked the Royal Barber, twirling his golden scissors.

"Not really," said the King of Little Twittelburg. "I'm just so busy – affairs of State, you know. And I have to do lots of counting before the taxman calls. Gold coins. The Crown Jewels. The Royal Swans. It's all very worrying."

'Snip-snip-snip!' went the scissors.

"And then there's Prince Pom- I mean Florian," said the King. "He's been away at Finishing School all summer. Another expense, I'm afraid."

'Snip-snip-snip!'

"Well, that's the sides done," said the Royal Barber. "Just a little bit of layering on top and we're finished."

He lifted the crown from the King's head and the King heard a sharp intake of breath.

"Ah!" said the barber. "Hum. Ho-hum!"

"What do you mean – 'ho-hum'?" cried the King in alarm.

"Oh – nothing," said the barber.

"Tell me!" thundered the King.

"It's just that you have a small bald



patch," said the barber. "A very *small* bald patch."



"What!" cried the King. "I can't be going bald! How big is the patch?"

"Er – about as big as a penny," said the barber.

"The truth!" roared the King.

"A saucer?" said the barber.

The King snatched a mirror. It was true. The top of his head was as bare and shiny as a boiled egg.

"Woe!" cried the King. "Woe is me!"

"Don't get upset, Your Majesty," said the Royal Barber. "You can easily hide it under your crown. Or wear a wig."

"You don't understand!" cried the King. "There's a prophecy! I learned it as a boy –

" 'Oh! Little Twittelburg, beware!
If you should lose your golden hair,

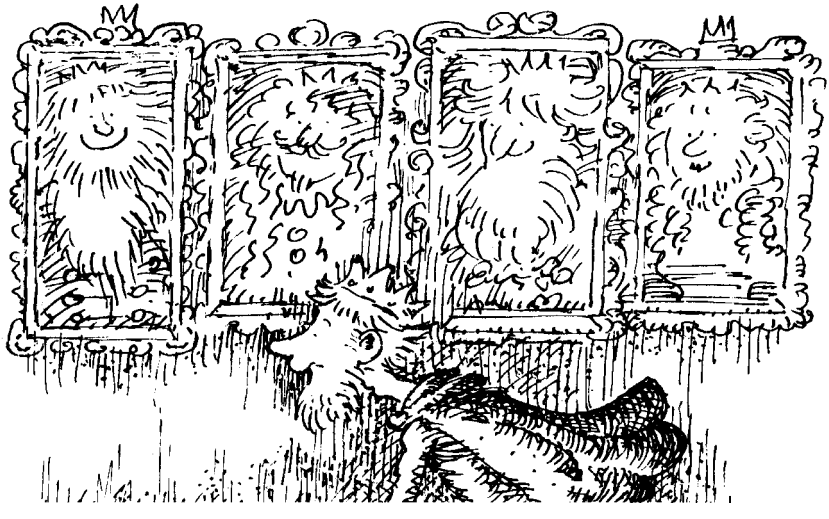
The kingdom's doomed! It will expire
By earth and water, air and fire.' "

"What does that mean?" asked the barber.

"It means earthquakes and floods!" cried the King. "Hurricanes and forest fires. We're done for!" He paused for a moment. "There's only one thing for it," he said. "I shall have to abdicate."



The King trudged down the Long Gallery. The portraits of his ancestors on the walls seemed to be smirking down



at him. Each of them sported a fine head of golden hair.

"Oh, woe!" moaned the King. "Poor Florian!"

He stopped at a cobwebby door marked 'Wizard' and knocked.



The door opened with a creak.

"Yes? What do you want?" snapped the wizard.

"I have to abdicate," said the King. "I need you to set the Four Tasks for Prince Florian."

"What Four Tasks?" asked the wizard.

"The Four Tasks he must complete before he can be crowned," said the King.

"It is the custom. They involve fire, air, earth and water."

"Very well!" said the wizard. "I shall have to consult the runes. And my crystal ball."

And with that he slammed the door in the King's face.



With a heavy heart the King mounted the stairs to the battlements. There he met the Queen, who was pacing up and down, knitting a sock.



"I'm waiting for Florian," she said. "Have you forgotten, my dear? He's due home today."

The King told her the bad news.

"My poor baby!" cried the Queen. "He's much too young to be King!"

"At least he's not as silly as he used to be," said the King. "And the Finishing School will have helped."

As he spoke, they heard a dull rumble in the distance and a carriage appeared in a cloud of dust.



"It's Florian!" said the King; and he leaned over the battlements and roared:

"Guards! Lower the drawbridge!"



The carriage trundled to a halt in the courtyard. A footman opened the



door and Prince Florian appeared, wearing a beautiful blue velvet suit. He descended the steps in an elegant way and approached his parents. He bowed so low that his nose almost touched the ground.

"My dear parents!" he said. "How pleased I am to be home. Here is my report."

The King took it and read aloud:

"'Ninety-nine percent. Prince Florian has excelled himself. He is well and truly Finished. He will make a fine king some day.'"

"Er – that reminds me, Florian," said

the King. "There's something I have to tell you –"

At that moment another boy climbed out of the carriage. This one was small and skinny, with sticky-out ears. His hair was gelled into spikes and he was drinking from a can of Coca-Cola.

"This is my friend, Prince Basil of Brattilova," said Prince Florian. "I have asked him to stay for a couple of weeks. I hope that meets with your approval, dear parents."

"Of course," said the King. "How are you, Basil my boy?"



"Fine," said Prince Basil. He did not attempt to bow. Instead he gave a hiccup and tossed the empty can to one side.

"And did you have a good report,

too?" asked the Queen.

"Oh yes," said Prince Basil. "You can have a look if you like."

He produced a piece of grubby paper and handed it to the Queen. The King read over her shoulder:

"'One hundred percent. Prince Basil is wonderful. He's a star.'"



The King could see that the 'hundred' had been altered from 'ten'; someone had added a nought. 'Wonderful' had been written over 'awful'; and underneath 'a star' he could just make out the word 'rubbish'.



"Hmm," said the King. "Come, my boys – come into the banqueting hall and have something to eat. And after that, Florian, you and I must have a talk."

