

from “The Cleverness of Elsie” in

THE SEA-RABBIT, OR, THE ARTIST OF LIFE

by Wendy Walker

... *A*nd then, one evening, as the young man was sitting at table with the family, Elsie’s mother, who wished to show off her daughter’s domestic grace, bade the girl go down to the cellar to fetch their guest some beer. So Elsie, who was not so quick-witted that she did not find the prospect of marriage enticing, promptly rose from the table, took the beer-jug down from its peg on the wall, opened the door to the cellar and started down the dark stairs.

Elsie believed that she could see a great deal more than other people in commonplace experiences, and the journey down that steep tunnel had been, ever since her coddled childhood, a venturesome foray such as heroes in ballads conduct, a mysterious lark. Once upon a time her fear of the dark had rendered the errand thrilling and dangerous, but now that she had outgrown that fear, she had been forced back on her own shamefully indulged resources to nourish the marvels upon which she had grown so dependent. It seemed to her that echoes were the audible life of shadows, for when she stood on the first stair and made the lid of the jug go clapperty-clap, the small, delicate resonances made the overlapping scales of the shadows more vivid, so that she understood that every long tube was really a serpent, that serpents had scales inside as well as out, and that there were more snakes living under the earth than most people realized. She was always most respectful of this serpent, the lining of whose belly in darkness was rough and various as a panoramic landscape of tiny, invisible beings, scored with ridges and harsh terrain, relieved by blank plains and unscouted outcroppings. The snake bore a whole world of unsuspected kingdoms, seemingly at peace—but who knew what went on when she was not there?—in its extended belly. The long vertebrae of bone upon which she made her way down, they too bore attending to, for the first plank, so sturdy and solid, yet exhaled a flawed resistance to her careful tread, as though it might, from some deep uncontrollable malevolence, suddenly tumble her down the stairs; and the second breathed the most querulous noises, no matter how gently she put her foot down upon it, as though the slightest need of another being caused it pain; and the third was so thick and strongly hewn it seemed totally somnolent, a giant that could not be bothered to notice the parasitical advantage a weary insect might take of it; the fourth always squealed with surprise and a pleasure she knew it felt, though it might vainly, creaking, deny it; the fifth step wobbled, but made no noise, as though it were a dumb philosopher intent on doing the best it could, by signs, to convey its sense of the universe; and the sixth step, having a hollow knot exactly in the middle of its plank, which she invariably found with the mound of her heel, always reminded her of the depths beyond depths here, and everywhere; while the seventh, which had been laid at a slight slant, seemed to provoke some defense on her part, for she felt that it wished to cast aspersions on her balanced and peaceful conception of the world; and the eighth step, the last, always let out a groan, that she had safely reached the bottom, as though it could not bear that some human beings should succeed. It is hardly surprising that Elsie, subject to vivid imaginations such as these, should consider the world beneath the floor, spare as it was, superior to the household domain above. But because household chores provided her with such endless opportunity for discovery and amusement, she bore no grudge against women’s work as such; she always regarded a chore as

a pretext for getting to know the objects and spaces involved. Once at the foot of the stairwell she set the lid to clapping first loudly and rapidly, then softly and slowly, and then loudly and slowly, to hear how the dark would respond. And when she had amused herself in this way for some time, she peered around to locate the three-legged stool. She wanted to find this stool because it always struck her that stooping before the beer-barrel was an action absolutely fraught with danger. What if she should hurt her back by bending over so far? There were so many muscles in the orderly tangle of the lower loins that one could hurt—why, she had seen them shine, veiled, intertwined hillocks, in the sweating torsos of men in the fields! There was only so much one could control, and she could not even see those muscles in herself—she could not twist her head so far—no wonder her parents did not fetch the beer themselves! She found the little three-legged creature lurking in a corner, and set it down in front of the spigot.

Carefully, she seated herself, folding back the lid of the jug, and planted it under the shining hook. She opened the spigot, and as the beer poured into the jug she busied her eyes with contemplating the wall before and above her. It was at that moment her imagination really set to work.

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