

*Lady Cecylee Neville (1415-1495) was born a few months before King Henry V's glorious victory at Agincourt. When she was nine years old, she was betrothed to Richard, Duke of York, a cousin to King Henry VI. Eventually, Cecylee became the mother of thirteen children, including Edward IV and his younger brother Richard III, whose bones were recently discovered beneath a car park in Leicester. Lady Cecylee's six hundredth birthday occurred on 3 May 2015. This piece tells of an adventure she had recently.*



Since my death, I have tried to stay abreast of the goings-on in this world of ours. and I must confess I am most curious about this twenty-first century. Never before have ladies held power so openly. But it is not just the ladies that interest me, but the toys they play with. Truly, it is magical. Fancy being able to talk to someone miles away whom you cannot see. Or fix the image of a person for eternity. Or do calculations merely by moving your fingers around. Or convert currency. And all on a little thingy that is about the size of a pack of playing cards.

My scribe remarked recently that my six hundredth birthday was nigh, so on the occasion of the marking of my Great Age, I decided to pay a visit, closing my eyes to make my wish.



When I opened my eyes, I was staring at a something I didn't understand. I appeared to be in a guardroom, because everything was in muted colors, creams, silvers, blacks. On top of a marble bench sat something that might be an animal. I had to peer closely at it, as I couldn't see clearly. It was as if I were gazing through some thin gauzy curtains. Every so often, the curtains would lift and shift as if disturbed by a breeze. Then they would settle and the scene would

gradually grow clearer. The animal resembled a cat with deep sea-green eyes and orange fur. But something wasn't quite right, because it was bigger than most cats that I knew, and it seemed—softer somehow. I studied it carefully. Underneath its fur were not muscles and skin, but—padding. It didn't look quite real.

“Look!” it exclaimed.

I jumped back, startled. Had that cat spoken?

It held up a large sheaf of something, some very large sheets of finely made paper so fine that the light shone through. I had never seen paper with such evenly made fineness in my life. It reminded me of a bolt of silk. As I scrutinized it, I realized it was covered all over with extremely small writing. Or rather, marks formed by moveable type, of the sort used by Master Caxton.

“British Government Contemplates Robot Rights,” declared the cat, flourishing those papers.

“Why would that be a problem?” asked a deep voice. The contrast in pitch made me realize that the strange cat must be female. I looked around. Another shape materialized, but this time it was off-white. Large and roundish, it possessed a bear-shaped face. But what drew my attention was its bow-tie, which was pink and covered in blue flowers.

I have seen bears before. During my girlhood, I inhabited a castle in a rather wild part of the country on the Scotch Marches, and there were plenty of wild animals there, howling wolves, snuffling boar, and cantankerous bear. But the bears I'd seen were black or brown, and were large, muscly, fearsome creatures. This thing was not only the wrong color, it was—stuffed. Like

that strange cat, no muscle nor sinew rippled below its skin. It appeared padded with something, mayhap down feathers, and its stuffing made it strangely docile, even sweet-natured.

Then it came to me. These must be *Pouppées*, the toys of a Royal child. Soon he would come toddling into the room. Perhaps my scribe wanted me to meet him, for I have a large experience of children, being the mother of thirteen.

The toy bear continued to speak.

“Why would it be a problem if Roomba and Scooba bestir themselves to present their case? You say they’ll become too uppish, but you don’t have to contend with them, our companion does.”

He must be talking about the children that own these toys. What were their names? I always pride myself on my ability to remember the little one’s names, they get so upset if one forgets them. But Roomba and Scooba? What strange names to bestow on children. Poor little things.

But the bear hadn’t finished. What a talkative toy he was.

“When she’s switched them on, you take off for the nearest spot out of reach,” he remarked.

I had no idea what he was talking of. But that cat twitched her tail, and grimaced.

“They un-nerve me. Ugh! I cannot bear the touch of their sensors. And those funny noises they make aren’t natural. If Roomba and Scooba can glide off to Whitehall and beep for their rights, why not us?”

Where were we? The only clear thing I understood is that we must be somewhere near the Palace of Whitehall, which is in London. I was back in the Land of England, but ’twas very

strange, scarce recognizable from when I left it. Where were the servants scurrying around? The guards? Where were the wall hangings, and the elaborate furniture? Most of all, where were the fireplaces with their roaring fires? Truly, I found myself in a strange place. But I had to pin down my wandering thoughts, because the conversation was heating up. As I stood between them, moving my head from side to side as if watching a game of shuttle-cock, these two strange beings began to argue.

“We’re not robots,” declared the bear.

“We’re animals, Augustus,” said the cat. “We should have rights too.”

“We’re not animals, Pandora,” remarked Augustus. “Do we bleed, when we are pricked?”

“Why does having blood matter?” demanded Pandora the Cat.

Augustus the Bear ignored her. “You’re not quite real,” he declared rather foolhardily, for Pandora looked as if she were on the verge of throttling him. Then she said something that amazed me.

“I must be real,” she declared. “I have ideas. What about Duchess Cecylee? Is she real? I thought she was just a figment of the imagination of our companion, who writes historical novels.”

As she pronounced my name, those shimmering curtains dissolved and I found myself standing right there in front of these two beings who persisted with their argument.

“She was alive once,” said Augustus the Bear.

“She’s dead now,” replied Pandora the Cat, swishing her tail, “whereas we are very much alive.

I daresay I should have kept my peace, but Pandora annoyed me so with her supercilious tone. I decided to intervene.

“What mean you that I be dead?” I demanded. As I became more fully present, I realized I was dressed in my court gown, a deep plum velvet with a train several feet long. I put my hand out to feel for my headdress. Judging by the weight, it was that pointed one with the fluttering silk veil. I had to keep my chin jutted out in order that it did not fall off. As I adjusted my posture to balance it on my head, these pets turned to stare at me. They seemed surprised. And now I thought of it, I had never met a pet, or toy, in that long-ago Land of England that could talk.

I spied a piece of furniture that looked as if it might be a chair, and made my way slowly out of the guardroom towards a carpeted area with tables and chairs.

“What be this matter I hear concerning Robber Rights?” I remarked, seating myself.

“They’re called robots,” snapped Pandora.

“Robots use technology,” said Augustus coming forward. He took the chair opposite. Both chairs curved in a half circle at the back, perched on silver legs, and were covered all over in brown velvet. Between us sat a table made of some substance like glass, for I could see the carpets on the floor through it. I regarded it dubiously. Would it shatter if I placed a goblet of mulled wine on it? I was dying for some refreshment, but I had to put that thought aside as Augustus continued to speak.

“Scooba washes floors, and Roomba cleans the carpet. They both work automatically.”

“What means automatically?” I asked.

“It means you don’t have to do anything.”

I frowned. I had never heard that word before, yet it described my life perfectly.

“I never had to lift a finger whilst I lived all those years ago,” I observed. “I was a Great Lady.”

“You never did a hand’s turn in your life,” spat Pandora.

My cheeks warmed. “I like not your tone.”

“Robots are smart,” observed Augustus, giving Pandora a look. “Scooba and Roomba do their work without bumping into objects. Let me show you Roomba.”

I shivered. I must be in a Necromancer’s Castle. Was he evil or good? He must be mightily powerful if he could make animals speak, and inert objects move around the room. When was he going to materialize? What would he do to me once he appeared? Prickles of unease wound their way from the back of my neck, down my spine, and along my arms, as my stomach clenched into a cold fist.

While these thoughts stirred in my mind, Augustus opened a small door in the wall of an entryway and brought out an object shaped like a large platter, such as we would have employed to serve peacock, or boar, at one of our great feasts. However, this thing that was supposed to move around objects squatted on the floor quietly.

“It goeth not,” I remarked. “Is it dead?”

“You have to push its button,” said Pandora, jumping down onto the carpeted floor, and coming to stand beside my chair.

I gazed into her sea-green eyes. What in Heaven’s name did she mean?

“It’s that round thing there on the front. You press it.”

I trusted her not. She was up to some trick, and I would not be a party to her wiles.

“Would you do it for me?” I asked Augustus. “I like not the sound of this. It smells of the Black Arts.”

Augustus leaned forward and depressed the round disc with his paw. Immediately, the platter shaped object moaned deep in its throat, and began to move onto the carpeted floor, devouring bits of it as it went.

“How can that be?” I asked, unable to tear my eyes away. “Before he was dead, and now he lives.” I threw myself down on my knees. “We must give thanks!” I exclaimed.

Pandora rolled her eyes. “Oh God,” she said, as she jumped up onto the marble bench that separated the carpeted area from the guardroom.

“We must pray,” I repeated, ignoring her rudeness. I turned to Augustus. “What you accomplished was miraculous, like Our Savior bringing Lazarus back from the dead.

”He scratched his head and frowned. “I just pushed a button,” he remarked.

“Don’t bother,” called Pandora, from the marble bench. “She’s never heard of electricity, or motors, or anything like that. You’d be wasting your time on lots of tiresome explanations.”

I seethed, like a pot on the boil, anger making me forget my fear. Just at that moment, Roomba careened into the long velvet train of my plum-colored court gown and growled. My belly lurched as I clutched my arms together across my chest. Was this a form of torture the Necromancer had dreamed up for me? Was the platter going to eat me for dinner?

“Can’t you shut that thing off?” bellowed Pandora.

Augustus leaned forward.

A deafening silence erupted.

I sagged with relief. The platter was dead. He could no longer toy with me. But what had Augustus done? Had he murdered something?

“You have killed the creature,” I exclaimed. “What you have done is most evil. God will punish you.”

“He just turned the damned thing off.” Pandora jumped back down onto the carpeted floor, and stared at me.

I was too distraught to be angry with her. Tears welled in my eyes. I was so relieved the creature was dead, yet I felt a great wrong had been done.

“Every living creature has a soul,” I remarked. “It is our duty to protect them.”

Augustus stood up. “Ummm.” He scratched his head again. “Perhaps it might help if I gave you another demonstration.”

My neck stiffened with fear. Not another creature performing strange acts. Could I manage another such encounter? I shuddered as he walked over to a silver box in the Guardroom. Reluctantly, I followed. He bent down to open a cupboard near the floor, and took out a bottle of liquid.

“This will clean the dishes,” he explained, opening the door to one of the silver boxes, and pouring something into it.

I peered in. There were various things sticking up in a container to one side. Were these weapons? Perhaps they were specially shaped arrows, or knives. Whatever they were, they did not perturb Augustus, who shut the door and pressed a disc marked *Power*. It played a descending major triad in reply.

“It sings,” I exclaimed, relief making me smile. “How did you know what to do?”



“I pushed the button marked *Power*.”

“Can folk read?”

“Everyone reads,” sneered Pandora. “Surely you know that.”

“In my time, folk could not read.”

“*You* lived during the Dark Ages.”

I opened my mouth to reply, when Augustus interrupted.

“There are several different kinds of cleaning you can do.” He indicated a row of buttons.

“These dishes aren’t really dirty, so I’ll press the button that says *Normal Wash*.”

As he pressed another silver disc, the silver box sighed, like a reluctant maid rising from her bed of a morning.

“It sighs as it cleans,” I remarked. “Clearly the creature lives.”

“It’s just a machine,” said Pandora. “Look at it, it’s made of metal. If you touch it, it feels cold.”

By way of response, I felt her orange fur. “You do not have the warmth of a living being,” I said into those sea-green eyes that stared at me unblinkingly. “By your argument, you’re not alive. Of what substance are you made?”

She thumped her tail, and glowered.

“Pandora and I are just stuffed toys,” said Augustus.

“But you can speak,” I said. “Have you souls?”

“What’s that?” asked Augustus.

“’Tis the living spark that you carry with you after death,” I replied. “’Tis that very part of you that never dies. Your soul is marked by your actions in life, and God judges the state of your soul after death.”

Pandora yawned largely into my face. “Who cares about that?” she observed. “I believe in living in the here-and-now. If we don’t do something, Roomba and Scooba will go to Parliament and get their rights and we’ll have nothing. We need to go to Whitehall.”

I wasn’t at all sure that I wanted to help that irritating cat, not to mention those platter-shaped beings, but my husband Richard had fought hard for the people’s rights in the Land of England all those years ago. Folk called him *The People’s Champion*. Mayhap, my task now was to help these creatures, these strange non-people beings who could talk and move around rooms as if they were alive and could exercise Free Will. I drew myself up.

“I’ll go.”

“You?” exclaimed Pandora with disdain. “They’re never going to listen to someone wearing a long velvet dress with a pointed headdress and veil. You look like a witch.”

At that moment, my scribe opened the door and came in.

“I see you’ve met everybody, Lady Cecylee,” she remarked smiling, as she scooped Pandora up into her arms.

“Where are we?”

“This is my apartment. You are standing in my living room. That,” she pointed to the guardroom, “is my kitchen.”

“Lady Cecylee wants to go to Parliament to plead for Robot rights,” remarked Augustus.

My scribe sighed as she sat in one of those moon-backed chairs.

“It’s not so simple.” She stroked Pandora’s orange fur as if she were a real cat. We have to think about what robots are going to be used for. The greatest need is to help nurses move elderly people. Many nurses have been badly injured trying to move them. Robots could do that task instead, and save their backs.”

“So what is the difficulty?” I took the chair opposite, arranging my velvet skirts around my feet.

“We don’t want robots taking decisions into their own hands, because we don’t know if we can trust them to act ethically. It would be a real problem if a robot with the strength to lift people suddenly turned that strength against them, breaking their arms and legs.”

I shuddered. Why had it not occurred to me that these beings could be a force for evil as well as good? Perhaps because they didn’t seem human?

“You do not think they should have rights?” I asked.

“Not until we know a great deal more about them,” said my scribe. “We need a public discussion.”

“I would like to attend such an important meeting,” I remarked. “When is it going to be?”

She smiled. “We don’t do things by formal meetings any more. This discussion will take place in the press, over the airwaves and on social media.”

I was silent. How could I respond to something I didn’t understand? Perhaps I should leave this matter to others. My six hundred years was weighing on me, and I was becoming tired.

My scribe smiled again. “Let us celebrate your birthday.” She went to another silver box in the guardroom-kitchen and drew out a bottle of bubbly wine, and a cake. But best of all was

my present, a silver box the size of a pack of playing cards, which she told me was called an iPhone. I used it to take pictures of my new friends.

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