

A Tail Full of Sound and Curry

Pablo Sebastián Lobo*

‘[...] We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.’

The Tempest Act 4, scene 1, 156–158

Up rose the child quivering with fright. His glowing apple-red cheeks tinged whiter than the frost climbing the window pane. The vaulted firmament had vanished into the misty regions of twilight. It was no more than a heath of deserted wintry stars, enshrined in veils of murky vapour, like tuberose overgrown by a dense thicket. Night had drenched the vales and meadows in raven-ebony. No sunrise seemed to have gleamed on that flickering day. The dreary glooms sprawled into the cottage and more furtively into the child’s chamber...Not that dirges of the wind stirring the drooping willows and stately old pines had cast him out of his dreams nor even that the ominous hoots of the owl on the gabled roof had troubled his sleeping. In truth, what did disturb his nightly rest were the weird, dull, indistinct noises downstairs, unfamiliar to his ears but certain enough to beguile his imagination into weaving grim visions of airy shapes hovering and raiding the regal estate of his parents and ancestors.

There is, at times, a fine line that separates our grasping of reality from delusion. In a child of such tender years, such distinction lacks relevance. And in this regard, it is worth noting that he had grown fond of the British fairy lore; in the nursery, he was used to being read widely about the knightly deeds against the felonies of goblins and other villains. Then, evoking those ethereal lines and kindled in chivalrous feelings, he took on the duty of defending his realm. Yet, how would an infant commit himself to such a daring adventure? Certainly, no alien thought could spark his mind but him...Of all Narnia’s heroes, he cherished brave Prince Caspian the most. So much so that he went into the fanciful delusion that he was playing his part in earnest. It was then that he set out on his epic journey into the glooms downstairs.

From the landing, where he established his own battlement, he scanned the surroundings in search of any hint of threat lurking in the deep shadows below. Fraught with unease, his mind came to forge again images of ghastly airy creatures, parading in the bottomless hollow of the drawing-room. Though they might have drawn him back for a while, luring his retreat to his sleeping quarters, he remained steadfast in his commitment. He knew he had to make haste lest his enemy should take over his castle without waging a battle. Time was pressing and he would have to make do without an army. Happily, he caught sight of his gramps’ walking-stick, which would prove a suitable sword, light enough to wield with ease and sufficiently sharp to thrust into a foe’s heart. Likewise, he thought it a matter of the

* 2º premio del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría cuento (2017).

utmost importance to have a banner of his own. So he climbed down the stairs leading to the drawing-room. There, the burning light of the garden lamppost was streaming in through the bay window, dressed in soft coral curtains. At the adjacent west corner of the room there lay a brass table lamp slumbering on a piece of fine linen. The Queen Mother had embroidered it herself with sprays of blossoming apple trees. Its glowing silver-moon hue met his eyes. As he fingered it cautiously, he knew at once what it was meant for. Now it would wave in the fierce northern sea winds as the standing hallmark of his cottage-sized kingdom.

There and then, he took the path that ran westwards into a dimly candlelit corridor, assuming that the frightful drumming came from beyond. It was modestly furnished with paintings of English landscape alone. As the little Templar was passing by, he halted at the sight of a single fine picture...he recollected the sunny hours he had spent gazing at Cotswold meadows, its silver streams and rundown castles. It was like going through a magical mirror into realms of blooming trees and balmy sunsets. He could almost feel the skies breathing merrily upon the lilies and the heather. Alas! Perhaps, even now, he was marching into a pit from which no traveller has ever returned...maybe he would not live long enough to launch a crusade into that fancy pleasure ground. All his hopes seemed to fade away like the glorious-red clouds beyond the shadowy brows of a hill.

Though somewhat disheartened, he resumed his advance. At the farther end of the hall was an open arch, perched on the gable roof, followed by three steps leading to the darker side of the house. So bleakly thick was it that no sunbeam seemed to have straggled into for countless years. As he struggled to move forward, a new clattering hurly-burly came from the kitchen. He might have fancied witches brewing toads' hearts on ravens' blood for they surely could not be weaving or spinning around the steamy cauldron! He feared they would bite or even cut off his toes to enhance their broth. Yet, as the princely knight that he was, he should prove he was by no means a cowardly-custard or even deem it excusable to make a retreat under such deadly circumstances. So he sneaked up along the labyrinthine borders of the kitchen with a dubious gait. He halted, made some unsteady steps, halted again, gathered courage and assuming an adamant mien, he resumed the perilous quest for the intruder...What terrors would be revealed upon his crossing the kitchen's threshold? Surely he would wield his sword against the wretched invader...However, fear assailed his feverish imagination. It was then that he figured that a grisly dragon might be lurching in the dingy-smoking scullery, letting out yells of blazing wrath. As he drew nearer, he noticed that the door stood ajar and unguarded.

The clash of brass saucepans and pottery plates grew fiercely louder...did he ever imagine the gruesome creature that was awaiting him in that hellfire-forged cavern? – he hoped he would manage, anyway... For an instant, his grit seemed to abate, yet he promptly reclined on his “stick-to-it-iveness.” He groped for the door handle and, on its rusty hinges, the massive wooden gate creaked open. No sooner had the daring paladin stepped in than the dreadful beast was already sniffing at his feet. Some sort of furry tail kept wagging and tapping his trembling legs. Without much further

ado, he flipped the switch. There and then, a terrier with a smeared-in-curry snout appeared before the six-year-old knight, leaping merrily.