Toby and the Secrets of the Tree

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For the Forest where I grew up

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Broken Wings

The Major was as light as a grain of pollen, but the weight of his stupidity should have snapped the branch he was sitting on, feet dangling in mid-air, firing arrows at a black shape writhing about below.

Major Krolo was stupid, there was no end to his stupidity, he put a lot of effort into being this stupid. Even more than an expert in stupidity, he was a genius.

It was night-time in the Tree, a night of thick mist and freezing wind. But it had been dark all day long: a black apocalyptic sky had shrouded the Treetop since the previous day, and the damp was causing a heavy smell like spiced bread to rise up from the branches.

"Two hundred and forty-five, two hundred and forty-six..."

How many arrows would the Major have to fire to finish off the huge creature stuck in the sap? Wrapped

in a stiff fur coat, he just carried on counting.

Krolo slipped his thumbs under his coat to make his braces go *ping*.

"Two hundred and..."

He felt a satisfied tingle and did his collar up again.

The Major had a long-standing reputation as a bully. Following a few "personal issues" he had changed his name and made a new life for himself. He even tried to disguise himself by wearing braces instead of a belt. He had also awarded himself the rank of Major and, to be on the safe side, these days he tortured only animals. He did this on the sly, at night and out of sight, like a grown man smoking in secret from his mother.

Below him, the poor creature lifted its head towards its executioner for the last time. It was a butterfly. A butterfly with broken wings... The job had been botched, using a poorly-sharpened axe. All the butterfly had left on its back were two ridiculous stumps that flapped emptily. This was the work of a thug.

"Two hundred and fifty-nine," counted Krolo, hitting the butterfly on the right flank.

A shadow suddenly passed by, in the thick fog behind the Major.

A silent apparition. The nimble shadow had come from above, brushing against the bark before disappearing into the night. Yes, somebody was watching this scene. But the Major hadn't noticed a thing, because being stupid is a full-time job.

Krolo's last arrow sank deep into the flesh of the butterfly. The wounded animal reared up but didn't groan.

The shadow passed by again, twirling with extraordinary agility. Half-dancer, half-acrobat, it was surveying the scene. This time, there was a reflection in the butterfly's eye.

Krolo turned around, suddenly uneasy.

"Soldier? Is that you?"

He scratched his head nervously, through his hat. He had a low-set forehead and wore a woolly cap with a few greasy curls peeking out from under it.

Now, Major Krolo had a small head with limited neurones, but he still knew that the shadow hadn't been cast by any of his soldiers. Everybody was talking about it: a mysterious shadow that moved around the Treetop in the evenings. Nobody knew who this furtive person was, but it was as if he or she was on watch duty.

In public, Krolo refused to believe this story. Instead he made himself look even sillier than usual with pathetic remarks such as, "What? A shadow? At night? Ha ha!"

But, given his problems in the past, the Major was scared of everything. One morning in bed, he had pulled off one of his own toes, mistaking it for an insect sticking out from under the sheets.

"Soldier!" he shouted, trying to convince himself. "I know it's you! If you start again, I'll stick you to the branch..."

A cloud of fog rolled over the Major and, in the freezing dark, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Eeeeeeeeek!"

Krolo let out a small, girlish whimper. And, turning his head sharply, bit into flesh.

The Major prided himself on his exceptional reflexes. And it was certainly true that he hadn't wasted a second in attacking his aggressor's hand. His speed was impressive... But he *had* made a simple mistake about which way to turn and he felt his incisors sinking

deep into his own shoulder and hitting the bone.

Stupidity on that kind of scale really *is* a form of genius.

Krolo let out a raucous cry and jumped in agony. He landed at the feet of an odd character in a dressing gown.

"It's me, only obliging with your respectyness, it's me. Am I scaringly you?"

The newcomer bowed, lifting the hem of his dressing gown.

"It's me, Clotty," he added.

Recognising his soldier's unique way of talking, Krolo bared his teeth.

"Soldier Clot!" he exploded.

"Don't be afraid, Major."

"Afraid? Who's afraid? Me, afraid?"

"Please to forgive the meddling of my curiosityness, Major, but why did you eat your own shoulder?"

"Look at me, Clot."

Krolo pointed threateningly at him.

"If you mention to anybody that I was afraid..."

The Major was still down and the blood from his wound had painted a red velvet epaulette on

his coat. Clot felt sorry for Krolo and bent over, holding out his hand to help him get up again.

"May I have the hon-hah of helping you?"

Clot tried to comfort the Major by patting him on the shoulder, but he clumsily slapped the wound and Krolo turned crimson with pain.

The Major's strength was running out, so he spat at the soldier to keep him at bay.

Clot leapt sideways. He was saddened by his superior's lack of education. The soldiers reckoned that Krolo was an overgrown bully, but Clot saw him as more of a big baby, or a very small child, who hasn't learned how to live yet.

Instead of trembling at Krolo's insults, what Clot really wanted to do was pop a dummy in his mouth, make "goo-goo-ga-ga" noises, and pat his cheeks.

The Major contemplated the soldier's outfit.

"What kind of a get-up is that?"

"A dressing gown, Major."

"And that?" He was pointing at the pair of slug slippers the soldier was wearing on his feet.

Clot suddenly came over all coy. He looked like a poet from a literary gathering, lost in the fog.

"Slipperties, Major."

"You what?"

"It's the middle of the night, if I'm not abusing you, so I put on my slipperties. It's just that I was asleeping when you called."

"I didn't call, you idiot. Go back home."

Clot heard the butterfly flapping in despair, and leaned over to take a look. The Major blocked the way with his arms.

"What d'you want?"

"I can see something moving over there..."

"Mind your own business."

"There's an animal stuck in the sap, or am I mistaking me?"

"What are you doing here, Clot? Are you looking for trouble?"

"You have the interferingness to ask that, well as it happens..."

"Speak!"

"It's because of *her*," Clot whispered.

"Her! Her again!" roared the Major.

"Allow me to be sharply spearing you the details: the prisoner is asking for the Great Candle Bearer."

"What for?"

"For her hot water bottle."

"The Great Candle Bearer is asleep!" barked Krolo. "I'm not going to wake the Great Candle Bearer up for a hot water bottle!"

Krolo couldn't take his eyes off Clot's slippers, they fascinated him.

"I know the prisoner is making your high-brows frown, Major," said Clot. "But if she can have the Great Candle Bearer to heat up her hot water bottle..."

Krolo wasn't listening. He was staring at Clot's feet and un-slippering them with his eyes.

He was jealous.

Slippers. He wanted a pair just like that.

Krolo couldn't resist the temptation. He went over and stood with his boots on the pointy bit of Clot's slippers. Then, using the arm that still functioned, Krolo gave a great whack that sent the rest of Clot flying thirty paces.

A few minutes later, Major Krolo knocked on the Great Candle Bearer's door. The wind was howling.

"She wants the candle," he explained through the wood.

Someone opened a shutter. A small face appeared in the gap. It was the Great Candle Bearer himself. Even on a night as dark as this, it was clear that he wasn't someone to mess with. He had a stretched head that looked like a bone, and two red, sickly eyes. He closed the shutter again and reappeared on the doorstep, grumbling.

The Great Candle Bearer was short and hunchbacked. He carried a candle protected by a lantern, and he hid his hump under a dark cloak with a cowl that shaded his face.

He stopped for a moment to look at Krolo's feet. Major Krolo blushed and went up and down on his toes several times while looking at the ground.

"They're slipperties," he explained.

Without saying a word, the Great Candle Bearer followed the Major.

The whole region was a confusion of twigs. You had to know the route to avoid getting lost in this enormous

ball of branches so different from the rest of the Tree. On a clear moonlit night it was possible to see what this huge bundle of sticks stuck on the Treetop was.

A nest.

An outsized nest. Not one of those wagtails' nests that a hundred men can easily dismantle in a night. No. It was a nest that seemed to go on forever. A nest once inhabited by a giant bird in the highest branches.

The use of fire was forbidden in this parched landscape. That right was granted to the Great Candle Bearer alone, who was called upon in cases of absolute necessity. So who could possibly be disturbing the Great Candle Bearer for a simple hot water bottle?

The fog was getting thicker. The Major walked in front. With each step, he nearly came unstuck in the slippers he had stolen from Clot.

"A hot water bottle! Far be it for me to criticise," he muttered, "but I really don't think the boss should give in to the girl's every wish..."

The Great Candle Bearer didn't say anything, which is a top tip for looking clever. Not that he had anything to fear from being compared to Krolo. Next to the Major, a potty would have looked like an intellectual.

The Great Candle Bearer came to an abrupt halt. There was a noise behind him. He turned and lifted his lantern. A damp breeze made his black hood flap. He had the strange feeling that he was being followed. He peered into the darkness but didn't see the shadow that had slid all the way along a branch, landing on another and crouching down, just above them.

"Are you coming, Great Candle Bearer?" the Major called out.

The Great Candle Bearer hesitated, and then started walking again.

The shadow was still following them, three paces away, undetected.

Despite the first impression of chaos, it soon became clear that the labyrinthine Nest was perfectly organised. Lanterns glimmered at specific junctures. These powerful lamps served to light the way on moonless nights, and as beacons in the fog.

They were cold lamps, each one was made up of a

pyramid-shaped cage with a glow-worm inside it. These lamp-worms were reared specifically for the purpose. Two or three Master Worm Rearers were renowned for the quality of their worms. They formed a thriving corporation that was the envy of the rest of the Tree who had been living in poverty and fear for a long time.

The Treetop Nest was clean, the twigs had been planed down and the intersections were reinforced with rope. Stairs had been sculpted out of the steepest passageways. Mixed in with the wood and dry moss, hollow straw provided an impressive network of tunnels leading to the heart of the Nest.

There was obviously a superior intelligence behind this citadel of dead wood. It was a frozen world, austere even, but one that had been perfectly designed. So who was the architect behind the Treetop Nest? It wasn't just the creation of a bird's brain.

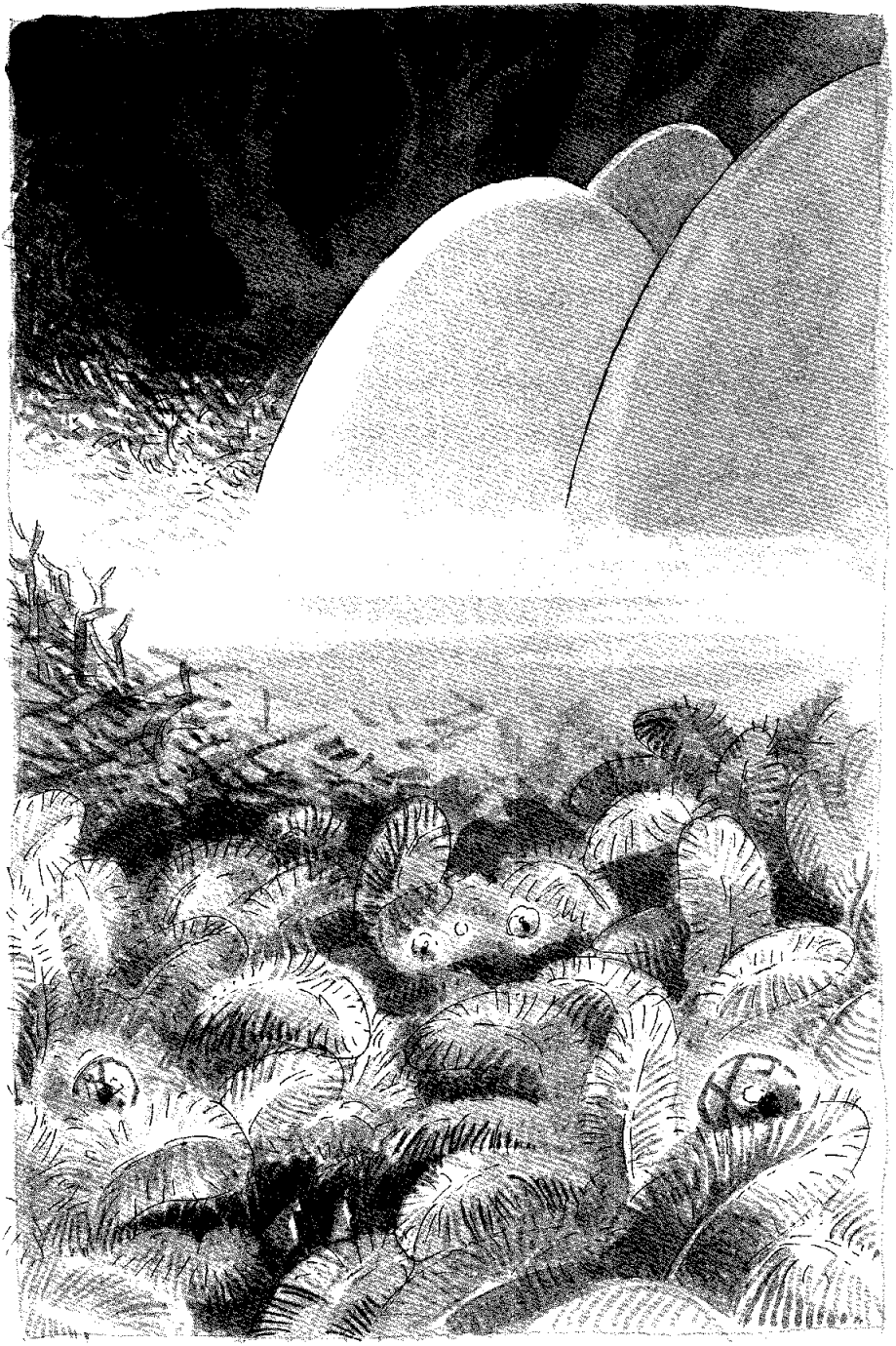
When the two men reached the top of the Nest, a blast of wind unveiled something even more fascinating from behind the mist.

Pointing towards the sky, pink and smooth as a baby's cheek, three hundred cubits high, and perfect in form and majesty, three Eggs rose up.

They looked like tall towers whose tips snagged the shreds of mist.

"The Eggs!" the Major shouted, as if his companion hadn't noticed.

They climbed one last slope of dead wood and stopped



to breathe in the night air. A storm had left a smell of powder in the atmosphere. It only remained for them to cross the White Forest: a forest of down and feathers that covered the heart of the Nest and protected the Eggs. Three paths had been cleared through this undergrowth. The rest of the jungle was as spotless and pure as a snowy landscape.

One hour later, the sentries of the South Egg saw two men approaching. It all happened so fast. They let the Great Candle Bearer climb onto the footbridge that penetrated the Egg. He disappeared inside the shell.

Outside, one of the guards appeared to be hypnotised by Krolo's feet.

"They're slipperties," the Major explained, with false modesty.

The other guards drew near. "You what?"

"Slipperties," a fat soldier repeated.

"They're what?"

"Slipperties!" Krolo roared.

Not one of them had noticed, on top of the Egg, at a dizzying height, the shadow that was climbing the wall and spying down on them.

Soon, the Great Candle Bearer reappeared on the footbridge. He was walking quickly and looked furious. Krolo wanted to interrogate him about the prisoner, but the Great Candle Bearer pushed him aside dismissively. He was heading for the White Forest.

"The Great Candle Bearer isn't happy," the guards remarked to each other.

"What can she have done?" asked the Major.

They couldn't see the Great Candle Bearer's expression. He was hidden under his cloak. Krolo caught up with him.

"I'll accompany you, Great Candle Bearer."

They ran into Soldier Clot almost immediately, as he was climbing barefoot up through the White Forest.

Clot's dressing gown was in tatters and some of his teeth were broken, but he was mostly in shock from what he had discovered on Krolo's departure. The butterfly ... the poor animal lay dying before his eyes, banished from the sky forever. Was the Major capable of this horror?

"Ith not pothible," he whispered.

In that whack from Krolo, Clot had lost seven teeth and a great deal of innocence. Krolo wasn't a big baby: he was a murderer. Nothing less. And the emotion welling up inside Clot was anger.

"Nathty beathtie..."

Clot watched the two men pass by. The Major didn't even notice him. Soldier Clot was on the lookout for the slippers that Krolo had stolen from him. Oddly, his gaze came to rest on another pair of feet.

The Great Candle Bearer's.

"Cwikey ... cwumbth..."

Clot froze. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Two small feet.

Two small, white feet.

Two small, white feet that showed at the bottom of the coat with every step. Two feet that looked like stars when they brushed against the cloth of the cape.

Two feet so fine, so light, so supple... Two feet so soft you wanted to be a branch, just to feel them walking over you. Two angel's feet.

Clot nearly swallowed his remaining teeth.

"Cwikey Cwot, an old Gwate Candle Beawah with feet like that..."

The rest of the figure was dark. The cowl hid his face. Clot couldn't help smiling. He went on his way as if he hadn't seen anything.

When the two travellers reached the entrance to the White Forest, the Great Candle Bearer with angel's feet put down the lamp and lifted up a great log of a feather shaft that was blocking the way. Surprised, Krolo went up to him.

"Is there a problem?"

In the minute that followed, the forest rang out with the sound of Major Krolo roaring eight times in succession.

The first roar was when the heavy feather struck him on the feet.

The second roar was when the Great Candle Bearer leapt on the feather, crushing Krolo's toes still more.

The third was roar when the Great Candle Bearer, swift as lightning, landed on Krolo's shoulders, right on his wound.

The fourth roar was when, hands diving under the poor Major's coat, the Great Candle Bearer pulled his elastic braces and, in a flash, fixed them on a log above him.

And to finish off the scale harmoniously, Krolo let out four long shrieks of horror when he realised, as fast as his poor brain could register, that he was trapped.

His feet were stuck on the ground and his braces, stretched towards the sky like archery bows, threatened to send him flying into space if he pulled himself free of the log.

He was catapult and cannonball at the same time. Especially the cannonball.

A second later, Angel Feet landed softly on the ground. He picked up his lamp. A breeze gently drew his cowl back from his forehead and his face appeared in the lamplight.

It wasn't exactly the Great Candle Bearer's bony head.

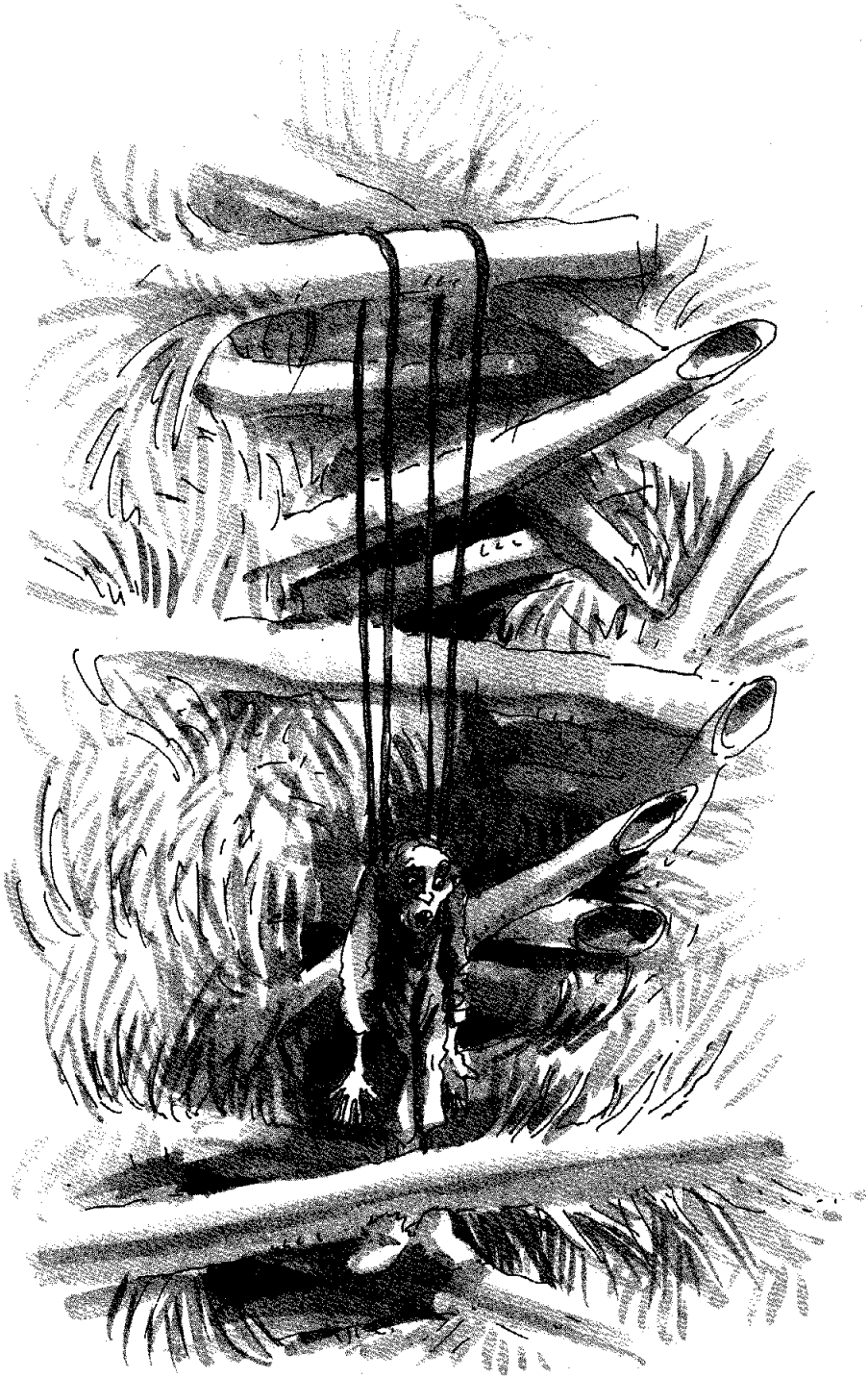
They were the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the perfect oval face of a sixteen-year-old girl. You could say she was pretty but, in the Tree, there are twenty-five pretty girls for every branch.

No, she was better than pretty.

"The prisoner..." breathed Krolo.

It had only taken one minute for this nuisance to crush the Great Candle Bearer in her Egg. She had stolen his clothes and left the prison in his place.

The Major tried to raise the alarm, but the girl gently put her foot on the feather. In one movement, she could roll away the weight that was keeping Krolo in contact



with the ground, and that would be enough to send him flying up into the air. So the Major chose to keep quiet.

The prisoner pulled the cowl back over her eyes and turned her back on him.

After taking a few steps into the White Forest, she stopped. She could feel fine water droplets left on her cheeks by the mist, the wind blowing between her feet. A few fronds of white feather were strewn on her coat. She felt good.

Freedom wasn't far now. She closed her eyes for a moment.

Ten times she had tried to escape. Last time lucky. She clenched her fists and her body was pumped up with wild hope.

A quiet rustling sound in front of her. Then another, to her left.

No, she thought. *No...*

At first, she didn't dare open her eyes.

All hope drained away.

Behind each of those feathers that disappeared into the mist, a soldier rose up. Dozens of armed men aimed their crossbows at her.

In the candlelight, they saw her smile. A joyful, insolent smile that made those surrounding her tremble.

Not one of them could see how, in the shadow of her cowl, Elisha's eyes were glistening with tears.

She was caught.