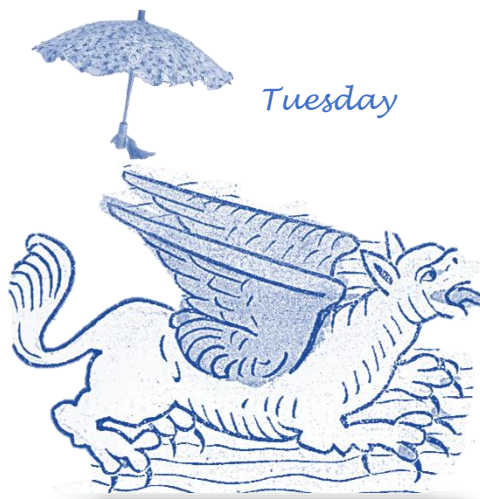




Tuesday

March 6, 2020



“For one griffin there will bear, flying to his nest, a great horse, if he may find him at the point, or two oxen yoked together as they go at the plough. For he hath his talons so long and so large and great upon his feet, as though they were horns of great oxen or of bugles or of kine, so that men make cups of them to drink of.”

“Give me a break!” said Bombònica and placed the book upside down on her desk: it was the 1900 Macmillan edition of Sir John Mandeville’s *Travels*. “Mrs. Bonaventure’s creature could

barely hold a rat in its claws; and it really doesn’t have such long and large and great talons. I don’t suppose the lady bought the griffin to make drinking cups from them. Anyway I wonder why she didn’t acquire a unicorn, it would’ve been a more suitable choice for a lady.”

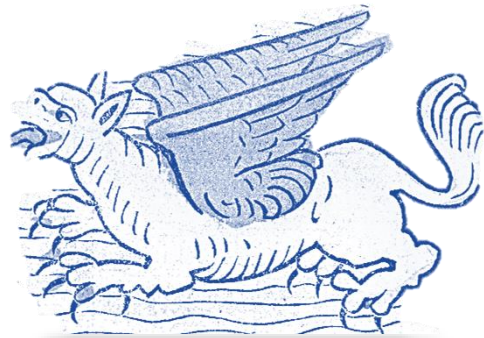
Then she thought a little more and came to two conclusions: one, Mrs. Bonaventure had a moustache, which was usually considered a masculine trait, so naturally she was prone to making acquisitions believed to be appropriate for a man—such as a griffin; two, there was something really weird about the griffin itself: it did not have an eagle’s head and, consequently, it was not equipped with a hooked beak. Then how on Earth could it have grabbed the rubber ring with that flat lion’s mouth?

On Monday evening the rubber ring had been reaffixed to the bathroom shower handle, so this morning there had been no bathroom incidents. But the question remained: who and for what purpose could have stolen the ring, and how did the ring get into Mrs. Bonaventure’s griffin’s throat?

That wasn’t really a serious issue, though; there were other things that needed to be considered on a rainy Tuesday morning, and the first one was fixing the umbrella that for months now had been in a state of disrepair. It was a parasol Lalili had inherited from her own mother (that is to say, Bombònica’s grandmother), and as such it was an object of value, sentimentally and historically. For who these days still owned a ninety-year old parasol? “Other than museums and antique shops, of course,” Bombònica thought.

There used to be an umbrella repair shop in Old Town, but it was more than a decade since it was closed down and replaced with a pie shop (which was still known as *The Little Umbrella Shop*); obviously the pastry-making ladies, however nice and obliging, didn’t know zilch about fixing broken umbrellas.

But Bombònica recalled that old Mr. Theodore MacRobius had once mentioned he knew a thing or two about umbrellas. Mr. MacRobius lived in a little house right across the street from one of the secondary entrances to the Park—more specifically, the one leading to the little train children used to take pleasure rides on of a Saturday and Sunday afternoon. It was a darling of a train, each car painted a different color, the locomotive a bright red, the mechanic wearing a

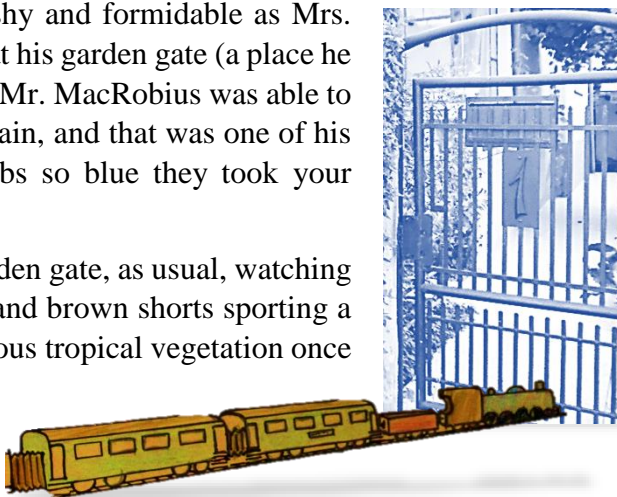




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peaked cap and a moustache almost as bushy and formidable as Mrs. Bonaventure's. From his observation point at his garden gate (a place he almost never left, especially on sunny days) Mr. MacRobius was able to greet folks who took their kids to ride the train, and that was one of his pleasures besides growing hydrangea shrubs so blue they took your breath away.

Bombònica found him leaning over the wooden gate, as usual, watching people go by. He was wearing a pink shirt and brown shorts sporting a palm tree print, in remembrance of the glorious tropical vegetation once abounding on the surrounding hills. That was no longer the case and had not been since times immemorial, but folks in town liked to pay their respects to regional history by any means available.



“Good day, fair Miss,” he said. “And how are we doing today?”

“I am fine, thanks. And how are you?”

“Oh well, you know, doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Not much. I'm actually waiting for my lady to come pay me a visit tonight. She's coming by the eight o'clock train.”

“I thought you were a widower, Mr. MacRobius.”

“**That**, I've been for many years. This lady I'm talking about—she's not my wife, may God rest her soul; this one's my mistress.”

“Oh, I'm so glad to hear you're still enjoying life!”

“Obviously, I wouldn't wanna miss a minute of it. Even so it's too damn short. You know, she's thirty years my junior ...”

“Who is?”

“My lady, who else?”

“That's nice. So she must be about ...”

“Well, how old do you think I am?”

Bombònica looked at Mr. MacRobius's robust body, rosy cheeks, perfect skin, impeccably cut and combed silver-colored hair, and admirably clear cerulean eyes. There was not one wrinkle on his face; a faint smell of perfume surrounded the man like an invisible cloud, a subtle fragrance in the best of taste. Mr. MacRobius was reported to be purchasing his toiletries from the Sister's shop, and Sister Imelda, who had a crush on him, saw to it that he got the best quality at a modest price—for he was a retiree of no ample financial means (although it was known in the neighborhood he had a son in America who, like all Americans, was a fabulously rich man).

“I'd say you're in your mid-to-late fifties. Well, maybe even in your **very** early sixties, but that seems improbable. You look positively glowing.”

“Mid-to-late fifties?! Lord, that's a good one—and thank you, Miss, for your kindness. I'm eighty three if a day.”



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That was amazing news. Mr. MacRobius continued:

“Truth be told, I’m a little worried: I have a strong suspicion my lady’s being unfaithful.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do say. You know, she’s not a normal person, a regular citizen like Mrs. Bacon or Mrs. Bonaventure—what I’m saying is that she’s an actress, and actors are known to be somewhat frivolous.”

“If that’s the case, I am really sorry. And you being such a nice man.”

“Perhaps I should have stuck to Mrs. Bacon—she and I had something going for a while; I even used to read to her laurel tree now and then. But to tell you the truth, I just couldn’t stand that chimaera of hers. I don’t think I’ve ever known such an obnoxious creature.”

“Yeah, even Mrs. Grosseteste says so, and she has it straight from her billy goat’s mouth. Anyway, I am here to ask whether you would take a look at my umbrella—it’s been broken for a while, and I thought you may be able to fix it.”

“Leave it with me. I’ll take a look once I know where I stand with my lady—I can’t think of anything else right now, I’m too upset. So you’ll have to wait till tomorrow.”

“Thanks. There’s something else I’d like to ask your opinion on: my shower handle O ring was gone yesterday morning, and it turned out Mrs. Bonaventure’s griffin had swallowed it. I can’t think for the life of me how (and especially why) this could have happened. Perhaps you’d have the kindness to give it a thought and let me know if you come up with something.”

“I’ll do that. Mrs. Bonaventure’s griffin is surely much better mannered than Mrs. Bacon’s chimaera. If it was the griffin that stole the ring, it must have had a good reason.”

“Thank you, Mr. MacRobius. I’m going now, and may your day be blessed with the fragrance of freshly harvested herbs and good spices.”

Bombònica left Mr. MacRobius leaning over his garden gate just as she’d found him, and went into the park by the secondary entrance. The little train was running at maximum speed, which was about four kilometers per hour, and Mrs. Bonaventure and her griffin were seated in one of the cars by the window.

Bombònica waved to them and continued walking towards *Friar John’s*, a small beer garden famous for the numerous sets of playing cards which were placed on tables for customers to use while drinking beer or sipping wine or lemonade in a pleasant outdoors setting. The sets had been designed by the Artist of the Sundial, a local celebrity who also enjoyed national attention by winning several national prizes, and who had a marked preference for stark, black-and-white drawings; consequently the card sets looked slick and sober, with no colorful or superfluous elements to disturb the players’ concentration. Everybody knew the owners of

Friar John’s took card playing seriously, and the town’s elite card players had chosen the establishment as their uncontested headquarters.

Mrs. Grosseteste and Mrs. Bacon were playing cards and sipping lemonade under a large umbrella.



Mrs. John



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“My dear,” Mrs. Grosseteste said to Bombònica “I heard that wretched griffin stole and swallowed your shower handle O ring.”

“It wasn’t very nice of it,” said Mrs. Bacon. “My chimaera would never do that, you know.”

“Not if you keep that despicable she-goat under constant surveillance,” thought Bombònica.

“There seems to be a trend these days to steal O-shaped things,” said Mrs. John, who was the co-proprietor of *Friar John’s*, the better half of Mr. John, and one of the featured faces in the playing card sets. “Someone’s stolen the letter ‘O’ from all the labels on my *Caballero* wine bottles. All of them, no exception. It’s really weird.”

“You mean, erased,” said Bombònica.

“No, I mean stolen. Cut out and taken away: first they detached each label from each bottle, then they cut out the letter ‘O,’ and then they reattached the labels.”

“How strange. How many bottles were there?” said Mrs. Bacon.

“Twenty seven.”

“That’s three times nine, and nine is three times three, and three is a perfect number for it evokes the Trinity and it’s also found in the triple note values of medieval motets,” said Bombònica.

“You don’t say,” said Mrs. John.

“I do say: *Notandum quod omnis perfectio in musica mensurabilis constat in ternario numero*. It must be noted that all perfection in measurable music consists in the ternary number’.”

“Says who?” asked Mrs. Bacon.

“Everybody who knows their stuff. Aristotle says at the beginning of *De caelo et mundo* that through the ternary number we apply ourselves to praise God, the eminent creator of the properties of all created things.”

“I think I knew that—it’s a bit of information traditionally held to be true in my family ever since the times of my deceased husband’s ancestor, Friar Roger,” said Mrs. Bacon, stirring the lemonade in her glass. “Pardon me,” she turned to Mrs. John “but for some reason the sugar is not completely dissolved.”

“Yes,” continued Bombònica. “Aristotle also said the ternary number holds in itself the unit—which is the beginning of numbers, and contains duality—which is the first number.”

“Oh yeah,” put in Mrs. Grosseteste “in ancient times, still according to Aristotle, when the gentiles wanted to honor and praise God and men, they always made triple libations, meaning if they wanted to offer sheep or lambs, pigeons or turtle-doves or whatever else, they always offered three of these, because the ternary number was reputed among them as more perfect than all other numbers. I seem to recall something along those lines was once told me by my late husband, who had it from his father, who in turn had it from his own father, and so on down the line all the way back to Magister Robert Grosseteste, may his soul rest in peace and may God grant him a place in Heaven.”





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“It’s already been granted,” Mrs. Bacon said. “Roberta, won’t you have some of these oven-baked chips? They’re delicious. I’m going to take some back home for my chimaera: she loves salty stuff.”

“And laurel leaves,” said Bombònica.

It was mid-day by now, and the town carillon could be clearly heard as Mr. Basil van Tcheluk’s head was seen popping from behind the neatly clipped hedge separating the beer garden from the street proper. He had a pensive look and was taking small and deliberate steps, one for each bell ring, so it took him a while to reach the ladies’ table. His head was surrounded by



diaphanous curls of blue smoke that lent him the appearance of an angel about to ascend to Heaven, for he was engaged in one of his favorite occupations, which was smoking a smuggled Ukrainian cigarette.



Bombònica identified him as the individual who’d stopped her on Sunday at the corner of Holossy and Red Creek streets.

“Ladies, I have the distinct honor of saluting you,” he said, and gave off yet another little round cloud of smoke; then one more.

“O-shaped! They’re O-shaped!” said Mrs. John.

“Of course,” Mr. van Tcheluk said. “They’re curls of smoke. It’s hard, you know, to make them: they require a special technique. I’ve been practicing for years, and the thing is that if you don’t keep at it, you’ll lose the skill. I can make them in any shape: round, spiral, oval—you name it. I can even make them in the shape of the number ‘8’. I’m an artist, and my specialty is designing (albeit on a very small scale, since to the best of my knowledge I am the only person to do it) cigarette smoke clouds, also known as smoke curls. As a matter of fact, I’ve been hired by a local private art school to instruct interested retirees on how to create such shapes.”



“Let me take a look,” Mrs. John said. She put on her glasses, which she kept in the apron pocket, and got closer to Mr. van Tcheluk.

“Jesus!” she exclaimed. “These are the ‘O’s from my *Caballero* wine bottle labels! Shame on you, Mr. van Tcheluk.”

“So he’s the author of that despicable burglary!” said Mrs. Bacon. “Not that I know him well, but I always took him to be a person of mild manners and peaceful demeanor, and would have never imagined he’d lower himself to cutting out and stealing individual letters from bottle labels.”

“I was pushed to it by unfavorable circumstances,” pleaded Mr. van Tcheluk. “You see, these smuggled cigarettes cannot generate any smoke, let alone curls of smoke, no matter how great one’s skills are or how hard one tries, and without the little O-shaped clouds there’s really not much left of the pleasure of smoking. Besides, these accursed smugglers are depriving me of my livelihood, so I thought I’d temporarily remedy that by appropriating some of your ‘O’s, Mrs. John. I was going to explain later, but it was urgent that I should acquire some when I last had a glass of *Caballero* wine at *Friar John’s* and saw the bottles neatly arranged behind the counter. Your husband was busy with a newlywed couple, so I had them to myself for a while.”





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“That I understand,” said Mrs. John. “But you should have asked me: I’m not one to lend a deaf ear to the needs of an impoverished artist. You know every now and then even I succumb to the pleasures of creating little darling drinking cups from the occasional griffin’s talons (although Mr. John disapproves of it, and Mrs. Bonaventure is adamant I should give up the whole idea). You may have seen them on some of the tables by the main entrance, next to those playing card sets designed by the Artist of the Sundial. But how on Earth you managed to have the letters float in the air like real curls of smoke beats me.”

“Mrs. Bonaventure’s creature is not exactly what I’d call a standard griffin,” cut in Mrs. Grosseteste. “My billy-goat is a thousand times truer to the nature of its own species. Why that griffin doesn’t even have a hooked beak. It can’t even spit fire through its mouth.”

Mr. van Tcheluk ignored her interruption and went on:

“You see, Mrs. John, inflating these ‘O’s so they look like delicate, weightless smoke ringlets is not that easy, either. You have to blow air into them like there was no tomorrow, but I needed to show my students and admirers alike that I won’t give up in the face of misfortunes of any kind.”

“Well you can keep them, that’s what I say,” replayed Mrs. John. “Not the misfortunes, you understand: the ‘O’s. Keep them and be happy; anyway it won’t make a difference to my customers if those letters are gone from the labels. The wine will still be excellent.”

Suddenly there was loud shouting and cries for help: Mrs. Bonaventure was running towards *Friar John’s* at a speed unusual for her, for she was, as I said before, a person of some bulk; her Almería silk dress was in great disarray, and her alms purse was swinging spasmodically below her *ceinturette* like a deranged grandfather clock pendulum. She was closely followed by her griffin, who was batting its wings and spitting fire through its lion-like mouth.

“Help! Help! Mr. MacRobius is dead.”

Mr. van Tcheluk’s little ‘O’-shaped curls of smoke froze in the air.

“I was riding the little train passed Mr. MacRobius’s house,” said Mrs. Bonaventure, pressing both hands against her generous bosom, almost out of breath.

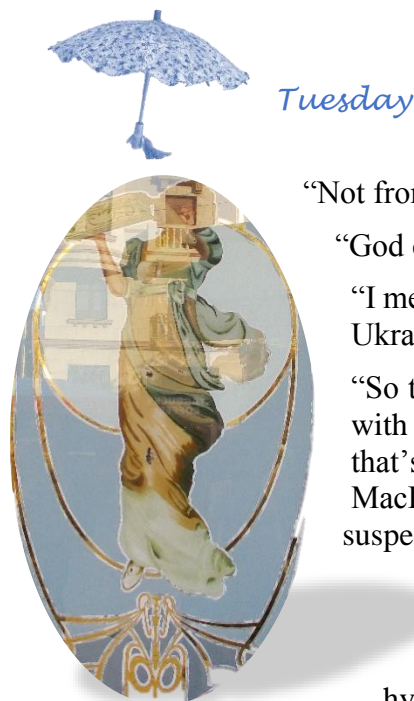
It was noticeable that the polish on the lady’s nails had been neglected for a while and was almost gone in places. Mrs. Bonaventure went on:

“He was watching people from behind his garden gate, as he usually does, and I waived to him as I usually do; the next thing I know is I saw him collapse. I disembarked and ran to him as fast as I could—it was useless: he’d already died; I think he had a heart attack. My griffin here witnessed all of it and I think it might have affected it—psychologically, I mean—in a bad way: why look at it, it’s spitting fire through its mouth! He’d never done that before. Poor creature, it must have had a shock.”

“I think I know what this is about,” thought Bombònica.

“You know,” said Mrs. Bacon, “I suspect this has something to do with that woman of his. That wretched actress.”

“Yeah,” said Mrs. Grosseteste, “it must have been woman trouble, for sure. I always knew that lady was bad news. She wasn’t good for him, what with the age difference and her frivolous ways. I think the relationship put a lot of stress on poor Mr. MacRobius. These actresses, you know, they’re not at all like the rest of us. I mean look at the way she used to dress, with that long, flowing thing made of semi-transparent fabric smuggled in from God knows where. Anyway, I say, may God rest his soul.”



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“Not from the Ukraine, for sure,” added Mr. van Tcheluk.

“God cannot rest his soul from the Ukraine,” Mrs. Grossesteste said.

“I meant the fabric: it’s too stylish to have been smuggled in from the Ukraine.”

“So there’s no one left now to fix my umbrella, which anyway I left with him and have no way of recovering” thought Bombònica. “If that’s the case,” she said aloud “I mean if that lady is the cause of Mr. MacRobius’s death, albeit indirectly, it means he was right in suspecting she was cheating on him.”

“That’s probably true,” said Mrs. Bacon. “You know I always had a good opinion of him not so much on account of his own achievements (among which growing blue hydrangeas must have been the greatest) but on account of the indisputable merits of his ancestor, Mr. Ambrose Macrobius who wrote that wonderful book, the *Commentarii ex Cicerone in somnium Scipionis*.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bonaventure, now looking partially recovered, “the work which is based on Book VI of Cicero’s *De re publica*.”

“You know Mr. MacRobius and I had something going for a while,” confessed Mr. Bacon “and once at his house I saw an old manuscript (I believe it was from the fourteenth century, but I may be wrong) including that work: it used to be kept at Christ Church, Canterbury, but he wouldn’t tell me how he got it.”

“He was a rather secretive man,” concluded Mrs. Bonaventure.

“I’d better call the family doctor,” Mrs. John said abruptly and went behind the counter where the *Caballero* wine bottles stood at attention like so many diminutive glass soldiers.

Bombònica didn’t think there was any point in staying any longer, for there wasn’t anything anyone could do anymore for Mr. Theodore MacRobius, so she said good bye and walked back home with small, deliberate steps. While doing so she composed the following epitaph:

Oh poor Mister MacRobius

He died a death so dubious

Because of someone infamous:

A lady most mellifluous

She seemed, but she was treacherous,

An actress very frivolous

Who wasn’t even serious

In love (a thing so glorious).

Of manners most delightful

Was he.



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She treated him so frightful

Did she?

Her kisses were delicious

But

Her love was plain fictitious

Her manners downright poisonous.

She truly was malicious

And her demands were ruinous

A lady really venomous

Was she.

MacRobius was generous,

Although a little credulous—

Some say he was ridiculous.

The situation's dolorous.



By the time Bombònica got back home she realized she missed her umbrella very much.

Notes

For Aristotle, see *De caelo* 1.1.

For Macrobius, see *Ambrosii Theodosii Macrobiani Commentarii in somnium Scipionis*, ed. James Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970); an English translation is available in *Macrobius, Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, translated with introduction and notes by W. H. Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).



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