

## **KNIGHT OF DREAMS**

**By Shelley A. Marshall**

It was a cool autumn day, and the rays of the sun fell through the branches of the trees and spread shadowy arms along the lane. The welcoming fingers of a breeze swept the scents of burning leaves and fallen apples east, shepherded by billowing, white clouds of random shapes and sizes. Nile enthusiastically skipped the two steps as he disembarked from the afternoon school bus, which caused Mrs. O'Leary to call out, "Careful Nile, careful." He shot a glance over his shoulder and smiled at her, and the bus lurched forward, squeaking and groaning its age.

Once the bus was out of sight, he retrieved his sword from its hiding place beneath the ancient oak tree, and continued his heroic quest. He was the proud and noble knight Sir Nile, on his way to rescue the townspeople's treasure and the beautiful princess from the clutches of an evil beast. He was armed with the imagination of a seven-year old child, a head full of stories of King Arthur's knights (which his mother read him each night), and his coveted sword. During his last visit, Nile's grandfather had forged the sword, turning a paint stirrer, some spare wood, glue, rubber tubing, and electrician's tape into a magical sword fit for one of Arthur's knights. Now, making his way up Burgundy Street toward his grand castle, Sir Nile lunged artfully at the looming trees and spanning fences which lined his path. Townspeople, like Mr. Furley or Mrs. Peacock, stopped raking their leaves or washing their cars to hail him as he strode gallantly forward. Sir Nile hoisted his sword high above his head and sliced the air victoriously, as the onlookers left their chores and cheered his passing.

Nile stopped along the path, reached deep into his pant's pocket and took out the plastic spy glass that -- joy of joys -- he had pulled from the cereal box that morning (after digging in it for three days with no luck). He held it tight against one eye and squeezed the other shut. His castle loomed ominously on the horizon. Nile, his two-year old brother Alexander, his parents, and Midnight his faithful dog, lived in a picturesque, two-story, Victorian home with a sizeable basement -- the perfect setting for a growing boy with imagination.

He had left the drawbridge up this morning -- as a defense measure while Sir Nile was away -- and was pleased to see it was still up. The gentle people inside depended on him and his magical sword for protection. He searched for and found the sturdy rope he had tied to the porch column yesterday, and, with a mighty swing, he caught the edge of the porch and scaled the giant wall. Once on the porch -- Sir Nile's balcony -- he leaned over and stared down into the murky depths of the moat trying to spot the vicious water

dwellers, part rat and part serpent, which mercilessly stripped the flesh from trespassers who attempted to storm the castle.

Bored with looking for the vicious yet elusive monsters, he turned to the immense solid oak door, heaved against it and, under his tremendous strength, it gave way with a whining groan. Standing in the grand entrance way, Sir Nile bellowed to the lovely princess that he had arrived to rescue her from the castle dungeon, "Mom I'm home," and before she could answer he bounded up the castle stairs to free his faithful squire from his cell in the tower.

Each day when Nile came home from school he went to wake his little brother from his afternoon nap. Today, unlike others, Alexander was standing in his crib awaiting his brother's arrival. For days now, Nile had been priming Alexander for this night -- a night like no other -- when howls and screams echoed madness, and bushes rustled with an unseen force; when the moon was the only illumination in a black, foreboding sky, and the eye beheld horrific, unimaginable sights; when brave knights and their followers had to be strong and fierce, and when coveted treasures were bestowed upon those courageous and kind enough to survive. Tonight was Halloween.

Sir Nile tousled the tiny squire's flaxen hair and, lowering the crib railing, loosed him from his cell. "Alex, do you know what tonight is?" he whispered conspiratorially into the little squire's ear. Alexander dropped his head, lifted his scrunched up eyes, and put a small hand to his mouth to cover a grin -- tonight was their secret, their adventure -- "Allo-eeen." Alex giggled as Nile became the toe monster searching for little boy's toes to gather for his special toe soup. Then they played with Alexander's bin full of Fisher-Price toys. For a long while the boys played independently, yet together. Alex pretended his Dad got in his station wagon and drive down the ramp of the Fisher-Price garage on his way home from work. Nile pretended the Fisher-Price garage was a castle and lined the figures of his squires and fellow knights along its ramparts in anticipation of a siege. Hours later, Alex looked up from his toys, pointed to the window, and said, "Dawk." Nile turned his attention from the tumultuous battle and looked out the window. The sun was fast losing her battle with the night. "It's time to get ready for trick-or-treating."

Hand in hand, Alexander faithfully followed his knight down the long passageway to Sir Nile's corner room. What remained of the sun's lumination was slipping down the walls and leaving shadows in its wake.

Sir Nile quickly dressed himself and his brother in their costumes. He knew the beautiful princess would cast a skeptical eye when he told her Mrs. Pelley had not assigned reading homework for this evening, but it was true. This afternoon in reading class, Nile had used such charm on Mrs. Pelley that a real

knight would have been proud. He convinced his reading teacher that if he and his classmates told a story of their Halloween adventures in class the next day, that would be as fun as reading aloud.

"Where is my cape?" Nile was tossing clothes, shoes, books, and games aside. "Alex have you seen my cape?" Nile asked, exasperated. The young squire gazed up into his hero's eyes before shaking his head in an unmistakable "No." Sir Nile scooped up his empty treat bag, took hold of his squire's hand, and went gallantly forward in search of his cape.

No sooner had they crossed the threshold of his room than the shadow of the Beast was black on the passageway wall, and shrinking as the Beast approached the corner. Sir Nile pulled his sword from its scabbard, ready to defend his innocent squire and castle against the Beast. They froze and listened attentively to the faint, but rising sound of a metallic clinking came from around the corner and down the hall, and rang in rhythm with the dancing shadow. Alexander fell back, frightened, as the Beast drew near. Sir Nile crouched and pulled his squire down, put his index finger to his lips and signaled silence to Squire Alex, whose lower lip was beginning to quiver -- Alex wanted to be near his brother, but he also wanted to be far away from the scary thing coming down the hall. They were on all fours, creeping slowly forward, when the Beast rounded the corner and was upon them. They were bowled over by a blur of black fur and slobbery tongue. Midnight, the dog, had found them.

When the boys regained their feet, Nile sheathed his scabbard and Midnight, tail wagging furiously, landed happy wet kisses on Alexander's smiling face. Moving cautiously down the hall, the three adventurers peered through the banister rails at the raging waterfall below them. Nile told Alex that they had to find the cape that the beautiful princess had promised to Sir Nile, and, to find the cape, they would have to climb down the waterfall and search downstairs. Midnight, being a sure-footed animal, raced ahead, followed by Sir Nile and then Squire Alex who moved slowly and deliberately, as their knees searched the wet rocks for the next firm step.

When they reached the bottom they took their time, placing each footstep on the bank carefully, so they would not slip into the water that swirled in the patterns of the Oriental rug at the bottom of the steps. The boys crept along the darkened foyer. Their next adventure was to go through the cave to get to the beautiful princess's sanctuary -- the place where she worked her magic (and baked them chocolate chip cookies). As they stood at the brink of the cave an inhuman sound resonated from within the pitch black darkness. Squire Alex scrunched his face and held his hands to his ears; Sir Nile likened the sound to his Cousin Agatha's first oboe lesson. Midnight took off, back to the soothing sound of the waterfall, where the stupid dog curled up in the middle of the pool and went to sleep. Sir Nile gave his spare sword to Squire Alex. The next few moments would be dangerous and they both had to be armed. Squire Alex remembered

the stories Sir Nile told him of the vicious ogre who slept in a cool, damp cave until his stomach rumbled from hunger. He then awoke and lumbered through the forest until he found an unsuspecting child who was lost in the woods. Alex's little body shuddered -- he didn't feel much like a Squire at that moment. There was a faint rustling from within the confines of the cave. Then a moist, smacking sound -- Alex thought, "Ogre getting hungry?" He reached out in the darkness and knotted a tight fist around the fabric of Sir Nile's shirt. The knight and the squire were within a few feet of the slumbering ogre. Squire Alex saw his brave knight raise his sword high above his head. Mimicking the knight's every move, Squire Alex also raised his sword high. With one hand on the sword and the other on his brother's clothes he could not hold back a sneeze. In an instant the loud "Heh Chewwww" issued from his small mouth. The sleeping ogre was startled awake and the newspaper draped across his lap crumpled and ripped as it struggled to get up from its reclining chair. By now Squire Alex was so caught up in the adventure that he began to swing his sword at the mighty ogre while yelling his battle cry (which sounded a lot like a little squeak). The fierce ogre swooped the young squire up in his arms and pretended to eat him up. Squire Alex was very ticklish and giggled uncontrollably. After a few seconds, Squire Alex wriggled free from his Daddy's arms and rushed to catch up with Sir Nile who had continued on in the quest.

The knight was traversing the sanctuary where the beautiful princess could usually be found. The blue diamond-shaped tiles, scattered in a pattern across a pool of white, were special rocks. As long as your foot remained on the blue tiles you were safe, but one misstep and one could fall into the acid. As his foot came down on one of the azure rocks, Sir Nile paused and strained to discern muffled, sporadic, sound of a small motor -- it sounded an awful lot like a monster gnashing its teeth in anticipation of eating two little boys. He turned to motion for his faithful squire to follow, but Squire Alex was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, the squire appeared, still giggling from his fight with the ogre. He paid no attention to the blue tiles or the acid, but Nile didn't care, since the monster with the gnashing teeth was nearby -- at an early age he had discovered that there was strength in numbers. The sound was filtering up through the long staircase that led down to the dark and cavernous dungeon. Sir Nile pretended to be crossing a wide gorge on a rope and wood slat bridge. Once again each step was taken with deliberation, and Nile's sense of balance was put to the test. Squire Alex followed his brother's every move.

A dank smell rose up from the dungeon and settled in their nostrils as they moved cautiously down the steps, trying to make no sound. Squire Alex was weary from the adventure, so, with one hand on the stair rail, he began to drag his sword down the steps, thud, thud, thud. At the bottom of the steps, in the instant before the lights went out, the brothers saw the hooks and racks for drying wet clothes -- or hanging up prisoners. A scream pierced the dark silence and echoed off the cold stone walls as the gnashing sound ceased. Sir Nile had no idea what was happening. His adventure was turning into a Halloween nightmare. He and his brother bumped into each other as they lost their sense of direction in the darkness. The knight

and his squire were trying to find the steps which had led them to the dungeon. In a far corner something struggled wildly, squawking in a language they had never heard before... could it be the legendary Monster of the Dungeon -- with red and yellow eyes, a matted coat of dark fur, and fangs as sharp as razors? All bravery left them as both the knight and squire called out for the ogre, their father.

As suddenly as they had gone out, the lights came back on, and both the knight and his squire saw what was moving frantically in the distance. The beautiful princess covered in fabric and entangled in the sewing machine. She was putting the finishing touches on Sir Nile's cape when the circuit blew, the sewing machine caught her finger, and, in her struggles to free herself from the machine, the fabric from the cape became draped over her head. Trick-or-treat had not yet even begun, but Nile already had his story for reading class the next day; a magical tale of danger, bravery, and the good fortune that would come tonight, as they filled their stomachs with candy.