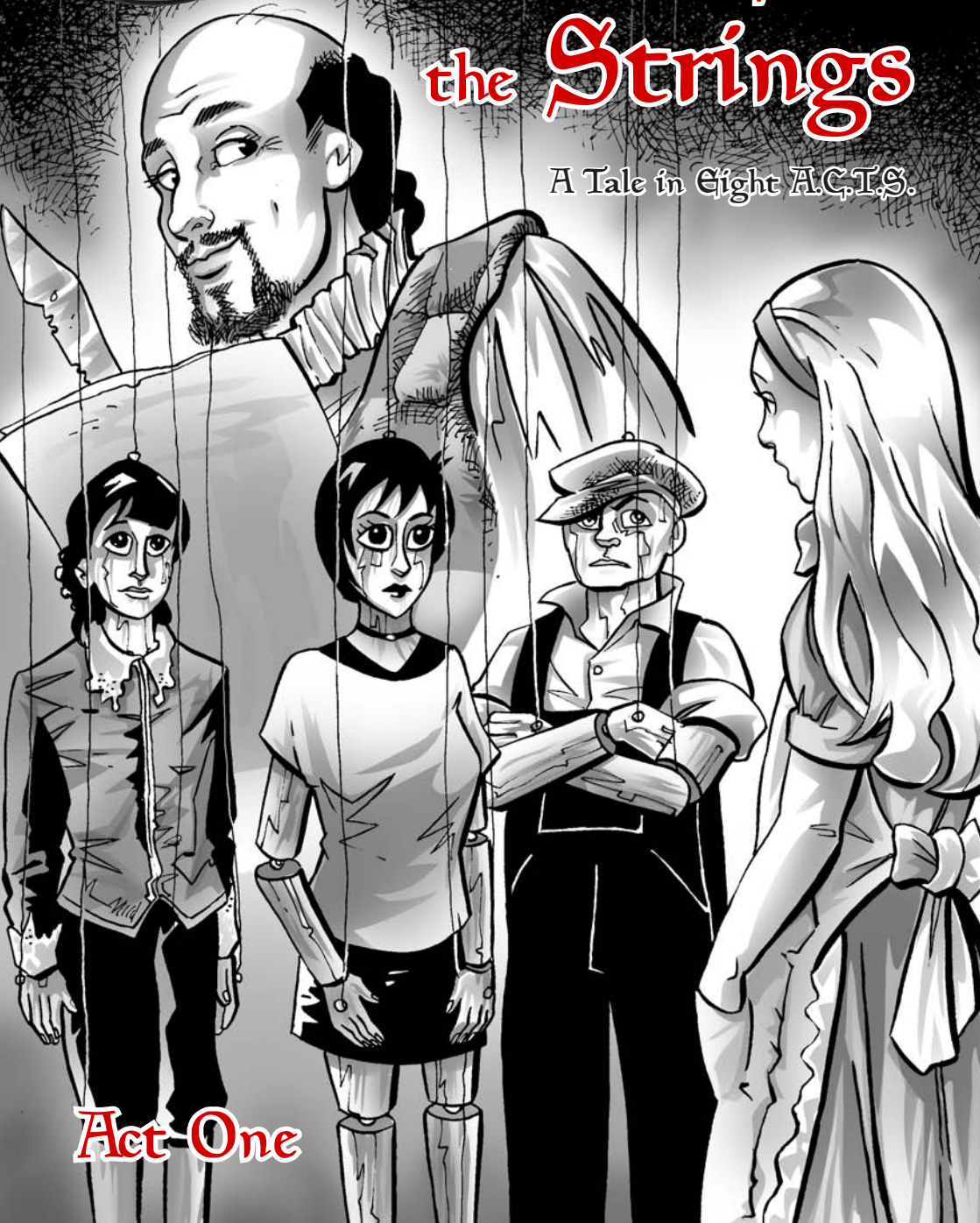


HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale in Eight ACTS.



Act One

Oh, DEM GOLDEN SCISSORS

Alice yawned.

In her opinion, Gilbert Fenton's *With No Further Ado*, a British play written in the late 1930s, set in the 1920s, and playing in the 2000s had far too much dialogue taking place for far too long in just a living room set. She refrained from appearing ungrateful, however, as it was a special night out for her and her immediate family to drive to London's West End to see a live situation comedy at the Warren Theatre.

Nonetheless, Alice had little interest in watching a group of adults sitting around sipping tea, nibbling tiny, triangular white-bread, fishpaste sandwiches, and chatting. It seemed to her that only the ring of the doorbell or telephone promised any surprise elements—such as the introduction of a new character or an unexpected turn of events.

Especially frustrating for Alice was that these events usually took place somewhere beyond the set's three elaborately wallpapered panels, and only a contrived repetition from the actor on the telephone could relay the scene's description to the audience. On top of that, she had difficulty comprehending the humour in the critically acclaimed script, even though she courteously laughed along with her brother Brandon, who was splitting his sides at the play's subtle dialogue.

All that to say, Alice was rather bored.

"You didn't get it?" Brandon asked at the end of Act One, seeing by Alice's deadpan expression that she had missed a cue to laugh at the especially jocular closing line in the mouth of Joyce Pembroke, the farce's leading role, played by the eminent Dame Irene Drutherford.

Alice shook her head. "Sorry, my mind was wandering."

"Well see, sis, it's because up until now, Lady Pembroke has always..."

"It's okay, Brandon," said Alice, seeing the lights were dimming and the curtains were drawing aside for Act Two. "You can tell me later. Er, by the way ... how long is this?"

"Eight acts," Brandon replied.



Wake up li'l Suzie!

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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Alice opened her eyes at the sound of a musical croak. A tiny elderly man with a large, ruddy nose and grey beard was peering at her through twinkling good-humoured eyes. He was wearing overalls and carrying a bucket and broom.

Wake up li'l Suzie, we gotta go home. ...

He paused from singing and spoke. "Your name probably ain't Suzie. In fact, I know it's not. You're *Alice* herself."

"That is true, sir," Alice said drowsily. She sat up, looked around the darkened, empty theatre and gasped. "But where are...?"

"The cast and crew all went home 'bout half an hour ago, miss. Strange they didn't pick you up."

"But my parents? Brandon?"

"They were here, miss?"

Alice jumped to her feet. "Oh, my goodness gracious, yes! They must have left without me."

"You may catch 'em yet. The main doors out front are locked, but the performer's exit will open from the inside. ... It's push-bar locked. Go backstage and take the steps down to your right."

"Oh, thank you ever so much, sir," said Alice, about to dash off.

"But before you go, miss," said the janitor, picking a paper off the floor and pulling a Biro* from his overalls, "if it's not too much trouble, I was wondering if you could sign this for my family and me."

Alice took the paper and her mouth fell open. It was a playbill.

Orb Theatre presents

Alice Pleasance

in *No Strings Attached*,
A comedy in six A.C.T.S by Lance Williams.

Cast in order of appearance...

"Dedicate it to Jack—that's me, Jack Ainsley—and family. We got free tickets for the show tomorrow night."

"Alas and alack," Alice sighed, looking down at her clothes. "It has befallen me yet again—but I refuse to complain."

"Good girl," said Jack. "Doesn't do to grumble. It's just common courtesy to sign an autograph—you owe it to your fans."

***Biro**: A ballpoint pen; known in British and Australian English as a biro, named after its Hungarian inventor László Bíró.

“No, no, no, Mr. Ainsley, sir, it’s not that. I’ll gladly give you my autograph. It’s just that ... nothing.”

Alice scratched her name and a dedication on the playbill, and with a smile handed it back, along with the Biro, to the beaming gentleman.

“Better run if you want to catch up with your parents, Miss Pleasance. I’ll keep the lights on for a few more minutes.”

Alice thanked Mr. Ainsley, bid him goodnight and God bless, and scurried up the wooden steps that led backstage. There, among paint, props, and lighting equipment, she stopped. With an acquiescent* sigh, she sat on a stool beside an old, dusty upright piano to contemplate facing another out-of-time experience. Most likely neither her parents nor Brandon would be outside awaiting her or even the city of London with which she was familiar.

“Here goes,” she said to herself, looking up and around as though for an unseen presence. “This could be another *Heaven’s Library* story, but I most certainly will try to not appear so *dreadfully* naïve this time. Oh, my goodness gracious, I cannot even talk to myself without it coming out all posh!”

At least I can like, think in normal English—I think.

Pensively, she tapped on a few of the piano’s yellowed ivory keys. Their painful dissonance jarred Alice from her musing, and she concluded that she would prefer to flee the theatre while the lights were still on.

Knowing Who was in control, however, Alice resolved that it was no occasion to panic. She assumed she had her comforting key ring, and endeavoured to confirm her assumption by slipping a hand into her pinafore pocket. To her puzzlement, she withdrew a pair of finely crafted, small golden scissors. A delicate inscription on one of its blades read “Keys Turned to Scissors.”

Alice shrugged, put the item back into her pocket and climbed the steps leading out of the backstage area. After wading through some heavy hanging curtains, she found herself in a corridor with no exit in sight.

Suddenly the lights went off.

Alice was usually unafraid of the dark except in unfamiliar places such as an empty, three hundred-year-old theatre in the West End of London at night. A chill ran through her and she was tempted to dread.

Despite her mystification at their undisclosed purpose, she clutched the scissors in her pocket and prayed. They grew hot in her hand and she pulled them out. To Alice’s relief they were like a small torch, giving off a glow that enabled her to make her way down the corridor fearless of the looming shadows. She turned the corner past coffee and soft drink vending machines and faced a row of about half a dozen doors.

***acquiesce:** submit or comply silently or without protest

A few were open.

Wrinkling her nose at the odour of stale beer, cigarette smoke, sweat, and greasepaint, Alice cautiously walked through the doors and concluded that these windowless, airless quarters lined with mirrors were dressing rooms. On the opposite wing of the corridor, she discovered more dressing rooms. She presumed these must have been the ladies', as the mirrors were more ornate, and the pungent aroma of perfume replaced—or at least masked—the odour of sweat and stale beer. From this wing, a staircase led down to another corridor where a row of doors opened to lavatories and rooms full of costumes and props.

To her dismay, there was still no sign of an exit.

With the scissors still glowing in her hand, Alice noticed in the corner shadows a wrought-iron staircase that spiralled upwards. She whispered a prayer and climbed the staircase until it led her into a banquet hall with a small stage at the far end. A door was open to her right, and she peered in. There, sprawled on mattresses and couches were a number of large puppets with their strings and wooden crosspieces carefully laid on pillows. The odd thing was, although the puppets were fashioned out of wood, they were breathing in deep sleep and some of the men were even snoring. Alice giggled.

“*Sssh.*”

Alice peered into the direction of the remonstrance.* A pretty, petite female puppet with short, shiny black hair and large, long-lashed brown eyes had sat up.

“I’m most awfully sorry,” Alice whispered. “Did not mean to awaken you.”

“I was already awake. Espressos, you know—terrible habit—keeps me from sleeping. Just didn’t want you to wake up the others, though.”

“That’s ever so considerate of you,” said Alice. “I was just leaving anyway. I need to find the exit, actually.”

“Exit? No idea. Try the window. Most likely locked, though.”

Alice tiptoed over to one of the large windows of the hall and looked out. Seeing a drop of about three or four storeys to the ground of an entirely unfamiliar London (except for Big Ben silhouetted in the distance), she decided against attempting such an exit, and so returned to the room of sleeping puppets. The female was still sitting up and awake.

“What happened?” she asked. “Why didn’t you take a taxi, or go home with the crew?”

“I fell asleep watching a ... never mind.”

***remonstrance:** reprimand, disapproval

Suddenly, the golden scissors' glow went out and Alice was unable to withhold a sigh of exasperation.

"Well," said the puppet, "it looks as though you will have to stay here for the night. There's a vacant couch over there. But the place will be full of go tomorrow morning—janitors and all."

"That's ever so kind of you, Miss...?"

"Marian. I thought you knew."

"Oh yes, of course," said Alice. "It's late and I *am* rather tired. I'm Alice, by the way."

"I know," said Marian, looking perplexed.

Trying not to tread on the puppets, Alice groped her way to the couch in the corner, where she curled up, clutched her golden scissors, and after whispering a prayer for a blessing on her dreams, she fell asleep.



"My suspenders are crooked!"

"My corsage is bunched up."

"He repainted my left eye all funny."

Alice awoke to these and other such complaints in her ears, and a flickering fluorescent strip glaring in her eyes. She turned over and buried her face in the couch cushion. The puppets were apparently in a tizwas* over the preparation for some event.

"The show is truly in three quarters of an hour?" someone frantically inquired.

"That it is," a guttural voice replied. "Off to the dressing rooms, all of you."

"But we weren't prepared for this, guv'nor," another guttural voice added. "Union rules say that until three o'clock rehearsals, the day is free. I'll be here at three, not a moment too soon or a moment too late. Until then, me and Penny are going on strike. Right, luv?"

"Right," squeaked a female voice. "Three o'clock. Not a moment too soon or a moment too late."

"Listen, Bob Tanner and Penelope Farthing, you can do what you darn well want, but as it stands, the play is a flop and we're closing Sunday night. We're doing a minors matinee to make ends meet and help to pay your wages. If you don't like it you can lump it and walk out of here without a sou.**"

"That'd be against union rules!" said Bob.

***tizwas**: a tizzy, a state of excitement, commotion

****sou**: a former French coin of low denomination; any small amount of money

“Yeah,” said Penny. “Against union rules!”

“I am delighted, however, to see that Miss Pleasance is here on time,” added a refined, softer voice. “Good morning, dear.”

Alice lifted her face from the couch cushion and turned over on her back to greet a slight, balding gentleman sporting a finely trimmed goatee and a brown-quilted waistcoat over a linen shirt with a ruffle around the neck. Alice considered him rather Elizabethan in appearance, especially with the addition of black hose and boots. He held a wad of papers and had a pencil tucked behind his ear.

“Decided to stay overnight?”

Alice squinted into the neon and smiled. “I had no other choice, sir, under the circumstances.”

“A wise move, dearie. Now the *real* thing can begin. So, ready for the minors matinee?”

“Er, what is that, sir, if I may ask? I do apologise, but last night ended up being rather out of the ordinary.”

“I know,” the man said with a mysterious smile. “Well, I’ll excuse myself to let you prepare.”

Once the man had left the room, his hefty companion—apparently the stage director—smiled ruefully.

“Out of the ordinary it was, miss, there was barely a couple o’ dozen left in the audience. It’s breaking Mr. Williams’ heart.”

“Oh, I’m most awfully sorry.”

“But it seems he suddenly cheered up mighty fast to see you this morning. Anyway, miss, to refresh your memory, a minors matinee is a cut-price morning show put on for children. Saturday morning is a good time for it, and any day of the week during the school holidays.”

“Children? How old?”

“Oh—ten to eighteen years of age.”

“I mean no offence, sir, but that’s hardly the age of what one would call a *child*.”

“It seems that the age of minors is getting older by the minute these days,” the man muttered offhandedly and turned to address the cast. “So, onstage in half an hour?”

“Alas,” Alice said to the puppets as they descended the stairs to the dressing rooms, “I slept in my clothes, and I haven’t combed my hair. I must look dreadful.”

“You look beautiful, Your Highness,” chirped a boy puppet wearing a lace-collared, black velvet suit with knee length pantaloons, white hose, and buckled, black patent-leather shoes.

“Thank you,” said Alice, puzzled by his term of address.

“If I may suggest, although you have the fairest skin I’ve ever seen, under those stage lights a little rouge is ... oh, excuse me, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Fauntleroy.”

“Oh, Little Lord?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

“Not any more,” growled Bob Tanner, a burly, red-faced puppet clad in faded blue overalls. “And lay off the ‘Your Highness’ bit, Fauntleroy. No titles ’ere and she’s no exception. Equality’s the name of the game, nuffink more, nuffink less. Right, Penny?”

“That’s right,” said Penelope Farthing, a scrawny, yellow haired, white female puppet wearing a pink mini-dress and black fishnet stockings. “Nuffink more, nuffink less.”

“So what’s wiv’ you, Alice?” Bob asked. “You sounds kind of uppity-up, hoity-toity, mucky-muck, like today. Upper class?”

“I don’t really know, actually, sir. I mean, my family is not exactly wealthy, but we’re certainly not poor. Average, I would say.”

“Hmmp. Middle class, then—*rich*.”

“Yeah,” said Penny. “*Rich*.”

“Well, I suppose you could say in *spiritual* riches,” said Alice.

“What do you mean?”

“Yeah. What do you mean?”

“Like love, happiness, joy in our tasks...”

“Pah!” said Bob.

“Pah!” said Penny.

Alice turned away, and amid the grumbling bustle, approached her puppet acquaintance of the night before, who was sitting in a women’s dressing room applying eye shadow.

“I am so awfully sorry to appear ignorant,” Alice whispered. “But who is the Williams gentleman?”

“Suffering from amnesia or something?” Marian replied. “You’ve been working with him for the past two weeks.”

“I’ll explain later,” said Alice. “But *please* tell me. I am so dreadfully at a loss.”

“Why, he’s Lance ‘Shaker’ Williams!”

“I see. *And...*?”

“Well, he’s only the latest, greatest, and *coolest* playwright and producer on this planet. For Heaven’s sake, where have you been?”

“You’d be ever so shocked if I was to tell you.”

“It’s okay,” Marian whispered. “If you’ve had to seek out some clandestine solace, I totally understand. The play has been a disaster, and last night was the worst. Friday night is always packed with rich, self-righteous churchy folk who don’t work on Saturday and have to be up early for church on Sunday morning.”

“I see,” said Alice.

“They’re picky,” Marian continued. “But the best crowd is usually tonight—the Saturday-nighters who don’t give a hoot for church and want to party ’til late.”

“We’re on in five!” the eventual dreaded announcement came. Trembling, Alice approached Lance Williams.

“Sir, it’s an extremely difficult situation to explain, but I have no idea of the plot, the script ... *nothing*.”

“To tarnation with that old script, Miss Pleasance, and the plot, the whole shebang—it’s a dead loss. Just get out there and extemporise.”

“I beg your pardon, sir? Ex...?”

“Wing it, baby,” said the stagehand. “We got nothing to lose.”

Wing it? What on earth does he mean?

Hearing the hubbub of the expectant audience, Alice peered through a crack in the curtains at the side of the stage. The theatre was far from full, but the youthful gathering seemed excited to be present.

Alice clutched her scissors and silently prayed to her beloved Joshua.

Joshua, please grant me the wisdom of speech and witness and all that I need to reach them. You have to do it. In the power of the keys, I claim it.

Joshua replied, *As you know, Alice. When I put you before the people, I always anointed you with My Mother’s supernatural boldness and wisdom.*

Alice, knowing how naturally shy she was, smiled to herself as she reflected. *You’re right, Lord! I mean if I can, like, stand up on stage and sing for a bunch of redneck cowboys in a country barrelhouse or a group of church folks or even face a press conference...*

- 2 -

ALICE AD HOC*

The stage curtains of the Orb Theatre parted and Lance Williams took the microphone.

“Young ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “before we go into our feature program of the ...er”—he looked at his watch—“morning ... to kick off the show, I want to bring on Britain’s premier, perennial rock group, winner of fifty platinum albums, The Strolling Bones, or as they are now more affectionately known, ‘Bones.’”

Tumultuous applause followed, and a quartet of elderly musicians fronted by an equally elderly singer who yelped and cavorted around the stage in a leopard-skin-patterned Lurex jumpsuit, performed a grinding number entitled “Gratification,” which solicited the audience’s stamping feet and warlike chanting of the title phrase.

The song died down along with the ovation, and giving her a “thumbs up,” Lance introduced Alice, who trotted onto the stage with confident composure. The audience erupted into applause and wolf-whistles.

“Considering my attire,” Alice said, “I’m surprised that any of you young men present would find me *remotely* attractive.”

***ad hoc**: improvised, impromptu

“You’re a *doll!*” a youth yelled.

“Why, thank you, kind young sir. I am indeed flattered. Now on to tonight’s program—that was the ... er ... Strolling Bones and...?”

“Gratification,” Lance whispered from the wings.

Alice spun around to the musicians loitering behind her.

“Gratification.’ And a *remarkable* demonstration of puppetry, I must say.”

The audience laughed.

Alice smiled and craned her neck to look up into the scaffolding.

“Surely some credit must go to the puppeteers, who I gather, are somewhere up in that wild black yonder. Hello, up there, whoever you are! Absolutely *amazing* coordination!”

The audience laughed again.

Suddenly a voice boomed over the public address system. “What will she say next?” Startled, Alice turned and saw Lance Williams standing in the wings, grinning and holding a microphone. The band’s lead singer tittered nervously.

“Far be it from me to not ’ave a serious *sensa yuma*, miss,” he said.

“But don’t you fink the joke is wearin’ a bit fin?”

“Joke? I do apologise for any misunderstanding, sir, but I was not joking.”

“Oh yeah?”

“The *strings*,” Alice said in a stage whisper. “I see them.”

The band singer winked and giggled. “Okay, miss. I fink I’m catchin’ yer drift. Yeah, we’re all just pawns in the game, streetwalking hussies in the carnival of life, right?”

“Hopefully not *all* of us, sir. Sounds rather umm ... *seamy*, to be quite honest.”

The audience laughed and Lance’s voice boomed again, “What will she say next?”

“I was wondering,” Alice said, seeing the man was glowering, “Mr. er...?”

“You didn’t know?”

Alice shook her head.

“Jaded. *Sir Nick Jaded*, to be precise.”

“Oh, you are *knighted*. A real *sir*?”

“Yeah, got knighted last week. Been livin’ under a rock, or sumfink?”

“My brother Brandon asks me that sometimes. I assume you’re saying I’m out of touch.”

“You must be, miss. Anyway, blew the Queen’s mind when I passed wind into the microphone. *Headline news*.”

While the audience and the rest of the band snickered, Alice frowned. “That seems awfully disrespectful, sir. I would have been most dreadfully offended if I had been in her shoes.”

“Nah. Her Majesty took it all in good, clean fun. It’s nice to see the old bag’s got a sensa yuma.”

“Well, anyway,” said Alice, “congratulations.”

“Ta, miss,” Jaded warily responded.

“But, er ... pray tell me, what *is* that kind of music you were playing?”

“Kind? You mean *genre*?”

“I suppose. Brandon—that’s my brother by the way—talks about ‘garage trash,’ ‘garbage thrash,’ ‘trip up,’ ‘cough-up,’ ‘throw-up,’ ‘death metal,’ ‘black metal,’ ‘rusty metal,’ and on and on it goes. ...”

Gosh! thought Alice, rolling her eyes. *I’d, like, die if Brandon and my friends could hear me now.*

“I mean ... I like some of it, but oh, there are ever so many names, and I am ashamed to admit I lose track, most dreadfully. So how *would* you describe your music, Sir Nick?”

“Er ... I don’t fink that one can *categorise* or *pigeonhole* our music, *per se*, but whatever it is, it’s alternative, non-mainstream, and *controversial*.”

“Interesting,” said Alice. “But, if I may ask, how can the music of a band regarded as rock music’s most popular perennial icons be described as such?”

“I don’t get what you’re drivin’ at, miss.”

“Well, I apologise for my seeming ignorance, sir, and I certainly don’t mean to be facetious*, but how can your music be termed ‘alternative,’ ‘controversial,’ and ‘non-mainstream’ when you have fifty platinum records to your name and everybody seems to *adore* you?”

“What will she say next?” Lance’s voice boomed out. The audience snickered and the singer, evidently nervous, turned to his band as if to solicit support, only to face apathetic shrugs. Alice struggled for another question.

“Very well, Sir Nick. What else do you have to perform for us today?”

“Well, umm, this is a *thought-provoking* hit number from our latest album *Modus Operandi*, called ‘Snow Queen.’”

“Fascinating. From the fairy tale?”

Sir Nick sniggered. “Not *exactly*.”

“Very well, ladies and gentlemen. The Strolling Bones performing ‘Snow Queen!’”

So, with his musicians playing stolidly stooge-like, Sir Nick Jaded snaked sinuously around the stage, hissing the verses into the microphone until, at the cue of a particularly sharp snare drum crack, he thrust a leather-gloved fist into the air, causing the audience to stamp their feet and chant the song’s anthem-like chorus along with him.

***facetious:** jocular or amusing, especially at inappropriate times

*Snow Queen,
My heroine.
Freezin' my scene
Wiv' needles and pins!
Snow Queen,
My heroine.
Over my spleen
And under my skin!*

"I gather that the song is not about a young lady at all," Alice said, once the music and the applause had died down.

Sir Nick let out a cryptic snicker. "Depends on how you take it."

"Well, I take it that it's promoting *drugs*."

"Nah, miss. It's not *promoting* them. It's more of an ambiguous statement about them. We even did it at that Royal Command Performance."

"Well, I imagine Her Majesty didn't take too kindly to it."

"Nah, she wuz' alright. She smiled and clapped."

Alice, appalled and perplexed, proceeded to ask what she hoped would be her final question. "So, Sir Nick, er ... how did you arrive at the name 'Strolling Bones' for your musical group?"

"Oh, we originally named our band 'The Skeletons' after an old Negro ... er ... African-American opus—'Skeleton in the Closet Blues.'"

"That must have been well over more than half a *century* ago," said Alice.

"What? The song?"

"No, sir. Er ... when you named your band."

Jaded cleared his throat and forced a smile. "Probably. Well, then the name morphed into *The Strolling Bones* and now we're just *Bones*."

"Appropriate," said Alice. "You all most certainly do look rather *skeletal!*"

Oh, Lord! Why is it all coming out like this?

Just trust Me, Alice.

By now, the audience's intermittent chuckles and titters had erupted into hearty laughter and Lance's voice yet again boomed, "What will she say next?"

"Oh, I am most dreadfully sorry, sir, I didn't mean to..."

"For your information, miss," Jaded said icily, "we have found it's important to 'stay fin to stay in.' And if you want to stick around on the scene, I suggest you work a bit on your image. Get with a workout programme."

To Alice's surprise, this last remark drew murmurs and shouts of disagreement from the male element of the audience, causing Nick to withdraw into his circle of musicians, who had now discarded their instruments.

“Besides that,” he bitterly added, “I want to say for myself, and on behalf of the rest of the band, that although we seriously appreciate a *sensa yuma*, we’re sorry to have stepped on the same stage as you, Alice *not-so* Pleasance. Goodbye and good *riddance*.”

Having said that, Sir Nick Jaded, amid hoots and heckles, slunk off the stage with his musicians traipsing behind him, leaving Alice alone on the stage, apologetic and bewildered. She looked with desperation at Lance Williams standing in the wings. He smiled and walked out to join her, waving a wad of manuscripts.

“Young ladies and gentlemen,” said Lance, taking the microphone, “see this? The fruit of nine months’ laborious scratching of quill on parchment into the wee hours by candlelight—the original *handwritten* script of tonight’s play. Hard work? Yes. Inspired? No. It’s *refuse*. Awful offal solicited by the demands of those secreted powers that sought to puppet *me* with invisible strings. That is why, in the presence of Alice Pleasance and all of you here, I am constrained to do *this*.”

Thereupon, Lance produced a tinderbox and set the wad of papers alight, sending shreds of carbon, carried on the vents of the air-cooling system, floating into the audience.

“And now I can finish my life’s work!” he shouted.

“Which is?” someone shouted back.

“Ah ha! Take it from here. Alice, you are the key player.” Then, with a look of triumph, he stamped on the remaining embers and marched off the stage to an enthusiastic ovation.

“But Mr. Williams, sir ... I have no idea of the script.”

“As my learned colleague said, dear, *wing* it. Henceforth there *is* no script, at least not one that you can see.”

Alice smiled and resolutely took the microphone. “Seeing as Mr. Williams’ move to burn his script has solicited your overwhelming approval, I want to ask you members of the audience why you think we, as a troupe of artistes, have seen fit to provide a minors’ matinee of the show.”

“Cos it was losin’ money,” someone yelled.

“Yeah,” said another. “Gotta do *somethin’* to bail yerselves out.”

Alice chuckled. “Apparently, this is true. But I trust that this morning’s entertainment will prove satisfying enough. On a side note, I would like to ask another question. How do you members of the audience feel about being referred to as ‘minors?’”

“Downright insulted!” a girl shouted. “I’m just a bit older than you—fifteen years old.”

“*You’re* insulted?” shouted another girl. “How do you think I feel? I’m sixteen.”

“Or me?” a boy shouted. “I’m seventeen and just got married and it raises eyebrows! Like I’m irresponsible or something.”

“That’s nothing,” a girl enjoined. “I’m eighteen and just had a baby. If I am a minor, what does that make my little tot?”

“I don’t know,” Alice said, and gasped with surprise at the irony of her own following rhetorical question. “A *major* minor?”

“But do go on,” she urged over the ensuing laughter and Lance’s booming interjection, “What will she say next?”

“They say we’re eligible for childhood-age extension benefits,” said the girl. “The weird thing is, as soon as I got pregnant, I lost my so-called ‘child’ benefits and now I’m only eligible for a mother’s benefits when I’m twenty-five. ‘The price of irresponsibility,’ my dad says. Fat lot of encouragement he is.”

“I’m so sorry, ummm. ... What is your name?”

“Ginny.”

“I’m sorry, Ginny, but I will be sure to pray for you,” said Alice. “Anyway, we really ought to get on with the play.”

The audience responded to her suggestion with booing protests.

“Forget it, Miss Pleasance. This is a heckuva lot more fun!”

“I suppose you’re right, we no longer have a script anyway,” said Alice, stealing a sideways glance at Lance who was still standing in the wings. He was smiling and nodding as if to say “carry on.”

“Nevertheless, I would like to bring on the puppets to liven up the morning. Maybe they have some insight into this, and other topics of discussion.”

She nodded to Lance, who ushered the perplexed puppets onto the stage.

“Are we getting paid for all this?” Bob Tanner demanded.

“I assume you are being paid for the show, sir.”

Bob made his way to the front of the group, folded his arms, and plonked his dangling wooden feet onto the stage floor. “I signed a contract with Mr. Williams to act in his play *No Strings Attached*, nuffink more, nuffink less. No minor’s matinee and certainly no off-the-cuff, talk-show debate. Union rules, you see.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, sir. But do you have any suggestions as to what we should do?”

“We does the play as is, Miss Alice Pleasance, and we does the minor’s matinee with overtime, or I’m out of ’ere—not a moment too soon or a moment too late. I believe Miss Farthing feels the same way. Right, Penny?”

The female puppet with yellow hair stepped to the front of the group, folded her arms, and plonked her dangling wooden feet onto the stage floor.

“Right, Mr. Tanner,” she simpered. “Not a moment too soon or a moment too late.”

“So, you’re what my daddy refers to as ‘nine-to-fivers’?” Alice asked them.

“What do you mean by that?” Bob Tanner asked.

“Yeah, what do you mean by that?” said Penny Farthing.

“Well, you ‘clock in,’ as they say, and do your bit. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“So what’s wrong wiv’ that?” asked Bob.

“Yeah,” said Penny. “What’s wrong wiv’ that?”

“Well,” Alice replied, “and I most certainly mean no disrespect, but I’ve always been taught to do *over* what was required of me. Be a hundred and ten percenter and execute my work and chores as unto God.”

“Pah,” said Bob. “What’s the Man upstairs got to do wiv’ it?”

“Yeah,” said Penny. “Wot’s ‘e got to do wiv’ it?”

“Everything,” said Alice. “He plentifully rewardeth the one who takes a pride in his work.”

Bob sniggered. “What, with a gold watch at retirement?”

“That’s rich,” chortled Penny and shook with mirth. “A gold watch at retirement!”

“Maybe not, sir. But with a feeling of accomplishment at a job well done—even daily. I mean, if I do my JJT ... I mean household jobs half-heartedly, even if I don’t hear about it from my parents or shepherds, I get what’s termed today as an ‘icky’ feeling that I did a rather vapid job.”

Bob and Penny looked a little mystified.

“You know, Princess Alice could be right,” Little Lord Fauntleroy suddenly piped up.

“Yeah,” Penny said with a pensive expression, “she could be right.”

“In other words,” said Alice, “if I don’t put my heart into everything I do, I’m a wimpy, half-arsed worker doing a wimpy, half-arsed job!”

Oh goodness, Lord! What did I say...?

“What will she say next?” Lance said over the audience’s laughter and applause.

“Exactly,” said Little Lord Fauntleroy. “What will she say next?”

“Exactly,” said Penny Farthing to Bob Tanner’s evident chagrin. “What will she say next?”

“And *that*, ladies and gentlemen,” Lance continued as he stepped back onto the stage over a standing ovation, “will be the future title of Alice’s Ad Hoc show, starting tomorrow night. So be sure to come back and tell your friends.”

“T-tomorrow night?” said Alice. “I thought...”

“Wait and see,” Lance whispered while they bowed to the audience.



And so, in keeping with Lance’s mysterious remark, he and the theatre management quickly negotiated for an extension of the show

to one more week. Thanks to its content that usually covered politics, economics, religion, and other universally controversial topics, the popularity of *What Will She Say Next?* snowballed from its beginning (when mostly parents, relatives, and friends of those who attended the minors' matinee came out of curiosity) to standing-room-only success.

Nevertheless, as far as most of the puppets and some of the theatre management were concerned, a blight on this success was the fact that Alice, who was following the leading of the Spirit, usually closed the show with an open invitation to a mysterious Joshua's wedding banquet.

"There's really no reason not to attend," she would say. "And who wouldn't want to? It's going to be absolutely *wonderful* with all kinds of spreads and drink and dancing and all sorts of things—a real *party*. And as Brandon—that's my brother—and my parents know, I just *love* parties."

Alice would then ask for a show of hands of those who would like to attend, and after doing so, would suddenly see the strings attached to the members of the audience. Then, while inadvertently snipping the scissors in her pinafore pocket, she would see the strings of those who raised their hands in acceptance of the invitation shrivel up and disappear into the air above them.

Furthermore, due to contractual obligations with *Indicted Artists*, Lance needed a replacement rock group for the Bones, who had declined from further engagements in the program.

"Not as long as 'Alice the Malice' is on the stage with us," the press quoted Sir Nick Jaded as saying, which naturally generated further interest in *What Will She Say Next?*

In the light of the Bones' defection, Lance managed to book a perennial, punk-rock icon to appear on the second night of the show. Unfortunately, as hard as Alice attempted to do otherwise, she so inadvertently offended them and each subsequent band that Lance secured to open the night's performance that they would decline from further venues for the show. Six nights later, when Lance approached her about this dilemma, Alice ruefully stated her opinion that every band, although being touted as "unique," sounded drearily alike, and when interviewed, they would reply as though they had memorised the same script. In short, they couldn't "categorise" or "pigeonhole" their music, and although it was multi-platinum popular, they considered it "controversial" and "non-mainstream."

"I do try to enjoy some of their music, but I think it's high time someone found an alternative to 'Alternative,'" Alice said wearily. "And why is every song they perform deemed 'thought-provoking'? So far, from 'Gratification' and 'Snow Queen' to the one last night—the title of which slips my mind—I have heard no such merit in any of their chosen fare."

“I’m sorry, Alice. I do agree. But it’s a contractual issue.”

“Oh, and I do not mean to judge, Mr. Williams, but on top of it all, it seems at least one of the members of each band is *knighted*. For what reason, I have no idea. I always considered knighthood a noble thing.”

Lance chuckled. “Once upon a time. But, as always, ‘significant contribution to the British Empire’ covers many things. Usually monetarily.”

“And they’re ever so *serious* about having a ‘*sensa yuma*,’” Alice added.

“About all that is left sacrosanct to the British,” Lance muttered sadly.

“But sir, I *do* try to be congenial with everyone, it’s just that some things...”

“I agree, but don’t worry, dear girl. One thing is certain—such caustic candour is filling the theatre seats, even at the cost of a few entertainers. As the saying goes, ‘There’s no such thing as bad publicity,’ so far be it from me to complain. Mine was but a passing question.”

- 3 -

FAUNTLEROY'S FLORINS AND PENNY'S TUPPENCE

The morning of the last day of the show, Alice took some much needed meditation time in her suite at the Shelton Glitz, a seven-star hotel overlooking central London’s Jekyll Park. Upon embarking on this escapade, she had scoured many entries in the telephone directories of her family’s surnames—both Godley and Pleasance (her spirit-trip alias), but just as she had expected, there existed no such place as Winsley Barnes. Consequently, Alice had accepted Lance Williams’ offer of what he termed as “upgraded” accommodation at the Shelton Glitz where the playwright also resided during his business in London (her previous mysterious alter ego having settled for digs at a three-star Vacation Lodge).

Unfortunately for Alice, however, due to afternoon dress rehearsals at the Orb Theatre that she and the rest of the cast felt were unnecessary for a spontaneous show, she had little time to enjoy the hotel’s luxury or even the lure of nearby Cambridge Street shopping.

As it turned out, that very afternoon’s rehearsals had been cancelled due to Lance having suddenly been taken with a feverish malady that had recently been befalling him especially in times of duress. To the concern of many, these bouts were becoming more

frequent. Alice had called his room, and he welcomed her offer to pray for him. Having done so, her afternoon was free.

Or so Alice thought until the telephone rang.

“Who? Oh, Little Lord... Yes, please do go on.”

Alice listened and her heart sank. “W-well actually I was planning to... But yes, I would be happy to ... I mean, I do need the get ... the exercise.”

In truth, Alice was decidedly *unhappy* to. She had been hoping to take the opportunity to browse the numerous clothing boutiques of Cambridge Street even if (as was the usual case on these adventures) she had proven unable to wear any of her favoured items. Now Little Lord Fauntleroy was proposing to accompany her for a stroll through Jekyll Park and to share a picnic.

“I know the perfect spot overlooking the lake, Your Highness,” he said. “And it’s a perfect chance to get to know each other a little better.”

“Umm, most certainly...”

“Sharks and Spendthrifts have an excellent food mart in the basement. I will take care of all expenses incurred, of course.”

“Th-that is most kind of you, young sir.”

“So I’ll meet you in the foyer at one o’clock?”

Alice found she rather liked Little Lord Fauntleroy’s eloquent upper-class chirp, and decided—after silent inward counsel with Joshua, of course—that the afternoon could not only be an opportunity to witness but also be quite entertaining. She agreed, hung up the telephone, and smiled—until she glanced in the mirror.

To meet a young lord, looking like this? My dress hasn’t been washed, like, since I’ve been here.

You meet with My approval Alice, you most certainly will meet with his. Claim the keys of heavenly dry cleaning—that your attire may glisten with the royalty of the Kingdom that is yours.

True to his word, Little Lord Fauntleroy was standing in the hotel foyer at one o’clock sharp, carrying a bulky attaché case with one hand and nervously clutching his black velvet cap to his chest with the other. Fifteen minutes later, Alice approached him from one of the elevators, apologising for her tardiness.

“Royally late, Your Highness,” Fauntleroy said with a smile and bowed. Alice curtsayed.

“By far not my preferred mode of conduct, I assure you,” she said, thankful for once that her Victorian diction was apparently in full steam. “My parents have always instilled in me the importance of punctuality. It’s a sign of love.”

Fauntleroy flirtatiously rolled his eyes at her and grinned. “*Love*. I like that.”

“Concern for others,” Alice said, with not a little concern for herself at that moment. “So, Little Lord, what now?”

“Sharks and Spendthrifts for the victuals, Your Highness, and then the park. Unless, of course, you have other ideas. I know a quaint, little Italian restaurant off Cambridge Street that has the perfect ambience for developing further acquaintance. I would just need to phone to make some alternative arrangements. Remember that all expenses incurred are on me.”

“Thank you, young sir, but the park sounds just splendid.”

As they trotted from the department store down bustling Cambridge High Street, carrying the bags of food and attracting no little attention, Fauntleroy noticed that Alice was glancing longingly into the boutique windows.

“Remember, all expenses incurred are on me, Your Highness.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I mean, should there be any item of apparel you would wish to purchase...”

“Oh, thank you, young sir, but no, no, no ... I could never...”

“Just say the word. Although I venture to say that not a single rag on those racks compares to your exquisite attire. Victorian taffeta, I gather?”

Alice looked at Little Lord Fauntleroy in shock, but then remembered Joshua’s promise. She nodded and thanked him for the compliment. Nevertheless, she did feel somewhat self-conscious at being proudly escorted by a flamboyantly dressed puppet that was evidently enamoured with her and whose stature only came up to her elbow.

“How old are you, by the way?” she asked as they entered Jekyll Park.

“Twelve and three-quarters, Your Highness,” said Fauntleroy.

“Remarkably mature in matters of etiquette and ... er ... courtship,” Alice managed to say. “I suppose you learned it from your parents?”

“Tutors.”

“I see.”

“Ah, here is the spot,” Fauntleroy said and produced a crimson-and-white chequered tablecloth from his attaché case, which he spread out onto the grass. “From here we can watch the ducks.”

“Ducks? Oh, yes. But I thought we would merely sit on a bench.”

“Oh no, Your Highness. That would never do. Besides...”

Fauntleroy paused to acknowledge a short, white-bearded man wearing a beret and a smock who approached them carrying an easel, a large canvas, and a wooden box.

Bewildered, Alice smiled and waved at the man who remained at a distance and said nothing but merely waved back and proceeded to set up his easel.

“We can exchange pleasantries and it will be as though Jerome isn’t even here,” Fauntleroy whispered while he pulled finely wrought,

silver cutlery, china plates, and crystal champagne glasses from his attaché case. “If you sit right there, that would be a fine angle and I can situate myself here. After all, Your Highness, *you* are the focus of the piece.”

“The piece?”

“The picture.”

“You mean we are being *painted*?”

Fauntleroy nodded. “Oil on canvas, Your Highness. Of course, if you object...”

“N-n-no, your lordship,” said Alice. “Not at all. This is all just rather unusual. A photographer is one thing, but...”

“I could think of no finer way to capture the moment, Your Highness.”

Alice shifted awkwardly, but finally settled into a comfortable enough position to be able to eat and retain sufficient poise for the occasion.

“So we can start with the hors d’oeuvres,” said Fauntleroy. “Pâté?”

“Please, young sir,” said Alice. “Allow me to serve.”

Fauntleroy waved his hand and shook his head. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. I am at *your* service, Your Highness. Besides, it’s important you remain in that position. So, pâté? Caviar?”

“Caviar will do very nicely,” Alice said with a mystified grin, and bowed her head in a prayer for the food.

Then, while touching on some of the more controversial issues that Alice had engendered on *What Will She Say Next?*, the odd couple picked at hors d’oeuvres and tucked into their picnic’s main course—the young lord’s suggested fare of roasted pheasant breast with Parma ham, leeks and mushrooms together with duck comfit and sautéed collard greens.

“Truly a meal fit for a king,” Alice sighed at last, laying down her knife and fork and unsuccessfully stifling a belch. “Oh, I do beg your pardon.”

“Fit for a *queen*, Your Highness. It is a mainstay for the grandest of occasions at court.”

“Anyway, *most* delicious,” said Alice. “And I am most assuredly ... *stuffed*.”

All the while, the elderly artist had been standing at some distance, silently but vigorously exercising his colourful flair to capture the engaging scene on canvas.

“So how are matters of the kingdom these days, Your Highness, if you pardon my asking?” Fauntleroy said in a sober tone.

“Very well, thank you,” Alice replied, clutching her keys turned to scissors. “The Offensive is gearing up tremendously. Attacking initiative is most important you know.”

“I most assuredly do, Your Highness.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My grandparents want to enrol me in military academy when I turn sixteen, but they are superficially allowing me the ‘space,’ as they say, to indulge my acting proclivities. Nevertheless, Grandfather, being a Sandhurst graduate, has instilled in me the awareness of strategy, and one of the most important rules of the war game is ‘never let yourself be put on...’”

“The *defensive*,” Alice chorused with him.

Fauntleroy laughed and clapped his hands. “Exactly!”

“Which accounts for your somewhat audaciously asking me out on this jaunt?” Alice teasingly asked.

“I suppose you could say that,” the puppet said with a chuckle, but then his expression fell suddenly grave and he lowered his voice. “Although, in the case of your warfare, you are not wrestling with flesh and blood, or even *wood* for that matter.”

“Why Little Lord, that is most ... *insightful* of you.”

“Thank you, Your Highness. I must credit my Grandmaker for instilling such in me. But I am constrained to warn you that there are evil forces at play who hate what you are saying, and even *more* what you are doing.”

“Of that I am aware—at least sooner or later on these missions,” said Alice.

“Yes. Well, I don’t know if you have noticed, Your Highness, but there is a subversive groundswell among the rest of the puppet crew.”

“I have been somewhat sentient of such, Little Lord. Fomented it seems by Mr. Tanner and Miss Farthing—although I feel that she is—pardon the simile—a *puppet* of Bob Tanner.”

“Actually, Your Highness, speaking of Miss Farthing...” Fauntleroy stopped and pulled a beeping cell phone from his suit.

“Hello? Yes, it is I, Fauntleroy. It’s still on. In about three quarters of an hour at Sorso’s? Splendid. Cheerio.”

“Well, I must say the air of mystery is most tantalising, Little Lord,” said Alice.

Fauntleroy smiled and refilled the glasses with Alice’s favoured bubbly water. “Then let us toast to mystery, Your Highness, and we can savour the dessert.”

“*Dessert?* You purchased dessert?”

“Of course. Brioche and pumpnickel bread pudding layered with cranberries and walnuts. A mainstay for the grandest of occasions at court.”

“It is *done!*”

Having just finished their sugary morsels, the nearby triumphant announcement drew Alice and Fauntleroy’s attention.

“There! A masterpiece of *impressionisme*, no?”

“Beautiful, Jerome,” Fauntleroy remarked once he and Alice had gathered around the artist’s finished work.

“Hmm,” said Alice, stroking her chin and looking puzzled.

“Is it not, Your Highness?” Fauntleroy asked. “He has indeed captured the colour of your hair. Like a field of golden corn in the sun.”

Alice blushed. “It is a little umm ... *blurred*. But yes, most beautiful colours.”

“I shall call it ‘A Wonderland Picnic,’” said the artist.

“Splendid. And here is your imbursement,” said Fauntleroy, placing a small, leather drawstring pouch into Jerome’s paint-stained hands. “Forty gold florins, am I correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, Jerome. Please have it delivered to my Grandfather’s manor in Dorincourt. Thank you.”

The artist bowed, Alice curtseyed, and the delighted old man scuttled off with his painting equipment while gingerly holding the large wet canvas over his head. Fauntleroy and Alice gathered up the remains of their picnic repast.

“And now, Your Highness—if I may be so bold, I wish for you to join Miss Penny Farthing and me at Sorso’s.”

“Sorso’s?”

“A coffee bar. A popular chain.”

“I’ve hardly ever drunk coffee,” said Alice as they walked. “But I have the strangest feeling that this night could prove rather long.”

Fauntleroy smiled knowingly. Picking up their pace, he and Alice were at Sorso’s in time to greet Miss Farthing, who was nervously waiting at the entrance. Alice noticed, but declined to remark, that the bedraggled puppet looked haggard and her face had been chipped in a few places.

“You could have sat down and ordered, Miss Farthing,” said Lord Fauntleroy.

“Oh, I just didn’t know if I could—you know—*trust* that you, sir, being upper class and all that ... well never mind.”

“Never mind indeed. Shall we take a table and proceed, Miss Farthing?”

“Ooh, quite posh,” Penny remarked, surveying the coffee house’s oak-panelled walls decorated with abstract paintings, its tables lit with sunken oil lanterns and the ambience complemented by mellow, modern-jazz saxophone. “Never set foot in anyfink like this in me life. Bob wouldn’t have dreamed of being seen *dead* in one. Cuppa tea in a transport caff or a pint at the pub is more his speed.”

“Much more his speed,” said Fauntleroy. “But if you so desire, madam, we can go to one of those places. Remember all expenses incurred are...”

“On me,” Alice chorused with him.

“Ooh, no, your lordship,” said Penny. “Far be it from me to pass up the chance to get a little pampered.”

“Exactly,” said Fauntleroy. “Don’t pass up the chance.”

A waiter approached them with menus in hand and guided them to a corner table where he awaited their orders. Alice and Fauntleroy requested simple espressos and Penny took advantage of the occasion by ordering the Sorso’s special—a double-cream, mega Mocha.

“If Bob could see me now, he’d murder me,” she said. “Of course, he finks nuffink of spending this much down at the pub every night.”

“That’s right,” said Fauntleroy. “He thinks nothing of it.”

“What time do we have to be at the theatre, by the way?” Alice asked more in an effort to dispel the air of mystery than from a desire to be punctual.

“Oh yes, Your Highness,” said Fauntleroy. “We should get to the point.”

“Yeah, we should get to the point,” said Penny.

“Well, Your Highness, Penny here has been party to some clandestine meetings with the puppet crew led by Bob Tanner. They have bode much evil towards you.”

“Yeah, they’ve, you know ... whatever, towards you,” said Penny. “Evil.”

“I think it’s fuelled to a large degree by jealousy,” said Fauntleroy.

“Yeah, jealousy,” said Penny.

“Especially, Your Majesty, on the part of Bob Tanner.”

“Yeah,” said Penny. “Especially him.”

“And,” Fauntleroy continued, “Miss Farthing here has it on good authority that they mean to do you great harm.”

“Yeah, Miss Pleasance. Great ’arm.”

“Would you care to explain, Miss Farthing, ma’am?” Alice asked.

Basking in the rare position of being besought for information, Penny ran her fingers through her yellow hair and took a large sip of her mocha. She began in a whisper.

“I don’t mean to be a snitch in all this, Miss Pleasance, being as I was Bob Tanner’s bird for quite awhile. But I started finking that maybe you had a point wiv’ all this talk about Joshua and his weddin’ an’ all. Then one night after snoggin’ wiv’ Bob backstage after the show—everyone had gone home, mind you—I sort of mentioned that maybe you were right, and Bob threw a blue fit. Slapped me around—that accounts for the splinters on me cheek, by the way—and called me a deluded piece of kindling. I begged him to think about it, but he hit me again. I ran upstairs and bumped into Little Lord here and he protected me.”

“Well, I merely showed her a place where we could hide in the theatre, Your Highness.”

“And we slept there the night,” Penny said dreamily.

“We hid out,” Fauntleroy mumbled.

“It was so romantic,” said Penny. “Like a fairytale. You know, like when the handsome young prince rescues and falls in love with a servant girl.”

“Yes,” said Fauntleroy. “Like when a prince rescues a servant girl.”

“Of course,” said Alice. “I love those sorts of stories. Brandon can’t stand them, though.”

“Yer boyfriend?”

“No. My ... er ... so what are you going to do now?”

“Run away,” said Fauntleroy.

“Yeah, run away,” said Penny.

“All that to say, we won’t be at the show tonight, Your Highness.”

“Nah,” said Penny. “We won’t be at the show.”

“Hmm,” said Alice and absentmindedly perused the menu. “Does that mean there is impending peril?”

Fauntleroy and Penny nodded.

“I am afraid at the moment we cannot be specific, Your Highness.”

“Nah,” said Penny. “We can’t be specific.”

“But suffice it to say you should walk circumspectly,” said Fauntleroy.

“Yeah, walk ... whatever,” said Penny.

“I will most certainly do that,” Alice said soberly. “I will be sure to keep an ear out for Joshua’s instructions.”

“I am sure you will, Your Highness.”

“Yeah. I’m sure you will,” said Penny.

“Well,” said Alice, daintily draining the last sip of her espresso and rising to her feet, “it has been a most lovely time. Thank you, kind young sir, for the enjoyable picnic, and most of all for your delightful company, and for yours Miss Farthing, although I have only just now benefited from the pleasure of knowing you. I pray that you and Little Lord will enjoy a most happy life together with Joshua’s blessings.”

Penny suddenly burst into tears and reached for her napkin stuffed in her empty mocha mug. Fauntleroy handed her a lace-trimmed handkerchief from the breast pocket of his black velvet suit.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” blubbered Penny. “But this has been so luvverly meetin’ you and gettin’ to know you better, Miss Pleasance. I confess I misjudged you at first. But you are truly a right darlin’. I pray too that Joshua will keep you safe in the middle of it all.”

“He will,” said Alice.

“He will,” said Fauntleroy.

“He will,” said Penny.

To be continued...



Issue 245-AM

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale in Eight ACTS.



Act Two

The story so far: While attending a play at the Warren Theatre, London, Alice is whisked into another out-of-time adventure where she finds herself featured (along with several walking and talking puppets) in a comedy by a mysterious playwright. Alice soon finds herself no longer following the script, but improvising as she goes ... and causing no small stir as she decides on what to say next.

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MARIAN

Oh my! These lights like, show up every blemish, and I look so pale. Maybe, like Little Lord suggested, I should consider a touch of something? ...

Not knowing where to begin, Alice had been perusing the brushes, pencils, powders, and accessories covering the table in front of the highly illuminated, wall-length mirror. She now had her own dressing room.

Within just under a week, the success of *What Will She Say Next?* had captured newspaper headlines and the attention of television networks nationwide. After bemoaning his unsuccessful attempts at securing her for an interview, one prominent talk-show host even remarked that Alice Pleasance had become the most sought-after personality since Gloria Swanson, the outspoken thirteen-year-old actress of the 1940s.

Because of Alice's reticence to appear on public television for interviews, Lance had offered to be her spokesman, and obstinately referred to himself as such, refusing to be addressed as Alice's "spokesperson" when it was evident that he was a man.

"Why use three syllables, when two will do?" he would say in the face of objections. "If so, let's knock 'man' off the end of 'fireman,' 'postman,' 'dustman,' and even 'human' while we're at it. Of course, other than the rather clumsy use of 'person,' I haven't the faintest idea what to replace it with."

Alice giggled as she reflected. *Postperson, dustperson, huperson...*

A knock on her dressing room door interrupted her amusement. It was Lance Williams.

"Everything to your liking, Alice?"

"Absolutely wonderful, sir. Very spacious. Although I was perfectly happy to share a dressing room with the female puppets. Furthermore, it seems all the puppets resent this 'upgrade,' especially Bob Tanner."

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“Be that as it may, dear, but it would never do for the leading lady not to have her own quarters.”

“I see, sir, but with only one more night...”

“Well, let me explain—it’s a packed house again—standing room only. This time they’re even filling the aisles, and there’s a mile-long queue outside. We told them to come back tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, sir?” said Alice. “I thought this was to be the last night. We agreed to stretch it to one week only.”

Lance shook his head. “The theatre has insisted on keeping the show open for yet another two weeks, doubling the percentage. With two shows a day—a late afternoon and a night show.”

“But I *can’t*. I have to...” Alice’s voice and face fell, realising that although she had been receiving intermittent instructions “on the fly,” she had not taken sufficient time to hear more fully from Joshua about her present situation. The pace had been so hectic to where she usually fell into bed exhausted at night, muttering resolutions to pray about it on the morrow, excusing herself that, much like a dream, it was just another out-of-time trip anyway.

“Well, I’m ashamed to say, sir, I haven’t the foggiest idea what I have to do, actually.”

“Exactly. It is, I agree, a rather unexpected turn of events in my ... *our* ‘script,’ so to speak. So let us ride the wave and see where it leads us.”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Look, Alice, on another note, I have a high-powered promoter waiting in the hall. She’s from the U.S.—Mayhem to be exact—and she works for Cineshock. She would like to have a word with you.”

“About what, may I ask?”

“Some proposals regarding your future in show business.”

“But Mr. Williams, sir, I have no...”

“I understand. But don’t fret, I will fully support any decision you make following your discussion. I have it on good authority that you’ll make the right one.”

Lance leaned back into the corridor. “You may enter, ma’am.”

Alice clutched her scissors and claimed a key of wisdom and wise speech along with conviction.

“Alice, meet Miss Velma Slithers,” said Lance as he pulled up a chair for an emaciated, heavily made-up brunette, presumably in her late twenties, dressed in a form-fitting suit of black lizard skin, complimented by a handbag and boots fashioned from the same.

Alice stood up and curtsied.

“Impressive,” croaked Velma. “She walks the talk. That always gets results.”

“It’s in all sincerity,” said Lance.

“Doubtless. Er ... mind if I smoke?”

Alice shrugged.

“I realise you are on in fifteen, so I’ll cut to the chase. You are well aware that you’re goin’ places, right?”

“Going places, ma’am?”

“Yeah, Miss Alice. *What Will She Say Next?* could break us into Paris, Rome, New York. They want us to hit the entertainment magazine *Talk of the Town*, and we have a couple of prime-time TV spots we could crack.”

“You say ‘us’ and ‘we,’ ma’am, but who are you referring to, may I ask?”

“You and me, of course, honey. Us girls have to stick together in a man’s world!”

“Oh alas, Miss Slithers, I really don’t know if all this is what I should be doing. And what about your plays, Mr. Williams? Would you not wish to pursue that rather than *this*?”

Lance cleared his throat and was about to answer, when Velma spoke. “It’s crazy you should mention it, Miss Pleasance, but a short while ago I grabbed ahold of a kick-butt little screenplay called *Goldilocks and the Three Stooges*. A producer friend in Cineshock had showed some interest in it at the time and had asked me who I had in mind for the star role. I had told him I had no idea. He said to come back when I’d found the leading lady. Anyway, I called him today to tell him I’ve snagged her!”

Alice smiled and said nothing.

“I told him the name, Alice Pleasance, and it was like ‘open sesame.’ He said we would start negotiations right away no questions asked. You see, he’d been here the night before last, and you knocked him dead, and...”

Alice continued smiling and saying nothing. She was silently praying, and Velma’s voice was fading in the background. She was apparently quoting from a proposal.

“Your accommodations throughout the filming will be of optimum compliance with your every wish and whim. ...”

Alice was committing her wishes, whims, and most of all her will, to God when Velma’s following question broke her reverie.

“You’ll wanna chew over the financial terms, I guess?”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am?”

“That is, of course, with appropriate counsel from a lawyer and perhaps your parents.”

“I think the young lady is going to have to get ready for the show, Miss Slithers,” Lance gingerly reminded the woman. “I am sure that you and Alice will have plenty of time afterwards with a lot to discuss.”

“If I may be frank,” said Alice, “I feel that the lady and I have but little to discuss.”

“Alice,” said Lance, “do you realise who you are talking to?”

“I do.”

“Hey, guys,” said Velma, “I can deal with it. The little girl’s got guts. ‘What will she say next?’ She talks her walk. I like that.”

“That may very well be, ma’am,” said Lance, “but I just wanted to remind you, Alice, that you are talking to someone who could make or break you in show business.”

“With due respect to Miss Slithers, I wish for neither. Show business is neither my gift nor calling, sir.”

Velma snickered. “Now that is a damn *lie*, Miss Pleasance. Don’t you realise by now that you are destined to be one helluva star? It wouldn’t matter if there was no one else struttin’ up there on the stage. You’ve got that crowd in the palm of your sweet little hand.”

“You’re on in five, Miss Pleasance!” a voice announced with a rap on the door. Alice patted her cheeks for a final check in the mirror, and with a polite “good evening, Miss Slithers,” arose and strode out of the dressing room.

“Show business,” she muttered in disgust while making her way to the stage. “Lord, I want no part of it unless it is of You. Please have Your way and show me. And anoint my words right now,” she added, gazing into a sea of expectant faces and clutching the scissors, which were heating up in her pinafore pocket. The theatre was packed, and in her opinion, dangerously so. She stepped forward and took the microphone.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. ...”

Alice paused for the clamour of cheers, whistles, and stamping to die before continuing.

“Thank you. But I must inform you that regretfully there will not be a show tonight.”

A heckling uproar met Alice’s announcement, and she attempted to gain the audience’s attention by waving her hands. “Let me explain. It is not that I do not wish to entertain you, it’s just that I feel it’s urgent that you should all leave.”

More booing and objections followed.

“Look,” Alice pleaded, “I am sure that arrangements will be made to refund tickets.”

Still people refused to budge, demanding that she speak.

“What will you say next?” someone shouted.

“Yeah!” shouted another. “That’s what we came for!”

“Very well. What I will say next must be brief. I would like to leave you with an invitation to Joshua’s wedding. ...”

Suddenly the microphone shut off and an alarm started ringing.

“Fire!” someone shouted. Smoke was billowing from backstage and the puppets started rushing hither and thither and getting their strings tangled.

“Wait, *wait!*” Alice screamed, but panic had blinded them from taking heed. “Let’s safely exit the building in decency and in order.”

Hearing a crackling, she turned and saw the stage floor had caught alight. By now, people in the audience were stampeding to the exits and trampling on each other and distant fire engine sirens were echoing outside. Then, to Alice’s horror, almost as one body, the puppets

slumped into a lifeless, tangled heap—the unseen puppeteers had evidently made themselves scarce.

Choking from the smoke, Alice scrambled towards the unconscious puppets and attempted to drag them out of the flames, but they were hopelessly entangled in one another's strings. She pulled out her scissors and tried to cut the strings, but they were as steel.

They have to agree to that, Alice, a still small voice was whispering. Alice was shaking her head in tears.

“But they didn't have a chance to hear!” she protested.

They heard every one of your invitations, Alice. Now it's too late for human intervention. As they have rejected your winsome love, and instead heeded the voice of the devourer, the strings hardened like the arteries to the heart due to the inordinate intake of the host. They become nearly impossible to cut, but you can cut Marian's strings and help her escape. She's over there.

Trapped under a fallen stage light, Marian was unconscious, almost asphyxiated by the smoke, but breathing. Alice heaved the light stand out of the way, and after cutting Marian's strings with the keys turned to scissors, grabbed the limp puppet by the wrists and dragged her out of the backstage area towards the stairs. The heavy stage curtains, being made of combustible fabric, suddenly burst into flames causing Alice to tumble backwards down the stairs, still holding onto Marian's wrists.

“Gotcha, luv!”

It was the voice of Lance Williams. To Alice's relief, she had fallen into the playwright's awaiting arms. He, with singed face and a grateful smile, then carried Alice and Marian through the performers' exit and out onto the street where fire engines' hoses sprayed seemingly powerless jets of water into the blaze. Charred Tudor timbers crackled, cracked, and tumbled into the steam and smoke as crowds watched, cordoned off at a safe distance behind the flashing lights of ambulances, police vehicles, and reporters' cameras.

“Did everything I could, dearie,” Lance said, wiping his brow, once he'd draped Marian over a cordon rope. “The puppeteers and Velma had long escaped, along with the rock group and some of the cameramen and crew, apparently. Couldn't salvage any other puppets, though—the fire took hold so fast! ... It's tragic. I'd given up, but something told me to go back in there at the last minute.”

“It was a miracle you did, sir. I don't see how we would have escaped.”

“Well, thanks to you calling off the show and warning them, Alice, it seems most of the audience escaped unharmed. Do you need a lift home?”

“Oh, that is ever so kind of you, Mr. Williams, but I reside quite a distance away from London, actually. Winsley Barnes.”

“Winsley Barnes? Never heard of the place.”

“I am not surprised, sir, under the circumstances.”

“Although I am well acquainted with most of England’s larger towns,” said Lance, “can’t say as I know the names of many smaller villages.”

“Actually, Winsley Barnes is normally a fairly large town ... I mean, normally, when I ... oh, goodness ...”

“Don’t fret, miss,” Lance said with a wink and a pat on Alice’s shoulder. “I am sure I can find it in the A-Z. I have one in my cab.”

Lance strode over to the cordon and slung Marian over his shoulders. “There’s no reason to linger here any longer, Miss Pleasance. There’s little we can do. Let’s go.”

“Oh Joshua, please help the firemen put out the blaze, and do comfort any people who have loved ones hurt or lost in the fire,” Alice pleaded.

“You’re a praying lass, I see,” Lance remarked as they made their way through the crowd.

“I most certainly do pray, sir. And circumstances such as these do provoke me to even more earnest beseeching.”

“Rightly so, miss. Unfortunately, it is the only time when many beseech their Maker’s intervention. Including myself, I am ashamed to say. Anyways, here we are—my pride and joy.”

“Why, that is an authentic Victorian cab!” Alice exclaimed.

“You ought to know, miss,” said Lance, opening the door and dumping his inert load of Marian the marionette onto the seat, “like you, I have the most difficult time adjusting to this modern world, its vehicles and whatnot. But I would appreciate you verifying its authenticity. See, I bought it at an antique fair. The man told me it was genuine—showed me the engraved brass plaque at the base of the seat. Actually, I wanted an Elizabethan one, but there wasn’t one available within my means.”

Alice drew her breath and closed her eyes. By now, she had found it generally unnecessary to explain why she was not ‘Alice in Wonderland’; it was simpler to flow with Joshua’s leading.

“It is most assuredly authentically authentic, sir,” she said. “Have no fear.”

“Then we shall proceed with confidence, Miss Pleasance,” Lance announced as he helped Alice to climb into the cab. “Make yourself comfortable. I shall inform my coachman in the tavern across the road, have him consult the A-Z, and as soon as he has prepared the horses we shall be on our way.”

“That is so very kind of you, sir,” said Alice.

“Make no mention of it, fair damsel. I am most indebted that you salvaged the show and my reputation. You performed most admirably.”

“Thank you sir, but it was nothing that I did, it’s really the...”

“Ah, I see your puppet friend is conscious, Miss Pleasance. Let’s sit her upright.”

Marian rolled her eyes and stared torpidly about her. “Th-there was a fire?”

“Alas, there was,” said Alice.

“It seems that the Orb Theatre is gutted,” said Lance, “but you are safe.”

“Thanks to Mr. Williams,” said Alice.

“My arms are all charred,” said Marian.

“That’s nothing, miss,” said Lance. “When you consider, to put it bluntly, that some o’ yer unfortunate fellow puppets are now charcoal. God rest their...”

“I am not a puppet,” Marian stated impassively and shivered, “I’m a *marionette*.”

“We should get her a blanket,” said Alice.

“Under the seat,” said Lance. He then walked over to the tavern. Presently he returned with the coachman scuttling behind him, A-Z in hand and looking apologetic.

“Winsley Barnes, miss. No such place.”

“It’s a relatively new town, sir,” said Alice. “How old is that A-Z?”

“Latest edition, miss. Last month. Did I get the spelling right? W-I-N-S-L-E-Y...”

“Yes, you did, sir,” said Alice, and sunk down into the seat. “Actually, I’m not surprised.”

“So that leaves us no choice,” said Lance.

“Really?” said Alice.

“Really. Except to leave you and your pupp—marionette friend here to fend for yourselves. ...”

Shocked, Alice looked up into Lance’s eyes and saw they were twinkling with amusement.

“Or to invite you to my humble abode, the Tuck Inn way up in Telford-on-Revlon. Anne Hastaway, my bride-to-be, runs it. I would so like you to meet her. She’s a tremendous aficionado of your adventures. You are welcome to stay as long as you like as our privileged guests.”

“Oh, that is ever so kind of you, sir,” said Alice.

“Then I shall ring Anne at the next opportunity and instruct her to prepare.”

Lance tapped the underside of the cab’s roof and it jostled into motion. Alice was startled.

“Strange you manifest unfamiliarity with such transportation, Miss Alice,” Lance remarked. “Or maybe our present-day coachman’s handling leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Not so, sir,” said Alice. “It’s remarkably smooth, which I imagine is because there are no cobblestones.”

Lance laughed and Alice fell into thought. It seemed to Alice as she cogitated, meditated, ruminated, and whatever other word could describe her thoughts as the coach rattled into the night, that on these adventures, she barely had the time to catch her prayer-and-prophecy breath. She was tempted to blame the “ghost-writers in the sky,” as Brandon jokingly called them, for making the events so fast paced for the sake of pleasing or at least catching and keeping

the readers' attention span. Especially perturbing for Alice was that missing such required time for spiritual connection and refreshment, so conveniently slotted for her in her Home in Winsley Barnes, resulted in the loss of her comfort and safety—sometimes even that of others.

But I mustn't murmur, Lord—there is really no excuse. And I most certainly wouldn't want to forego these experiences that mean so much to the readers. I just really wish I could like, learn once and for all to take the time with You and stuff that I need in the middle of it all ... but it's just, if I only ... oh, here I go again, "just if I" justifying. ...

Except for a brief rainstorm while passing through the village of Denbury, where they required assistance to push the coach out of a muddy ditch on a winding back road, the journey up to Telford was uneventful and took a little over three hours. During this time, Lance recounted his rise to playwright fame to an enrapt Alice, and a sleepy but traumatised Marian, who showed more concerned interest in the charring of her face and limbs.

"Nothing a little sanding and a touch of varnish can't fix," Lance said with a hint of irritation at being unable to gain her undivided attention. "Anne is a dab hand at fixing up and retouching damaged dolls and puppets."

"I am not a puppet," Marian repeated.

"Well, isn't that the same thing?"

"Not at all," said Marian, "I was fashioned in Italy where they make marionettes, not puppets."

"I see," said Lance and continued. "Anyway, it was around the time of my big breakthrough with *All's Fair in Love*, that I met Anne. Hometown girl, you know, hardly the belle of the ball, except in my eyes. Of course, in London, I had many eligible young debutantes approaching me with their eyes upon my purse, and I courted a few. However, I preferred Anne's companionship over theirs, along with her wise and unselfish observance of my purse!"

"I do so look forward to meeting her, sir," said Alice. "She sounds like a wonderful woman."

"That she is."

"But she's not pretty, right?" Marian asked.

Alice was startled. "Marian, *really*, that is hardly good form. ..."

"Hey, Alice, it's just a question."

"It's alright, girls," said Lance. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and to me Anne is the essence of beauty."

"That's ever so sweet, sir. God bless you," said Alice and silence fell upon the three travellers.

Strange that I'm "stuck" with this puppet, Lord, Alice wondered. I mean, she doesn't seem very receptive or sheepy. Yes, yes, I'll try. If You say she is, then I'll take it by faith.

Alice looked over at Marian and courageously offered a smile. To Alice's surprise, the marionette returned it—her doleful black eyes responding warmly to hers with a look that caused Alice to meditate further as the carriage jogged along into the night. Lance Williams was nodding off, his head slumping intermittently onto his chest causing him to waken briefly at intervals and grunt.

"If I may ask, why do you object so to being referred to as a puppet?" Alice inquired at length.

"Puppet' implies I'm being mindlessly controlled like the rest of them," said Marian. "I mean, who wants to be like all the others? *I* certainly don't."

"Nor do I," Alice agreed.

"Obviously not," said Marian, "judging by the clothes you wear and the way you talk—you of all people should understand."

"I do."

"Anyway, no one controls me, but *me*. I think for myself and can come and go as I please."

Alice decided to pipe down and pray.

- 5 -

TUCKED IN

Alice was asleep when the carriage finally clattered into the Tuck Inn's cobblestone courtyard. A short woman in her mid-thirties with dark hair drawn back in a bun bustled out of the side entrance. Lance opened the carriage door and extended his hand.

"Alice, Marian, meet Anne Hastaway, my wife-to-be."

"We haven't named the day for the last fifteen years," the woman said sardonically.

"Don't blame me," said Lance. "You're the one who seems to want to keep the music playing. Anyway, these damsels are tired and would probably appreciate your good old Irish stew. ..."

"On the pot over the fire," said Anne. "And then I imagine a piping-hot Horlicks would be the ticket right afore bed. But first, I'll show you to your rooms. Lance rang to say ye were a-comin', and I prepared the best available.

"At least four hundred years old," she added, noticing Alice's awe of the quaint but sizeable lodging's décor, with its black Tudor beams contrasting white stuccoed walls apparently hewn without plumb, level, or carpenter's square. "And I believe nary an inch has been changed, save for an occasional coat of whitewash, pitch, or paint.

"Oh, and this is Lance's writing room," she remarked, passing by a bolted black oak door. "Has the best view of the town. Overlooks the Revlon."

Presently they arrived at what Anne had allotted as Alice's bedroom: an expansive suite with an antique four-poster bed, a corner kitchenette, a well-equipped bathroom, and an already blazing fireplace surrounded by a sofa and two armchairs.

"And your room is just down the hallway next to the linen closet, miss ... er..."

"Marian."

"I wasn't exactly sure how to be a-lodgin' a puppet, Miss Marian. ..."

"I'm not a puppet! I am a marionette."

"I see. Well, I wasn't sure of their requirements, washing up, lavatory, and all that."

"Same as anyone else," Marian said curtly, "and I certainly don't see why they should be any different from Alice's."

"Well, if the room is not to your liking, Miss Marian, do let me know. Although we *are* full these days, you understand. It's sometimes necessary to take what's available."

"If it presents a problem, ma'am," said Alice, "I am perfectly happy to take Marian's room, and she can stay here."

"That's obligin' o' you, miss, but that would never do with Lance. He insisted ye take this one."

"I see," said Alice.

Anne smiled and took Marian's hand. "So, Maid Marian, allow me to show you to your room. Oh, and by the way, I'll be takin' care of that there charrin' with a little sandin', smoothin', and varnish."

"She'll appreciate that tremendously, ma'am," said Alice.

"Anyways," said Anne, "we'll be seein' you both in our dining room for supper in—let's see—half an hour."



"Why do they call you 'Shaker,' sir?"

"Because he became known as a 'mover and shaker,'" said Anne, overhearing Alice's question as she laid a pot of lamb stew on the table. "Lance cares not for people to exalt him unduly, so he's usually reluctant to say why. I don't mind saying he shook up the theatre world forever."

"Dear Anne," Lance said, addressing Alice, "my greatest admirer. I can pass her a draft of my most inferior work and she goes into veritable raptures. Forget my e'er receiving an unbiased appraisal from her."

"Nay," said Anne, "even your most seemingly feeble attempts do shame the grandest of works touted today. Pass me your bowl, Alice."

Lance grinned. "*There*. See? Biased."

"But the *No Strings Attached* play?" Alice timidly inquired.

Strained silence followed as Anne served the bowls, until Marian who had been straightening her silverware and serviette, spoke up.

"Yah. Let's face it—pretty lame. No wonder it got bashed by the critics."

“*Marian*,” Alice whispered, surprised at the incongruity between the marionette’s impeccable table etiquette and her deplorable social graces, “we’re guests here. That was entirely uncalled for.”

“Let’s say grace,” Anne interjected, and the rest bowed their heads. “For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Alice and Lance.

“By the by, Alice, to answer your question, Lance did not write that play.”

“I beg to differ, darling. As you well know, I sat in that study night after night burning the midnight oil.”

Anne spoke and sipped cautiously from her spoon. “I remember well, dear—the stew is very hot, by the way—I meant to say that ye did not write it ’cos the concealed entities that commissioned it gave precise instructions on the plot, characters, what they said, and how they said it. You admitted yourself that you hated it.”

“I did so,” said Lance. “But it took care of the down payment on our happy Tuck Inn abode, did it not?”

“The *advance* did, dear. We still owe.

“Sorry to have to talk about such things,” Anne added, turning to Alice and Marian. “We should turn to lighter topics.”

And so they did, with Lance and Anne, at Alice’s enthusiastic prompting, explaining the history of Telford and its people, and recounting their childhood memories there. It did seem rather odd to Alice and Marian, however, that the couple’s descriptions of a town without electricity, plumbing, and motor vehicles could still have been in existence but twenty years ago.

Nevertheless, the stories and anecdotes were fascinating, even arresting Marian’s wavering attention span, and after a couple of heart-warming hours and a Horlicks nightcap, the four of them retired to bed.



“*Alice Pleasance believed to be the arsonist behind the Orb Theatre fire!*” Screamed the headlines of a newspaper that Lance was reading by their fireside. Anne was spinning yarn at a wheel, and Alice was playing a game of dominoes with Marian who was sipping an espresso. At Lance Williams’ and Anne Hastaway’s generous behest, Alice and Marian had already stayed two days at the Tuck Inn with no indication from their hosts of the need to reevaluate their purpose and leave any time soon. Marian was happy to lounge around, watch television, and read magazines while drinking espresso coffee, and Alice was content to read books and enjoy the cosy quaintness of the inn and the antiquated town of Telford, chalking the time up to “rest and refilling”—as she’d heard her parents and steering council refer to such periods. Although she

had taken some time for prayer, praise, prophecy, and even meditation, Alice was concerned that apart from there being an antique pulpit Bible in the living room bookcase, no printed Family Word was available, and therefore she prayed for the supply of such, even if it was in the form of an “old” MO book.

“*Poppycock*,” Lance exclaimed and threw the newspaper into the fire.

“Mmm, mmm,” said Anne, “I read it. Not surprising though.”

“Surprising? How?”

“It was just a matter of time before they put the mockers on* it, dear. Alice was having too good a run, and the big ‘they’ didn’t like it.”

Hearing her name, Alice looked up from the domino game. Lance noticed her curiosity.

“They’re blaming the Orb Theatre fire on you, miss.”

“Who, *Alice*?” said Marian.

“Indeed.”

“Why?”

“Overstepping herself,” Lance replied. “Someone or someones disliked what she was saying, especially her mysterious invitation to Joshua’s wedding feast, and what’s more important, what she is effecting. Her influence has been phenomenal. ...”

“Actually,” he continued, lowering his voice, “we don’t know if the things we discuss even now are being filmed from that two-way television set. ...”

“That’s why we hardly ever turn it on,” said Anne.

“That’s not the *main* reason, my little partridge,” said Lance. “You and I are extremely busy, and besides, the program fare leaves a lot to be desired.”

“True,” said Anne. “And our beloved language has deteriorated terribly.”

“Anyway,” Lance continued, now lowering his voice to a whisper, “all kinds of insignificant electronic gadgets and fixtures could be wired to monitor us, even the toaster.”

“But strange as it may seem,” said Anne, “as difficult as it has been for us to adjust to this modern world, I have found it much easier than Lance who still insists on writing his scripts with a quill. I appreciate the use of a gas stove for instance or an electric smoothing iron—although I have to be circumspect as to how I am attired even when ironing.”

“Usually rather alluringly,” Lance said with a sly grin at Alice. “Maybe she’s imagining that Crime Minister Anthony Driftwood Blarr himself could be peeking in!”

“Yuk,” said Marian.

“Apparently, *Alice*,” Anne went on, “you seem to have adjusted remarkably well.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am, to what?”

***mockers on:** (Old English slang) to put an end to

“The modern world. Of course, you came along a lot later than Lance and me. The world was already a much different place by then, what with the Industrial Revolution and such.”

“To be sure, ma’am.”

“Come in,” Lance suddenly responded to a timid knock on the door. It opened to the inn’s receptionist.

“A gentleman to see you, sir, and Miss Alice in particular. He didn’t want a room.”

“His name?”

“Mr.—or ‘Monsieur’ as he refers to himself—Jacques Truncheon. A very charming French gentleman.”

“Oh my goodness,” said Alice, “the police inspector!”

“Yes, miss,” said the girl. “He flashed me his ... er ... *credentials*.”

“You know him, Alice?” Anne quickly asked over Marian’s giggles.

“I do, ma’am ... from sometime ago. True, a very charming gentleman. He helped me very much, but it’s most unlikely he will remember me.”

“Show him in,” said Lance.

Clearly apologetic, and bearing a somewhat excuse-me-for-living demeanour, a portly, middle-aged gentleman with a walrus moustache entered, and allowed Miss Hastaway to take his Burberry trench coat. After introductions, he sat down in the proffered armchair.

“Talk about the clichéd French detective,” Marian whispered to Alice. “Next thing we know, he’ll pull out a *pipe*.”

“Sssh,” said Alice.

“I have to admit zat, although my business regards ze pleasing Miss Pleasance, it is not entirely pleasant,” Monsieur Truncheon said.

“We understand,” said Lance. “I assume it is in regards to the fire at the Orb theatre?”

“*Exactement*. Ze story goes zat Alice knew ze fire was going to ‘appen, and is even suspected of starting it herself.”

“So say the newspapers,” said Anne.

“*Oui*. Ze theatre management ‘as been flooded with lawsuits about overcrowding, but being as they were conspiring with the powers that be, they’ve devised ze scheme of blaming Alice. Zey are going as far as to say zat Alice in her morbid religious zeal attempted to detain ze audience even as ze fire was brewing so she could ‘ave an opportunity to evangelise them while she and zey could die in flames. Ze charges are arson, murder, and suicide with ‘Alice’ malice aforethought. Zey even pieced together bogus footage supposedly from their video surveillance.”

“This is preposterous,” said Lance. “But you don’t believe this yourself do you, Monsieur Truncheon?”

Jacques laughed. “I have worked long enough under ze unseen powers zat be, to learn to put no stock in their spurious media. Just as with any testimonial produced in court zat is found false in one point, I throw it *all* out. You would be wise to do ze same.”

“We do,” said Lance.

“But what do you suggest the poor girl does?” Anne asked.

“Lay low here for a while,” said Jacques. “I’ll keep those concerned at bay with some sort of excuse. However, I must ask ze young lady some routine questions, if it is okay with ze mademoiselle.”

“Most certainly, monsieur,” said Alice.

Truncheon produced a small spiral memo pad and a Biro. “Were you present on ze night in question?”

“I was, sir.”

“Did you indeed start ze fire?”

“I did not, monsieur.”

“Did you know of, suspect, or otherwise have precognition of ze conflagration?”

“No, monsieur. But I felt something was amiss, and that’s why I wanted to cancel the show and dismiss the audience.”

“*Bon. Merci, Mademoiselle.* No further questions.”

“Now you can relax,” said Lance. Jacques Truncheon smiled and leaned back in the armchair.

“It seems you are acquainted with young Alice, monsieur,” said Anne.

“*Vraiment?* Hmm. I haven’t stopped to think about it, but she does seem strangely familiar. Have we have met before?”

“We have, monsieur,” said Alice, “under somewhat similar circumstances. You had to press charges.”

“Against *you?*”

“Yes, sir. I was accused of treason by a man named Truco.”

Truncheon’s face turned ashen. “Treason? *Truco?*”

Alice nodded.

“How on earth did you meet him, mademoiselle?”

“Through a rather unusual chain of events, monsieur, that would take some time to relate.”

“We are in no hurry,” said Anne, before summoning the maid.

“Ah ... *m-merci beaucoup,*” said Jacques Truncheon, accepting the offer of a cup of tea.

“But if it is not to your liking, sir,” Anne said, noticing his hesitancy.

“Living temporarily in London has forced me to accept ze English taste, madame—otherwise by my own hand I would make my sojourn here a living hell.”

“We could offer you a Bordeaux wine instead,” Anne said and laid aside her distaff.* “My husband’s beverage of choice.”

The inspector’s face lit up. “Ah, zat would be preferable, but when on duty, I am obliged to decline.”

“I understand, sir.”

***distaff**: rod for unspun thread: a rod on which wool or flax is wound for somebody to use when spinning by hand, or the corresponding rod on a spinning wheel

“On ze other hand,” Jacques Truncheon continued, “now zat I have presented ze charges, and ze young lady is aware of ze ramifications, and I have interrogated her to my satisfaction, I am officially *off* duty.”

“Bravo!” said Lance, motioning to the maid. “The ’97 vintage on the third shelf in the cellar, dear, by the door.”

With his expression and tone turning grave, Jacques addressed Alice. “And while I am officially off duty, young lady, I feel I have to warn you zat ze powerful entities behind ze scenes mean you great harm. Zis I say not to scare you but to caution you to walk circumspectly. My orders came from ze *top*—at least ze top from my limited perspective.”

“I am afraid I do not quite follow, sir.”

The inspector scratched his chin and pulled a pipe from his pocket. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Be my guest,” said Lance, and Jacques stuffed a small wad of tobacco into the pipe’s bowl.

Marian giggled. “See?” she whispered.

“Sssh,” said Alice.

Jacques struck a match, and a brief period of pensive puffing passed before he proceeded.

“Mademoiselle Alice ... you have stepped onto ze world stage at a time when your presence could not have been more needed.”

“Well said!” Lance exclaimed with a clap. “I could have expressed it no better.”

Jacques smiled. By this time, the maid had reappeared with an uncorked bottle of Bordeaux, which Anne then poured into three wine glasses.

“So, I’m too young?” Marian inquired.

“I did not think that puppets drank wine,” said Anne.

“Actually, I usually go for champagne,” Marian curtly rejoined with a sophisticated air. “We *marionettes* do know how to enjoy the finer things of life.”

“Very well,” said Anne. “And *you*, Alice?”

“I’m fine with bubbly water, ma’am.”

“You were talking about the *top*, Mr. Truncheon,” said Lance. “Powerful men, I assume.”

“And *women*, most likely,” said Anne.

Truncheon nodded. “Powerful. *Very* powerful. And rich beyond imagination.”

“You mean like the top ten richest men ... I mean, *persons* in the world, monsieur?” said Alice. “My brother Brandon saw a documentary recently that highlighted them, owners of computer operating systems, entertainment companies and casinos—that sort of thing.”

“Small fry paraded before ze masses, mademoiselle,” said Jacques.

“I am talking about *gazillionaires*. A hidden oligarchy* possessing *unfathomable* wealth. Again, I say zat from my admittedly uninformed perspective.”

“Ah, but not from your *inadmittedly informed* perspective, Inspector.”

“Lance has a way with words, monsieur,” said Anne.

“So I noticed. But I want to let you know zat I am a man ‘under ze rifle,’ as you say. If I do not toe ze ruler, zey whip up a few well-edited video clips, and presto—I’m slapped with an indictment for police brutality.”

“We’re all puppets in that respect,” said Lance, “when we have a part to play in the theatre of life.”

Jacques nodded and continued puffing on his pipe. “True. By ze way, I do hope you find my indulgence inoffensive.”

“Not at all,” said Lance, as Anne nodded in agreement.

“It’s actually a rather delightful aroma,” said Alice. “My great grandfather used to smoke one of those.”

“It’s a *disgusting* habit,” said Marian with a feigned cough.

“You were speaking of the world stage, Monsieur Truncheon,” said Lance, “a term dear to my heart—and of Alice’s presence on it. ...”



About an hour and a half later, with Jacques Truncheon’s proclamation about her role in yet another out-of-time but in-spirit experience ringing in her ears, Alice retired to her room at the Tuck Inn, amid the portentous greetings of shadows dancing to the wafted whims of flickering lanterns. Even standing barefoot on the deep-piled crimson carpet enhanced her impression of being suspended between time and eternity, unsure which was real—her existence in her Winsley Barnes’ Home with Brandon, her parents, and other Family members, or this wonderland of a puppet, a playwright, and a plot.

Being as the atmosphere bristled with such mystery and promise, Alice was in no mood for sleep, so she wandered over to the bookcase by the blazing fireside (kept fuelled by an ever-attentive maid) and perused the titles, one of which caught her fancy.

Alice and the Baptism of Fire.

“Another Alice book? Never heard of this one, let alone read it,” she muttered to herself. “Sounds like a Harry Potter title...”

“Looks a bit like it too,” she remarked on the cover’s surrealistic pastel depiction of a girl in Victorian clothes resembling herself, with a fiery glow bathing her head. With the book in hand, Alice snuggled into the sumptuous, red velvet of the fireside couch, ordered a cup of steaming

***oligarchy**: government by a small group of people

chocolate Horlicks, and for the next three hours, engrossed herself in reading.

“The crown is never so heavy,” said Joshua, stepping down from his throne, “as upon the head of the one who wears it.”

“But thou art the King,” said Alice.

“Yes, milady. The King of kings ... and queens. Yet, I crowned thee ‘Queen Alice.’ Dost thou not remember?”

Alice nodded. “I do, but...”

“Then take hold of this anointing and let no man or woman take thy crown. How often must I tell thee?”

“Alas, many times it seems, milord.”

Joshua took Alice’s hand and lifted her to her feet. He kissed her brow and smiled. “Presently, thy crown is but the flimsy tiara of a princess, and thou dost wear it blithely and unburdened. But I must tell thee that the more glorious crown that awaits thee is of great weight, and many times thou wilt wish to doff it and be about your amusement, but it is not to be. Yes, there will be moments once thou hast passed from teenhood into queenhood and art off the stage that thou wilt lay thy crown down and wilt enjoy frolic with those entrusted to enter thine inner chamber. These will be but for short seasons, however, and thou must shortly return to the stage, where the crown will again weigh heavy upon thy neck. Yea, it will be as a crown of fire.”

Pondering the weight of Joshua’s saying, Alice burst into tears. ...

And in that fireside glow of her room at the Tuck Inn, our Alice herself, reflecting on this passage, did the same.

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SECONDHAND MEMORIES

At breakfast in the lobby the next morning, Alice sat at the table with red-rimmed eyes. Anne, who was hovering over the guests with menus, tea, and freshly brewed coffee noticed; Lance did too. Only Marian commented.

“You’ve been crying, Alice?”

Alice nodded, picked up a menu and requested a boiled egg in an eggcup.

“Missing home and friends, I’m sure,” said Anne. “Would you like your egg medium or hard boiled?”

“Medium, please. But it’s not that, ma’am. I was reading a most soul-searching book last night, amazingly titled *Alice and the Baptism of Fire*. It moved me to tears.”

“Ah,” said Lance, “a century-old classic, and written by an excellent writer. A contemporary of mine.”

Alice glanced at him quizzically, and continued. "And strangely enough it seems to have been written about me."

"It was," Lance said with a mysterious smile. "It fired me up to write this ... ummm ... never mind."

"And even *Joshua* is in it," said Alice. "He's the King. The one, you know, who I've been trying to introduce to the theatre audiences."

"Yeah," said Marian, "and a lot of them didn't quite get what you were going on about."

"Some of them did, Marian," Lance responded.

"Actually, I was the one who purchased the book," Anne proudly announced, "at Sage's."

"Sage's?" Alice exclaimed.

"Yes. Try your egg, Alice. I hope it's not too well cooked."

"Mr. Sage? A secondhand bookshop man?"

Lance winked. "One of Anne's secret admirers, a charming chap."

"Your egg, Alice," Anne said, blushing.

Taking a teaspoon, Alice tapped open the egg. "Just right, ma'am. Thank you."

"Would you wish to visit the shop?" Anne asked.

"Oh, I would love to," said Alice. "*Ever* so."

"Secondhand books?" Marian mumbled. "Boring."

"You don't have to stay long," said Anne. "I have to do some grocery shopping in that part of Telford, and I can drop ye by there."

"You will be coming too, sir, of course?" Alice inquired of Lance, who was looking somewhat drawn and pale.

"Thank you, but I think I will be excusing myself from this little jaunt, enjoyable as it promises to be. I must take the time to 'put my house in order,' so to speak, regarding this new script."

Put his house in order? Alice wondered at his cryptic comment.

"That's my Lance," Anne said, giving him a hug. "Straight back to his desk! Don't be expectin' him to be a-takin' a moment to 'smell the roses!'"

"I do so very often, my little partridge. One cannot 'receive' the depth and insight required for performing my tasks without such aesthetically stimulating interludes."

"That is most eloquently so, luv," said Anne. "I take that back. Of course, ye must admit it required but little of such for that last 'assignment.'"

Lance chuckled. "Sad but true. Blood, sweat, tears, and little or no inspiration! But my current 'assignment' is as thrilling as they come ... truly my life's work. As far as today, however, I will also not be accompanying you as I feel rather poorly."

Anne put a hand on Lance's brow and clucked. "Ye *are* a mite hot. Back to bed for you."

"He comes down with this flu'ish sort of malady once in awhile," she whispered to Alice. "The doctors say it's a form of hyperscarria, a recently

discovered syndrome. It's apparently been brought into this country by fleas and lice on undercover terrorist immigrants."

"Oh, I am so sorry," said Alice. "I'll be sure to send in a prayer request ... I mean I'll be sure to pray for you. It could be a while before the readers get this story, and by then you'll..."

"What on earth are you babbling on about, Alice?" Marian asked.

"Pardon me," said Alice, "I sometimes don't realise ... maybe some get out ... I mean ... *exercise* and fresh air would be most beneficial right now."

"Absolutely," said Anne. "I just need to make sure that the kitchen staff has breakfast cleared away, and we can be off in about ... would three quarters of an hour suit you both?"

"Splendidly," said Alice.



A bell tinkled as Alice, Marian, and Anne Hastaway stepped through the rickety door of the secondhand bookshop. Its small, quaint premises, mustier, dustier, and presumably even crustier than Alice recalled from her visit to Old Cardstock. Nevertheless, her heart skipped at further memories kindled by a stooped, older gentleman wearing a worn, tweed jacket who shuffled out of a back room. He sniffed and peered over his pince-nez at the three customers.

"Mrs. Williams!"

"Not as yet, Mr. Sage."

"Ah. In any case, Miss Hastaway, William's book of odes is in high demand. You must be pleased, I'm sure."

"Very. Pleased as Punch ... or should it be pigs in er ... *pudding*?"

"Depends on which punch you are talking about. The dastardly wife-beater puppet* or the alcoholic beverage. I suggest you say 'pudding' to be on the safe side and leave the pigs out of it. Anyway, you should be delighted knowing that all two hundred of Mr. Williams' odes are dedicated to you and your *evident* charms. ..."

Picking up a small volume that had been lying open on a nearby desk, Mr. Sage continued. "As exquisitely appropriated in the following verse I was just reading..."

*Queen Anne, her raven locks held taut
In bun,
And clad in finest wrought
Homespun,*

***Punch and Judy** is a traditional, popular English puppet show featuring the characters of Punch and his wife Judy. The show is traditionally performed by a single puppeteer, known since Victorian times as a Professor.

*Her fingers gaunt that ply the shuttle,
And spin the wheel, as fair Ashputtle!
Eagle eyes that flit and spark
Like fireflies in evening dark.
Skirts with bustled apron tied—
What beauty do they attempt to hide?
Their artful drapery perchance they
Veil from sight, but not from fancy.
Skilfully sculpted columns white
Flanking portal of delight.*

Anne blushed and cleared her throat. “I was just a-goin’ to buy groceries,” she hurriedly said. “And thought I’d drop these two young lasses off, as Alice in particular here had a mind to search ye out and yer shop.”

“Alice? Ah, yes, of course,” Sage said, extending his hand. “You are always welcome here, along with Alcott, Austen, the Brontes, Goldilocks, and all such female literary luminaries.”

“To my knowledge, Goldilocks wrote no books, Mr. Sage,” said Anne. “And besides, the others you mentioned are deceased.”

Sage smiled wistfully. “’Tis of no consequence here where I indulge my flights of fanciful fantasy,”

“That’s fine for you, Mr. Sage, but down-to-earth, bread-and-butter-on-the-table business is of great consequence to us folks who have to provide it. See you at supper, Alice and Marian. Six o’clock sharp.”

So saying, Anne excused herself and left. Sage addressed Alice.

“How’s Wonderland these days?”

“I have not been there in many a day, sir, but I trust it is faring well.”

“Tell me, miss, when you read these great classics, are not their very characters *real* to you, and do you not share their distresses and delights—their failures and fortunes?”

“Indeed I do, sir. I am a hopeless romantic. Brandon—that’s my brother by the way—he always says that if I could, I would *live* in that world of make believe. ... Actually, it seems I do anyway.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Sage. “And why not? That is what truly attracted me to the world of books after Onion left me. She was my wife, you know.”

“Yes, I do,” said Alice.

“Of *course* you do. ... You *do*, don’t you, miss? Strange ... I feel as though I’ve explained all this to you before.”

“Umm, you *have* actually, sir, but it was in another... I gave you a ticket, didn’t I?”

“A ticket?”

“Yes, to the Woodchopper’s ball.”

Mr. Sage looked nonplussed.

Oh dear, Alice thought, does that mean I should witness to him?

Alice decided to get to the point. "You've heard of Joshua?"

"Ah, the wedding banquet."

"Yes, sir."

"How long are we going to have to hang around here?" Marian asked, nibbling at the varnish on her wooden fingers.

"Oh, I am so sorry, miss," said Mr. Sage, extending his hand, "my name is Sage and you are?"

"Marian."

"Well, Marian, maybe I can interest you in a delightful book I just purchased last week about a puppet like yourself."

"I am not a puppet. I am a marionette."

"I see. Well, it's an absolutely *charming* tale about a boy, umm ... marionette fashioned by an Italian woodcarver and clocksmith. I'll let you while away some time reading it, Miss Marian. Here, do take a seat.

"You too, miss," Mr. Sage said to Alice and pulled up another chair. Then, with a reverent air, he placed a worn, dark-green, linen-bound tome in Marian's hands. She opened it and her eyes widened.

"As you can see," Sage remarked, "the hand-coloured engravings are exquisite."

Marian nodded—evidently impressed—and began quietly reading. Sage turned back to Alice.

"So, you say your name is Ellie ... er ... Ellen?"

"Alice, sir."

"Oh, forgive me. I have virtually 'bookwormed' my way into an absorbing volume. ..."

Sage scuttled to the back room and returned with a blue, soft-bound book. He handed it to Alice.

"A little dog-eared, I'm afraid. I gave the hawker no more than sixpence for it, as he didn't seem to care tuppence for it anyway. Upon perusal, however, I am convinced it's worth its weight in gold. I was just reading this mysterious treatise 'Which Way to Ellensburg?'"

"I am familiar with this book, sir," said Alice. "It's in our Home's lit trunk. It contains many dreams."

"Indeed it does."

"And I can understand your mixing me up with this girl. Grandpa once referred to her as 'Ellie in Wonderland!'"

"I see. A rare volume, though, is it not?"

"Possibly. It's unlikely that many of our Homes have it anymore, seeing as it's now only available on InfoStore."

"An online bookshop?"

"I believe you could call it that, sir."

"Hmm. So what was the express purpose of your visit?"

“Pardon me, sir. I came because I had met you in another ... umm ... experience. Oh, it’s so awfully difficult to explain. Suffice it to say, I’d heard of Sage and Onion’s secondhand bookshop. ‘Head stuffing at its best.’”

At her aside, Sage burst into laughter. “Head stuffing at its best! A *brilliant* slogan! I must employ that one.

“But,” he continued, his voice calming down to a sad tone, “I do most of my business online these days. This little dump is just *that* ... a dumping ground for paperback junk.”

“Oh it’s not a dump, sir. It’s ever so quaint and cosy.”

“You may well say, but seriously scrutinize my collection and you will see that I have next to no quaint and cosy classics. As you yourself mentioned regarding this blue book, people can download them online from ProjectCaxton.com or your InfoStore.com, and because I utterly refuse to deal with modern fare I am left with mostly the in-between—novel novelettes by fly-by-night, novelty novelists.”

“How unfortunate,” Alice said. “But you *do* have Lance’s odes.”

“True, true.”

“And *this* is a cool book,” Marian suddenly remarked, peering out from her immersed reading.

“An exception to the rule, miss,” said Sage. “Once in awhile a book such as that and this—‘book of dreams,’ as I like to call it—makes its way into my collection.”

“Of course,” said Alice, “and the red book, too.”

“Red book?”

“The red MO book, sir.

“Oh, if I could only explain,” she added upon seeing his puzzled expression.

Sage pulled out a chair from behind his desk and sat down. “Try, miss. I must admit I am intrigued. If you have the time, that is.”

“Certainly, sir. You see, I met you in what was like a dream, only you were like a play ... oh it is ever so *bizarre*, as Brandon would say.”

“A playboy?” said Marian. “Must have been some dream.”

“I was about to say a playing card,” said Alice. “Anyway, you know when you’re dreaming you assume what’s happening is real until you wake up?”

Sage nodded, and Alice continued.

“The dilemma, sir, is that I often don’t want to ‘wake up’—if that’s the right word—from these experiences, because I want the people to be real. They become ever such close friends.”

“Do you believe you are having one of these ‘experiences’ right now, miss?”

Alice nodded.

“So I’m not real?” Marian asked.

“At the moment you are,” said Alice. “Very much so. But then when I ‘wake up,’ or whatever you call it, I wish I could meet you all again. Alas, the readers must be ever so disappointed. Anyway, I pray I can meet you and everyone else in ‘real life’ ... I mean *my* real life.”

“I hope so too,” Marian said, looking perplexed. “But where *is* your so-called *real life*, then?”

“It’s my home in Winsley Barnes, where I live with my parents, my brother, Brandon, and...”

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INVISIBLE INK

After spending the afternoon in Sage’s bookshop and accepting his invitation to tour the antiquities of Telford and to take a boat ride on the Revlon River, Alice felt some foreboding as she and Marian returned to the Tuck Inn that evening. Anne greeted them in the foyer. Her eyes were red and she was clutching a handkerchief.

“It’s not good news,” she whispered to Alice, after leaving Marian in the restaurant with an espresso. “Remember how Lance took poorly this morning? Well, he’s ... you know...”

“Very sick?”

“More than that. The doctor says he ... he doesn’t have long. He’s ... I don’t know how to say it. ...”

“Going to be with the Lord?”

“Oh, I hope so—he’s a very good man.”

“To be sure, ma’am.”

“But it seems he’s known about this for some time. Anyway, he’s been asking for you.”

“Really? Oh, I do apologise. Mr. Sage insisted on entertaining us this afternoon, which he did most delightfully.”

Oh, Lord, Alice thought. I’ve never been present at a deathbed scene. I’ve always wondered what it would be like, and I’m scared, to be honest.

Fear not, Alice. He is one of My sheep. I have sent you to comfort him.

“Of course, if you’d rather not...,” Anne began.

“Oh, I’d *love* to, ma’am, if I can tender some help or comfort.”

“You most certainly will, dear girl, with just your very presence. I’m on my way down to the cellar to fetch his favourite drink and will be up shortly.”

The local medical practitioner and a nurse excused themselves as Alice stepped gingerly into the candlelit chamber where Lance lay on a four-poster bed with his head raised on a mound of pillows. He was wearing a smock-styled, linen nightgown. Upon seeing Alice, a smile creased his pallid features. He patted the edge of the bed upon which

Alice perched nervously.

“Verily the world *is* a stage,” Lance said, “and all must play their part. You, my dear miss, are playing yours most admirably.”

“Thank you, sir. But I trust I am not merely acting.”

Lance smiled. “Yet you are following the ‘script’ handed you by...”—with much apparent effort, he lifted a hand and pointed upward—“*fate*.”

“Fate, sir? If you don’t mind my saying so, but I would afford Him a less deprecatory title! Even ‘Providence’ sounds better, which is what my System relatives say when they are too embarrassed to say ‘God.’”

Lance threw his head back and laughed. “*Insight*, miss. Such insight. Where do you get it? School?”

“From the Word of God, sir. And I am tutored at home.”

“I see. Well, then, you are admirably playing the role handed to you by God. In that sense, you *are* acting.”

“When I think about it, sir, I suppose you could say that. I do try to obey what He tells me to do and say. Doubtless, though, I miss many cues and drop quite a few lines.”

“Ah, that’s how it is in the theatre of life,” said Lance, taking her hand. “But that should not deter you from trying your best. I dropped a major cue with writing that awful play, and I hope to make it up to ... Providence. ...” He paused to check Alice’s demeanour, which remained unruffled; only a slight smile played on her lips.

“God, Alice. I want to make it up to Him ... if I ever can.”

“You cannot, really, sir. When you consider it, what efforts of our own can ever truly repay the love He has bestowed upon us through giving His only Son?”

Lance nodded and his eyes moistened. “So true, young lady, so true. Then I want to bestow upon *you* this final script that I will continue writing from the other side.”

“You mean you have already started it?”

“Yes, with the help of others who are already there.”

“When do I start? Acting in it, I mean.”

“You already have, Alice.”

“I have?”

“You started the moment you woke up in the Orb Theatre. Look in that bedside drawer.”

Alice did so and pulled out a stack of handwritten manuscripts replete with strikeouts, corrections, and rewrites.

“Go on. Read some.”

Alice Cuts the Strings.

A play in umpteen A.C.T.S. by Lance Williams.

Scene One.

Alice asleep in the front row of the empty theatre.

*JACK AINSLEY (singing, carrying a bucket and broom):
You've been sound asleep,
Wake up, little Suzie, and weep.
The play is over. It's one o'clock, and you're in trouble deep.
Wake up, little Suzie. Wake up, little Suzie.
You gotta go home.
Suzie probably ain't your name;
In fact, I know it ain't.
You're Alice Pleasance of theatre fame.
Why sit you thus in faint?*

*ALICE (opening her eyes):
That is true, sir, I am Alice ... but where...
Are those who brought me here?*

*JACK:
The cast and crew have all gone home.
Strange they left thee thus.
Hurry now, perchance ye'll catch them.
If not, a late-night bus.*

*ALICE (jumping up):
But my parents, Brandon, were they not...?*

*JACK:
With thee? I have no clue.
But go back stage, and exit right.
And oh, before you do,
Would you dedicate this playbill
To me—Jack Ainsley—and my family from you?*

*ALICE (looking down at her clothes):
Oh, alas, it is no use,
It has befallen me yet again.
But I most assuredly refuse
To murmur or complain.*

*JACK:
Good girl, it doesn't do to grumble.
You're the star in this 'ere gaff.*
It's just courtesy to be humble
And sign an autograph.*

***gaff**: a low-grade or cheap theatre

ALICE:

No, no, no, Mr. Ainsley, sir,

Forgive my consternation.

It's just that ... never mind, I'll gladly

Sign a dedication.

After a while of reading, Alice shook her head in amazement. "It's all here, sir, in poem form. Even my *thoughts*. Although I don't know how you would transmit those to a theatre audience."

"Pre-recorded and played over the public address system. Er ... Jack played his part well, I trust."

"Mr. Ainsley, sir? The cleaning man ... er ... janitor?"

"That's he."

"He was a very charming gentleman," said Alice. "And to the best of my recollection, he said everything pretty much as it's written here. How extraordinary!"

"It is so, miss."

"But you do agree that the script is handed to us by God, Mr. Williams?" Alice inquired.

"I most certainly do."

"Then why have *you* been writing it, sir, if I may ask?"

"Strange that you of all people would express such scepticism, young lady," Lance said with some irritation that elicited a wince of pain.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but seeing my recent experiences written down like this is rather unnerving. ..."

"Ah, that's the mystery, Alice. Time is a strange thing. You see, when I began writing the script, I wasn't sure if it had already happened or if I was in effect predicting. Either way, it was as though Someone or 'someones' outside and above was guiding my thoughts and ideas, almost 'dictating,' if you like. In any case, it was thrilling."

"I see!" Alice exclaimed. "That's what makes my ... er ... *this* story a *Heaven's Library* story! I mean to say, I am here and you have recorded it in a way, but while this is happening... Oh alas, it is all so very confusing if I try to comprehend it with my carnal mind!"

"It's the enemy of ... Providence!" she added with a grin. "Anyway, can I peek ahead?"

"You can try, but you won't see more than what happened say ... a few seconds ago."

"That is true," Alice said after flipping through to the last page.

"Amazing. The words only start appearing after they have happened. Did you write it using invisible ink or something?"

"No, but at first as I completed a page it faded—disappeared. I was about to change my ink and throw away the draft, when a few days later I casually opened it and saw the lines start to reappear on the page as your experiences literally unfolded."

“You mean, you wrote all this down in advance?”

“I did. Up to when I...”

Lance caught his breath and clutched his chest. Pain again seared his face. Alice jumped up, opened the door and called for Anne, who came rushing to the bedroom carrying a brimming glass, which she placed in Lance’s hands.

“I apologise for my tardiness, dear. I was waylaid in a conversation with the doctor.”

“I don’t have long,” gasped Lance. “Alice, would you cut my strings?”

“Your strings?” Anne inquired.

“Yes. I want Alice to cut them with her golden scissors.”

“I would, sir, if I could see them,” said Alice, “but I see no strings attached to you.”

Lance took a satisfying draught of his beverage. “Good. But not even the silver cord?”

Alice closed her eyes. *Joshua, please help me to understand.*

“Ah!” she said, opening her eyes. “I *do* see that, sir, it goes way up ... but I don’t know if I’m supposed to...”

“My husband was always rather strange, you know,” Anne whispered apologetically. “Mystical, you could say.”

“Oh, that is ever so ... umm ... *cool*,” Alice responded. “I *love* people like that.”

“Well, Lance’s heart was always full,” said Anne, “like it could *burst*.”

“Rather like Grandpa’s,” Alice said reflectively. “Anyway, that’s because I trust you have Joshua in it, sir.”

“I do, miss.”

Lance sighed and closed his eyes. “Yes, yes, that’s a good idea, Charles,” he muttered with a chuckle, “I’ll leave that one with you to give. Oh, and the pantomime horse ... a marvellous idea ... whimsical ... you can give that part, Lewis ... but let me just bid farewell to my dear bedside friends. ...

“Farewell, Anne, my dear. Farewell Alice.”

“Farewell,” the two females chorused in tears.

“Until we meet again,” Lance whispered.

“At Joshua’s wedding feast, sir,” said Alice.

Lance nodded. Anne kissed Lance’s forehead and he let out a long sigh. He was smiling.

To be continued...

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale
in
Eight A.C.T.S.



Issue 246—AM



Act Three

The story so far: Having been rescued from a treacherous fire by Lance Williams (the playwright), Alice is welcomed to his abode—the Tuck Inn—for a time of rest and respite. All is not well in their rustic retreat, however, as rumours abound concerning the fire that razed Orb Theatre. Lance Williams’ final scene is played out, and Alice, a marionette, and a widow are left in his wake.

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PUNCH AND JUDY

Silent and forlorn, Alice, Anne, and Marian trudged up the hill from St. Trinian’s churchyard where the funeral for Lance Williams had taken place. The attendance had been small. Regardless of his stature in the town of Telford, Lance’s open association with Alice—whom the media was now maligning as an arsonist and a religiously fanatical manipulator—caused many former friends and acquaintances to disassociate themselves even from his memory.

“You would have thought more people would have shown up,” Marian remarked, “his being such a big celebrity and all.”

“At least those who did attend were undoubtedly faithful to him,” Alice said. “I would have given nary an owl’s hoot for his fair-weather friends if I had been in Mr. Williams’ shoes.”

“Aye,” said Anne, opening her umbrella to what portended to be a rainstorm, “good riddance, that’s what I say!”

The woman’s attempted bravado quickly dissolved into tears and she clutched Alice’s arm.

“But dear Mr. Sage came,” said Alice. “He offered such sincere condolences.”

“Aye, that he did.”

“He’s a wonderful, gentle man,” Alice said in a gently hinting tone.

“Most charming,” said Anne.

“And apparently he’s not married, ma’am.”

“That is correct. His wife Onion left him many years ago.”

“Then he would probably be ever so thankful for companionship,” said Alice.

Oh dear, Alice thought. Here I go again, being a hopeless matchmaker!

Anne stiffened. “Of that, I have no doubt, miss. I’m sorry, but I was wondering if you—and Marian, of course—would consider staying on for a few more days. I would so appreciate the company.”

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents’ or teachers’ discretion.

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“Well, I think we were planning to do something more ... er ...,” Marian began.

“We would *love* to, Miss Hastaway,” said Alice. “I know it must be so very grieving to have lost such a loved one.”

“Yes, my dear, but I must admit I was prepared for this. Lance burned the midnight oil and the candle at both ends ’til there seemed to be nothing left of him for anything but his work.”

Anne glanced at the lowering clouds. The raindrops were increasing.

“Would you like to stop at *Tea for Two*?”

“*Tea for Two*?”

“It’s a teashop. Neither of ye have a broolly,* and I confess my wretched specimen would barely shield the top of a single head. We could duck in there and wait for this spell to pass.”

“A wonderful idea, ma’am,” said Alice.

“A *teashop*?” Marian said, shooting Alice a look of disgust. Alice exhaled, rolled her eyes, and sufficiently lagged behind Miss Hastaway in order to address the puppet.

“For goodness’ sake, Marian,” she whispered, “this poor lady has just lost her husband!”

“They weren’t legally married.”

“Well, how would you feel if your boyfriend just died?”

“Okay, okay,” said Marian. “I’ve got the point. But a *teashop*?”

“Perchance you can purchase a Java,” said Alice, and as she hurried to catch up with Miss Hastaway, she questioned in frustrated silent prayer why she had the misfortune to be yoked with this pitiless puppet.

Endeavouring to block Marian’s blatantly disinterested attitude as they sat in the teashop, Alice strove to tune in to Miss Hastaway’s admittedly mundane drone about life in Telford and the local gossip. Alice felt it inappropriate to introduce deeper subjects into the conversation, as it was evident that the bereaved woman was employing small talk to get her mind off Lance’s death. Finally, Anne downed her last drop of tea and stood up.

“Well, I suppose I should be hurrying along. Life must keep going.”

“We’ll come with you,” said Alice.

“Oh, it’s alright for now. You youngsters enjoy the town. I shall have supper ready by six. It’ll give ye time to consider my proposal. Oh, and here is my credit card. You are welcome to charge to my account.”

“Oh, ma’am. I really couldn’t.”

“It’s done, Alice. Ye could look into a change of wardrobe for instance.”

“Yay!” said Marian. “Clothes shopping.”

“I appreciate the offer, ma’am,” said Alice, “but as far as clothes, I fear that...”

Anne waved her hand dismissively. “Whatever ye feel you need. Take an evening on the town if you wish. Just ring me. Here’s my number.”

***broolly**: an umbrella

So saying, she handed a business card to Alice and left the tearoom.

“Whoa,” said Marian, “a freebie! Let’s *milk* it!”

“Milk what?” Alice wearily asked.

“A binge at Madame Hastaway’s expense!”

Alice clenched her fists under the table, but carefully chose her words. “I beg your pardon, Marian. But it would be highly inappropriate for us to take advantage of Miss Hastaway’s generous hospitality. To purchase some necessary items may be in order, and yes, perhaps even to enjoy some moderate recreation. So?”

“Check out the boutiques? Then maybe a club?”

“Sounds good,” Alice responded with some reluctance.



“Hey,” said Marian, “it must be market day. Cool. And over there they’ve got some, like, fairground-type thingies going. Not *my* thingy, actually.”

“Well, some of it looks rather interesting,” said Alice. “I suppose you could shop for apparel at the stalls and I shall try some of the games. ... They can be ever so much fun. It appears they even have a rifle range.”

“Rifles? You’re into them?”

“Well, I’m not actually ‘into’ them. Brandon is ever so good at the rifle ranges, though, but strangely enough, I usually beat him.”

“You beat him? At target shooting?”

“Most assuredly. At least the few times we’ve visited fairs and suchlike. I hit the bull’s eye, or very close every time, but he always tells me it’s merely beginner’s luck.”

Alice giggled and continued. “It’s quite odd, because I wonder after so many wins when would I cease to be a beginner?”

“A good point. So what’s your secret? A good eye, a steady hand?”

“Maybe a little of all those things, but I just remember Grandpa’s counsel in ‘Squeeze Don’t Jerk,’ to go slow, take the time to aim, and slowly squeeze the trigger. It works.”

“Hmmp. Well, you just go ahead, Alice. Meet you back here in an hour?”

“That suits me,” said Alice. “Happy clothes hunting!”

“Uh ... yeah. Umm, *do* be here, okay?”

“Of course,” said Alice, noticing a flicker of yearning in the puppet’s eyes as they parted. Projecting a silent prayer for Marian, Alice sauntered over to the stalls, and was about to try the rifle range, when shrill laughter drew her attention to a gathering of children sitting on the grass in front of a small red-and-white-striped stage booth. Inside the booth were two hand puppets, a male and a female. The male had a hooked red nose that almost touched his jutting chin, and wore a blue-and-white striped nightshirt and a floppy, red felt nightcap. The female was rotund,

rosy faced and wore an old-fashioned, beige flannel nightgown and a flat embroidered nightcap. They both were wielding thick wooden sticks.

Alice drew closer.

“Shuddup, you old shrew, I’m sick and tired o’ yer complainin’!” the male shouted in a squawking voice. And he struck the head of the other puppet with his stick.

“That’s the way to do it!” he exclaimed.

The female puppet burst into tears and the children laughed.

How sad, thought Alice.

“*Me shuddup?*” the woman puppet shrieked. “What about *you*, you stupid old codger? Always rattlin’ on in yer drunken stupor!”

With that, she struck the male puppet across the face with her stick. He reeled, then stopped and stared blearily into the laughing young crowd.

“Better stop, Judy,” he slurred. “Her ladyship doesn’t seem to approve.”

“*Who* doesn’t approve, Punch?”

The male puppet pointed to Alice, who was finding herself drawn closer to the stage. “Her over there.”

The female puppet turned and gasped. “Alice? What’s she doin’ ’ere?”

“Dunno, Judy. Ask her.”

“Okay. What are you doin’ ’ere, Miss Alice?”

“Umm ... I was just happening by, ma’am. The show looked rather interesting. ...”

“I can’t hear you, child. Come closer.”

Alice stepped gingerly forward until she was eye to eye with the two puppets.

“So, what did you say, child?”

“I said I was happening by and the show looked interesting.”

“Interestin’? You were curious?”

“I suppose so, ma’am.”

“Curiouser and curiouser?”

“I-I ... suppose that too.”

“Well, our family squabbles are no concern of yours. Mind your own business.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

The male puppet levelled his stick at Alice’s face and addressed her in a low squawk. “If you know what’s good for you, little lady, I would suggest you make yourself scarce and leave us alone to settle our family differences in private.”

“In private, sir? B-but if I may say so, you have a whole audience of children watching you settle your ‘family differences.’”

“Children? How old?”

“You mean, you don’t know?”

“No,” said the woman. “Punch and I don’t concern ourselves with the outside world. That’s our professor’s job.”

Alice turned and surveyed the crowd, which seemed to be growing. "Oh ... I would say the average age is around six or seven years old."

"Hmmpf. They probably don't even notice, and if they did, they're hardly old enough to understand what's goin' on."

Again, Alice clasped her scissors and silently claimed the keys of wise speech and discernment.

"Oh, but I beg to differ, ma'am," she said. "As young as they are, the children present perfectly understand your behaviour as a wedded couple."

"Look, little lady," said Punch, "we've been at this game for a good many years. It brings in the bread and butter. Who are you to waltz in from wonderland and start dishin' out advice? Go back down the bunny hole to your white rabbits and caterpillars."

Alice sighed and turned to leave, only to face a crowd of protesting children.

"You're leaving, miss?" a little girl asked.

Alice nodded, generating more protests.

"But you *can't*. It was just now getting good with you there!"

"Really?" asked Alice. "Why?"

"Well, the bashin' an' all is fun for awhile. Then it just starts to get borin'."

Upon hearing this, Alice returned to the stage booth.

"Did you hear that?" she asked the puppets.

"No, what?"

"The little girl said that it was just getting good after all the bashing, which in her opinion was getting boring."

"Her one little uninformed opinion," said Judy, "but the majority *loved* it."

"She may have a point, though," said Punch. "In fact, to spice up the show and to keep up with the times, we were thinkin' of introducun' more dangerous weapons into the act, weren't we, dear?"

Judy looked startled. "Well, Punch, I haven't exactly gone as far as to say..."

Suddenly, the stage-booth curtain drew aside, and Alice was staring into the faces of a thin, elderly man with a hooked red nose and a rotund, ruddy-complexioned woman, both bearing uncanny resemblances to the hand puppets. The man was sitting with his head cocked to one side. His eyes glinted as he smiled, while the woman merely smiled.

"I'm Professor Casper Shau," said the man.

"And I'm Greta," said the woman, "his wife."

Although she felt a little stupid, Alice curtseyed for the second time she could recall on this adventure. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Alice. ..."

"We are well aware!" snapped the woman, and silence followed.

Alice had no idea how to react to this stilted encounter, and turned to leave.

“Come back here, darlin’,” Casper said, beckoning with his finger, having lain the puppets aside. “Want a break into the biz?”

“The biz, sir?”

“Show biz. This is a perfect launch pad for greater things—a stint with Punch and Judy.”

“I am sure it is, sir. But I have just relinquished a career in the said business, and I am now between two ‘worlds,’ as it were.”

“Making choices about yer destiny,” Greta said with a nod and a contrived expression of wisdom.

“I would suppose, ma’am,” said Alice.

“But did you purchase a ticket?”

Alice shook her head.

“Then you must.”

“It shouldn’t matter, dear,” Casper said to his wife.

“Why?”

“Look at the turnout, luv. This must ’ave been one o’ the best we’ve had.”

The man scratched his jutting chin and turned to Alice. “I just want to mention that your novel rapport with my puppets has opened me up to the ... er ... *commercial* possibilities of human/puppet communication.”

“It’s been done before, dear,” said Greta. “Nothing novel about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I said, dear. Human/puppet intercourse—for want of a better word.”

“You could try ‘interaction,’ luv. Alice *is* a bit young.”

“Beg yer pardon.” Greta said to Alice and turned back to her husband. “But to put it bluntly like, human/puppet *whatever* is old *hat*.”

“What, dear? Punch and Judy meet Alice in Wonderland? It can’t miss! As I said, look at the turnout. A packed house ... money in the bank ... that new puppet fit-up booth you were looking at. ...”

“Hmm ... you could be right, Casper,” Greta mused. “Of course we would have to give it a new twist—bring our wranglin’ up to date. ...”

Suddenly Punch the puppet jumped up.

“Tell yer what!” he squawked. “We play the abusive parents and Alice the neglected kid. Sure fire!”

“Yer talkin’ through yer swazzle,”* said Judy.

“As always,” said Punch, “but my ideas usually pay off, right?”

The female puppet shrugged. “Sometimes yes, sometimes no.”

“Look,” Punch insisted, “I play the drunken, wife-beatin’ dad, you, the enslaved hausfrau, and Alice the misunderstood, abused kid. We could bring her wardrobe up to date and have her wear Goth. It can’t fail and we’ll be sittin’ pretty.”

***swazzle:** An instrument consisting of two convex pieces of metal with a tape stretched between them, placed in the mouth to make the voice of Mr. Punch in a Punch and Judy show.

Judy shook her head and chuckled. "You're crackers, Punch."

"They all laughed at Christopher Columbus, when he said the world was round," Punch sang in his distinctive squawk.

"You're not Christopher Columbus," said Judy.

"But I *am* a visionary, dearie."

"You know what," Casper pensively said, "I *like* this idea."

"See, Judy?" said Punch. "Our professor likes it!"

"Me, too," said Greta.

"*Wait*," said Alice. "This whole new idea is for children?"

"Of course," the two puppets said in unison.

"In my opinion, if I may say so, this proposed idea for a script hardly seems suitable for such a young audience."

Punch batted his hand. "*Ah*. Audience, schmaudience. What the heck do they care? It's all entertainment, right? Let's face it—life itself is just a bowl o'cherries."

"I believe I would take up issue with you on that, sir, but most of those children can hardly *relate*," said Alice.

"Well, if not, it would at least give the kids a role model to aspire to," said Casper. "Misunderstood, abused, neglected ... et cetera. Great cripe for kids."

"I think such a terrible example would cause them to be discontent with their lot," said Alice. "I think you should introduce a little more understanding and forgiveness into your show."

"You mean you can't relate to being abused and misunderstood?" Greta asked.

Alice thought for a moment. "I suppose I could relate to being misunderstood if I tried hard enough, ma'am. But then Brandon would tease me for putting on airs."

At that moment, Marian walked up. Alice perceived a spirit of relief and welcome in the marionette, but her words feigned otherwise.

"You said you were going to be right at the entrance ten minutes ago," Marian snapped. "I was teed off sick waiting around for you."

"I am dreadfully sorry," said Alice, "but I was waylaid in a most fascinating deliberation. Oh, let me introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Shau and their..."

"Punch and Judy, am I right?" said Marian. "Glove puppets?"

Punch and Judy looked blank.

"I mean, you're not controlled by strings."

"We're not controlled by anything," said Judy. "Yet *you*, young lady, are obviously controlled by a hand *above* you."

Marian seethed and tersely responded. "You have a hand reaching up right *inside* you from below and thereby controlling you. And if I am controlled, which I seriously doubt, at least *my* control is from a higher plane."

"Wait, *wait*," said Alice. "Let us not quibble about such trifles. Let's come to some loving agreement."

“Very well,” said Judy. “We have agreed to disagree that we are controlled.”

“But,” said Alice, “it all depends on whose hands control us. If they are good hands, then it would matter little if they are above me or around me or wherever.”

“I don’t know what the devil you’re all talking about,” said Punch, and reached for his bottle.

“We’re not talking about *him*,” said Judy. “I think Alice is talking about Someone else.”

“Hmmpf,” said Punch.

“But it’s easy for Alice to say,” said Marian. “She’s different.”

“Yeah,” said Punch. “Miss high and lofty. Above us all.”

“Not so, sir,” said Alice. “The venerable Lance Williams drew my attention to the fact that...”

Greta gasped. “Lance Williams? *The* late Lance Williams the playwright? You knew him?”

Alice nodded. “I did, ma’am. And Mr. Williams’ observation that I, like you, have a part to play in the theatre of life has mattered *greatly* since ever I had the privilege to know him. And I am concluding that we can choose, as in a modern role-playing game, which way our destiny will play out.”

“Interesting, when you think about it,” said Greta.

“Definitely rather thought provoking,” said Casper.

“Well, sir and madam,” said Alice, “it seems Marian and I must away. But before we do, I would like to offer you all the opportunity to attend the wedding of my friend Joshua.”

“Who is this guy?” Punch squawked. “Don’t even know him!”

“You can, sir. He wants as many people as possible to attend the banquet. I don’t have time to get into all the details, but you just have to sincerely agree to come.”

Punch shrugged and looked at his wife. “I suppose it can’t hurt. Count us in, right, hon?”

Judy nodded.

“And if you ever consider teaming up, let us know,” said Greta. “It could be quite profitable.”

“If I should merely consider it, I probably won’t, ma’am,” said Alice. “If I am serious about it, I will.”

Casper laughed. “I like you, Alice. You’re a card! I guess we’ll see you at the feast.”

Alice nodded. “You will.”

“All expenses will be on ... *Joshua*, you said his name was?” Greta asked.

“That I did, ma’am. And yes, he paid for it all.”

FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE

Late afternoon sunlight was now beaming through the dispersing clouds and bathing the preserved Tudor antiquity of Telford, and Alice had to admit to herself that she did enjoy gracefully tripping down the Revlon River embankment. To her welcome surprise, her attire coordinated remarkably with the styles hanging on the stalls and peddled by pavement vendors.

"The guys really look at you, Alice," Marian remarked.

"They do?" Alice said, feigning surprise.

"Yeah. Any idea why?"

Alice shrugged. "Maybe because of my rather out-of-time manner of dress."

"No, it's not that. Actually it's more like they look *into* you."

"An interesting way to put it," said Alice.

"Sure you don't want to get something?" Marian asked, having purchased a couple of blouses and a Victorian frock, courtesy of Anne Hastaway's credit card. "The styles are right up your alley."

"Actually, they're not as you assume," Alice replied with a despondent smile. "And besides, even if I cared to purchase an item, I fear I would be unable to wear it."

"Seems you want to stop," said Marian.

"No, I'm actually enjoying this. It has been a rather eventful few days, and we as a Home are learning lessons about having a balanced lifestyle."

"So you're ready to party?"

"I don't know about that—although I do so enjoy parties. But it is a little early, wouldn't you say?"

Marian shrugged. "Well, we can kick off the evening with a couple of drinks at the *Nail's Head* over there."

"I'm too young, remember?"

"I'm not. I'll buy them for you."

"Hmm...", said Alice, "if my memory serves me well, my digression along this line in a previous experience has only served me ill."

Marian rolled her eyes. "Whatever that means. But I take it you're not going for the idea."

Alice said nothing, and the two strolled along for a while in silence, until Alice spoke again. "You know what, Marian? I have the feeling someone is following me. An enemy, I think."

"You?" asked Marian. "Why would they be following *you*?"

Alice shrugged. "Well, is there any reason for them to follow *you*?"

Marian pointed to the tavern. "So? Are we on?"

"Maybe I'll go for some bubbly water and we can see how Joshua ... we can take it from there."

"Great. Then let's go."

“Very well, but shouldn’t we inform Miss Hastaway? She did say for us to give her a ring. ...”

“You know what, Alice? You should just lighten up ... and *boogie*.”

So saying, Marian turned and strode across the high street. Dodging traffic and pedestrians, Alice followed the dogged little puppet, ruminating on whether this was the best course to take and silently committing her steps to Joshua.

“I take it you’re eighteen, miss?” the barmaid inquired of Marian once she made her order. She nodded.

“And your friend? Can’t be more’n thirteen, fourteen at most.”

“Thirteen,” said Alice.

“Then you both will have to take your drinks out into the family garden.”

“Fine,” said Marian and whispered to Alice. “Even better, actually. I can come back and order something a little more exciting for you, and you can drink it without being right under the barmaid’s nose.”

“I don’t think so,” said Alice. “Like I said, I once learned a dreadful lesson in a similar experience. ...”

“Hey, who are these cute cookies?” said Marian, noticing a couple of leather-jacketed youths saunter into the bar as she and Alice were making their way out to the garden.

“They seemed to pick up on us,” she added once they had settled on a bench under a tree.

“On *you*, more likely,” said Alice. “And they do not appear to be the most savoury of characters ... oh goodness, here they come. ...”

Marian patted her hair and perked up as the two young men approached. “Hello.”

“Hi,” said one, a lean, sallow, dark-haired youth clutching a pint of beer. “Got space there for us?”

“Absolutely,” said Marian and shifted over. Alice hesitantly did the same for the other, a husky redhead who seemed to favour double shots of whiskey.

“Name’s Larry by the way,” said the beer drinker. “Larry Larrikin.”

“And I’m Harry. Harry Hooligan.”

“Pleased to meet you, Larry and Harry,” said Alice.

“And you’re Alice, right?” Larry asked.

Alice nodded.

“How did you know?” Marian demanded.

“Hey! You’re sitting with a celebrity, in case you didn’t know. She’s always in the papers.”

Marian huffed. “I am *well* aware, thank you.”

“And what’s *your* name?” Harry asked.

“Er ... Marian. Marian Twynette.”

“Nice to meet ya. Cute for a puppet.”

“I’m not a puppet. I’m a marionette.”

Harry shrugged. “Whatever.”

“But hey,” said Larry, “how ’bout we loosen up with a couple more drinks, then we go out and *live* it up?”

“What do you have in mind?” Marian asked.

“There’s a techno-trance club down along the river, *The Stygmartyr*—a converted church.”

Marian rose from the bench. “Sounds fabulous, Larry. But speaking of drinks, Alice is done with her bubbly water, and seeing as they don’t have champagne, I’d like another highball martini.”

“Sit back down, baby. I’ll take care of it.”

“And I’ll get me another whiskey,” said Harry, and the two youths sauntered back into the pub.

Marian turned to Alice wide-eyed. “Whoa! Looks like we’re in for some fun. Cute dudes, no?”

“They are attractive in a loutish sort of way, I suppose. But there’s something about their eyes darting ... oh, I don’t know. And I am a bit young for...”

“Come on, Alice! I bet you Larry’s no more than sixteen.”

“Really? He seems to be able to purchase alcoholic beverages.”

“That’s ’cos he looks older. Anyway, he seems to be taking a shine to you. ...”

Marian broke off; Larry and Harry had returned.

“Here you go,” said Larry. “A double highball martini for Marian, and another for Alice, courtesy of yours truly.”

“But I was drinking bubbly water, young sir.”

Larry winked. “Bubbly water is about as good for loosening up as a cold shower.”

“Once in awhile won’t hurt, Alice,” said Marian. “At least drink it out of common courtesy.”

“Go ahead, knock back,” said Larry, “then we can head over to the car.”

“The car?” said Alice. “But will you be fit to drive? I venture to say...”

“Your little friend worries too much,” Larry remarked to Marian.

Alice handed her glass to Marian. “Here. You can have it.”

Without hesitation, Marian downed the glass. Then, with a hiccough and a stupefied grin, she stood up and stumbled after the youths. Alice followed them out of the garden of *The Nail’s Head* and into the street.

Lord, I could just leave Marian right now and return to Miss Hastaway’s inn, but I feel I must stay with her. But she is so very selfish. At least Betty Trucker was a dear sweet woman. Why couldn’t I be with someone more like that?

Once they had reached the car parked about a hundred yards down the embankment, Alice knew what she was supposed to do.

“*Marian*,” she whispered vehemently, clutching the puppet’s arm, “I don’t think we’re doing the right thing! Let’s go back to the inn.”

Marian jerked away. “What are you so uptight about, Alice? For Heaven’s sake.”

“That’s why I’m warning you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m warning you for Heaven’s sake.”

“Ah, that’s just a figure of speech,” said Marian. “Come on, lighten up and get in the car.”

“Hey, girls, let’s boogie,” Larry called out, his hand hovering on the steering wheel. “Marian, you get in back with Harry. Alice, you get in front here next to me, and lock your doors.”

Marian climbed in, and Alice, still feeling constrained to stay with her, reluctantly complied as well. Larry stepped on the accelerator, and as Marian giggled with Harry in the back seat, Alice noticed a hacksaw handle sticking out of Larry’s jacket pocket. She was about to remark on her observation when she saw a sign whiz by blinking “*Stygmartyr*” in red neon.

“That was it!” she exclaimed.

“What was ‘it’?” Larry asked.

“The *club*—the techno-trance, converted church place.”

Larry cackled. “A change of plans, baby.”

“You could have at least informed us,” Alice said and turned to address Marian who was now enjoying Harry’s attentions. “Excuse me, but methinks they’re taking us somewhere else. ...”

“Okay, so?” Marian dreamily responded.

“So we should ask them to stop the car and let us out.”

This time, Harry cackled.

“I wish you guys wouldn’t laugh like that,” said Marian. “It’s kind of killing the mood of the moment and it sounds creepy.”

“It doesn’t just *sound* it,” said Alice, “it *is* creepy. Now will you young men kindly let us out of the car? *Immediately.*”

“It’s against our orders,” said Larry.

“Then I *order* you to let us out!” Alice barked.

Larry slowed the car and pulled over to the edge of the darkening road. “Okay ... I guess it’s come to this ... Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“We need to bind and gag ‘em.”

“What?” Alice and Marian exclaimed, and to their horror, Larry pulled the hacksaw from his pocket and waved it in Alice’s face.

“Take care of the puppet, Harry, and I’ll keep this little thing occupied.”

“For Heaven’s sake, what’s going on?” Marian wailed.

Harry sniggered and pulled out a length of rope from under the front seat. “You can be assured it’s not for the sake of *that* place, my little wooden cutie.”

“But you can be assured Heaven is watching,” said Alice, feeling a warm wave of tranquility overwhelm her.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“Every one of your actions is being written down,” Alice replied.

“Written down?” said Larry. “Where?”

“In *Heaven’s Library Book of Life.*”

“Pah! If there is such a place, which I seriously doubt, its inhabitants don’t have time to fiddle with such trivialities as my personal business.”

Alice smiled. “Are you sure?”

Strangely unnerved, Larry stared into Alice’s serene but flint-like countenance.

“I-I don’t believe it. I d-don’t know...,” he managed to mumble.

“Then it would be wise to not take any chances, would it, young sir?”

Larry stuffed the hacksaw back into his jacket pocket and turned on the ignition. “L-let’s just get going,” he snapped.

“So I still tie up the puppet?” Harry asked.

“I don’t bleedin’ well know,” Larry replied as they sped off into the falling night. “This wasn’t our idea.”

“Then whose idea was it?” Alice inquired.

Larry shook his head. “All I know it was from the ‘top.’”

“So what are we going to do?” Harry whimpered.

“We keep drivin’,” said Larry, handing the hacksaw to Harry. “Here, hold this at the puppet’s neck just in case Alice tries any funny business.”

Alice was about to pull out her keys turned to scissors, and use whatever power would be appropriate for the situation but felt a check to wait. Finally, she spoke to Larry.

“What do you propose to do with us, young sir?”

“We’re supposed to *dispose* of you.”

“You mean *kill* us?”

“Depends on the negotiations, baby.”

“You can’t kill *me*,” said Marian. “I’m made out of wood.”

Harry laughed and waved the hacksaw in her face. “Oh no? Never seen one of these before?”

Marian shook her head.

“Whatever you do, it shall most assuredly make an exciting story,” Alice said with surprising nonchalance.

“What do you mean?” Larry asked.

“Like I said, young sir. It’s all being written down.”

“Oh no, not this again. By who? *God?*”

“Well, maybe not God Himself, but most likely by one of His ... umm ... *secretary* angels.”

Larry jerked at the steering wheel. “This is ridiculous.”

Alice shrugged. “Very well, if you wish to think so.”

“Look, I don’t wish to think or talk about it! Now *shuddup* or we’ll get out the gags.”

Alice complied and looked back at Marian who was staring blank and ashen out of the car window at the dark, deserted road with Harry holding the hacksaw at her throat. The two girls knew not where they were heading, and it seemed neither did the two brigands, whose pretence of bravado was slowly disintegrating into panic. Alice kept silently praying and started whispering in tongues.

“What language is that?” Larry asked at length.

“I have no idea,” said Alice. “Why?”

“It sounds familiar, like...”

“Like what?” Alice asked somewhat impatiently, seeing that Larry had fallen quiet.

“Okay, like my great grandmother. Er ... she was Polish. I stayed with her as a kid and learned quite a bit of it.”

“Amazing,” said Alice and continued whispering slightly louder in tongues.

“No, I’m *not*,” Larry shrieked.

“Not what?”

“Don’t mess with me. You *know!*”

Alice shrugged, and Larry pulled the car up to the edge of a forest. Grabbing a flashlight from the glove compartment, he jumped out and strode around to the door on Alice’s side. He opened it and yanked her out.

“What’s got into you, man?” Harry yelled.

“Nothing. Just get that puppet out of the car. We’d better tie their hands and blindfold them.”

“Blindfold ’em? With what?”

“The *gags*. They can scream all the hell they want out here, no one’ll hear ’em.”

“We’re not going to scream,” said Alice, as Harry bound a strip of cloth around her head to cover her eyes. “As a lamb to the slaughter, so opened He not His mouth.”

Larry grabbed Alice’s hands and pulled them behind her back.

“Don’t talk like that,” he snapped.

Alice winced as rope tightened into the flesh of her wrists; nevertheless, she continued praying in soft tongues as the two brigands pushed her and Marian onward into the forest.

“But I’m *not!*” Larry suddenly shouted.

“Not what, young sir?”

“What my great grandmother ... I mean, *you* are saying.”

“I said nothing.”

“Yes, you did. You asked in Polish if I am a *morderca*.”

“I didn’t ask that,” said Alice. “I don’t speak or even understand Polish. What does it mean?”

“Keep movin’, doll,” Harry barked and gave Alice a shove, causing her to stumble and almost fall on her face. Larry quickly caught her in his arms.

“L-look, girl, it’s not that I, er ...*we* want to do this.”

“Then *don’t!*” said Marian, who had remained speechless until this point.

“Shuddup, you,” Harry bellowed and punched the puppet in the back.

Alice gazed into her surrounding blackness and kept praying in tongues.

Larry grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “You’re messin’ with my mind, girl! What did you just call me?”

“I called you nothing.”

“You *did*, you called me ‘La-La.’ No one but my great grandmother has ever called me that! And I am *not* a *morderca*.”

“What’s that?”

“A m-murderer.”

“Then for Heaven’s sake don’t be.”

“Hey, Larry, what are we doin’? Let’s get this thing over with.”

“Wait up, Harry. I don’t think we should go through with it.”

“You’re just *spooked*, man.”

Larry darted backwards, waving his hands. “I’m not *spooked*. It’s this Alice chick, she’s...”

“Okay, but what about the ransom?”

“*Screw* the ransom.”

“But these birds know too much, Larry. They’ll *sing*.”

“Whatever. I’m gettin’ out of here!” Larry yelled and took off running.

“And if you know what’s good for you, you’d do the same. Let’s just leave ’em to fend for themselves.”

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BABES IN THE WOOD

Oh, God, that was a close call!” said Marian, as they heard the two brigands dash off, leaving her and Alice trembling in the forest.

“Absolutely. And what was all that about a ransom?”

“N-no idea,” said Marian “Now if we can just get these blindfolds off, we can untie each other.”

“I have some scissors in the pocket of my pinafore,” said Alice, once they’d managed to remove each other’s blindfolds. “Pull them out and use them to cut the ropes.”

With some difficulty employing her bound, wooden hands, Marian eventually cut Alice’s bonds, thereby enabling Alice to cut hers.

“We could try to find the main road and hitchhike,” Alice suggested.

“You’re joking, Alice. It’s dark, and do you realize what could happen to a couple of chicks like us?”

Alice chuckled wryly. “It almost did.”

“Right. Thanks to me,” said Marian, hanging her head. “I know. I feel terrible about it. I’m so sorry.”

“Well, at least we’re safe and I suppose that whatever we do, we should trust the...” Alice paused at the sensation of raindrops on her nose. “Uh-oh.”

Lightning flashed and some seconds later, distant thunder crackled.

“We’re better off staying here until morning,” said Marian. “Find some safe hollow and bed down for the night. Let’s keep walking.”

“So, your name is Marian, like *Maid* Marian?” Alice asked, as they made their way through the intensifying downpour.

“Who?”

“You know, Robin Hood’s girlfriend. Oh, never mind.”

“Well, I do have a boyfriend,” Marian replied. “He’s in a travelling road-show circus thingy in Italy.”

“He’s a puppet, too?”

“Of course not, he’s a marionette like me. His name’s Mario. Italian, handsome, and a *fabulous* cook.”

“Brandon’s ever such a good cook, too, handsome, but he’s not Italian.”

“What’s with this Brandon guy? You talk about him like he’s your boyfriend.”

Alice blushed. “Oh alas, here I go again, carrying on about my brother, and for certain it is being written down.”

Marian looked at Alice puzzled. “So, you and your brother are very close.”

“I suppose,” said Alice.

A period of reflective silence followed until Marian asked Alice a question.

“What language was that you were speaking to Larry?”

“Apparently it was Polish.”

“What do you mean ‘apparently,’ Alice? You didn’t know?”

Alice shook her head.

“You don’t learn a language and not know what it is,” said Marian.

“I didn’t learn it, I just spoke it.”

“Doesn’t make sense.”

“I know,” said Alice. “You see, because that situation was so awfully scary, I was praying and I found myself speaking in tongues. It’s a gift from Joshua’s Mother ... I mean, the Holy Spirit.”

“I see. It’s a religious thingy.”

“I don’t know if I would like to call it that. But it was especially thrilling this evening, and I wasn’t embarrassed. I don’t usually do that in real life.”

“In real life?”

“Oh, you know...”

“Yah. I remember you did mention something at the bookshop. Well, whatever your situation is, I wouldn’t mind *this* one not being real life right now. So you’re a Christian? That’s odd.”

“Er ... why?”

“Well, I had the impression that Christians were supposed to have some kind of peace and love. You were incredibly serene back there in that horrific situation, but in the love department, you just seem to get a bit uptight with me.”

Alice gulped, feeling deeply convicted, and searched her heart and mind for words. She could only mumble a feeble apology.

“Apology accepted,” said Marian.

“Not to justify my impatience, however,” Alice said after awhile, “but pray tell me, how would *you* feel if you knew you were being watched all the time?”

“No different, really. We have to deal with that twenty-four-seven in this country with all the crazy surveillance. Even when you use the lavatory in some public places.”

“I know,” said Alice. “They say it’s in the interest of our ‘safety and security.’ *It’s dreadful.* And where is all that surveillance when we really need it? Such as just now for instance.”

“Talk about it.”

“But,” Alice continued, “my question was more like if you knew that everything you were doing, saying, and even *thinking* was being written down in a book?”

“Like, majorly intimidated,” said Marian. “And I suppose I would be even more careful about what I do, say, and even think. Although”—she paused and looked up—“it’s not because I’m a marionette, but I do feel that Somebody up there is ... no it’s *silly.*”

“It’s not silly, Marian. God *is* recording our life up there for us to review at the end of it, and that is rather sobering to ponder. In my case, however, my adventures like this are written down and then published in *Heaven’s Library* books and magazines for the whole Family.”

“For your relatives?”

“Yes, them too. They get to read about all my thoughts, my NWOs ... I mean, my weaknesses and problems, and even my ... you know, romantic involvements. Actually, I’m thankful to be at a point where it doesn’t bother me so terribly much anymore.”

Marian raised her eyebrows. “Romantic involvements? You do seem a little young.”

“Well, there usually *is* someone I have ended up really liking. The first time I met him he was a play ... oh, it’s absolutely crazy.”

“Not so crazy,” said Marian. “I know the type. That’s what I thought Mario was when I first met him—but he turned out to be quite sincere.”

“And where is he now?”

“Still in Italy. He was going to join me here at the Orb Theatre, but then he got captured by Baldo Striffolino’s travelling circus.”

“Captured? How?”

“Indentured,* by signing a contract. Striffolino promised him world fame. Yeah, right. Nothing happened.”

“We must rescue him,” said Alice.

“Oh yeah? Got tickets to Italy?”

“All things are possible through prayer and the power of the keys, Marian. Anyway, it would be ever so nice if you were a real *person*, though.”

“I’m not a person?”

***indenture:** a contract by which a person, as an apprentice, is bound to service

“Well, not a person ... *per se* ... whatever that means.”

“Person, or *per se*?”

“*Per se*,” said Alice. “Some of my friends often use that word at the end of a sentence, and it admittedly sounds rather impressive, although I—and most likely they—haven’t the foggiest idea what it means.”

“Me neither,” said Marian. “Anyway, in this situation, I am rather glad to be made out of wood.”

“Really?”

“Of course. The rain doesn’t bother me, my makeup doesn’t run, and only my clothes get wet. Even that can be quite cool and in vogue—you know—the *wet* look.”

Alice suddenly shivered and sneezed. “Methinks I’d prefer the *dry* look right now, to be honest.”

“Hey, are you catching a cold?”

“I most certainly hope not.”

By now, even in the dense forest, the downpour had drenched Alice to the bone and Marian to the wood, so that at Alice’s behest, the two girls took refuge in a large hole at the base of the trunk of a giant oak, thickly carpeted with dry leaves.

“This *is* rather exciting,” said Alice, as they lay down and heaped leaves over themselves. “It reminds me of the old story called ‘Babes in the Wood.’”

“Never heard of it,” said Marian, “although I wouldn’t quite classify *you* as a ‘babe.’”

“Of course not,” said Alice. “I am much too old.”

“Too *old*?”

“Goodness, yes.”

Marian looked puzzled. “Well, I’m eighteen years old and classified as a ‘babe’ *many* times.”

“Really?” said Alice.

“Yah. Mario refers to me as one, and young guys on the stage set, like Rod and Randy.”

“Puppets?”

“Naturally. And burgeoning with pre-programmed hormonal responses.”

“Hmm,” said Alice, and suddenly slapped her forehead. “Oh my goodness gracious me. Of course—*babe*. ... Oh alas, the readers must think me most *dreadfully* naïve!”

“Readers?”

“Yes. Remember what we discussed concerning Someone writing down what we’re doing, saying and thinking?”

“Oh yah, of *course*,” said Marian. “Well, I wouldn’t get bent out of shape over it. But I’d love to hear the story.”

“Story? Which one?”

“‘Babes in the Wood.’ I’m in the mood for a bedtime story. Is it like, *hot*?”

“It’s a children’s story.”

“Oh,” Marian said glumly.

“Yes. Although it is a bit unedifying.”

“Unedifying?”

“Umm, you know—slightly gruesome.”

“Gruesome is cool,” said Marian. “I *love* stories that keep me awake petrified!”

Alice shook her head. “Not I. I like my sleep to be sweet. Oh, I can imagine you would get along ever so well with Brandon my brother—I wish you could meet him—he just *loves* that *scary* stuff.”

“I see. So the story?”

“I’m sorry,” said Alice. “Anyway, once upon a time...”

“When’s that?”

“Hmmm, about four or five hundred years ago, I presume. Anyway, once upon a time there lived two very young children. After the death of their parents, they are left in the care of an uncle who is given a large sum of money to do so. The uncle, however, wishing to keep the money for his own needs, pays two men to take the children into the woods and kill them.”

“Oh God, that’s horrible.”

“Truly,” said Alice. “So the criminals, finding themselves unable to go through with the horrendous deed, abandon the children in the wood where they, being unable to fend for themselves, fall asleep under a huge oak tree. Legend has it that robins brought leaves to cover them to try to keep them warm.”

“Is this a true story?”

“Supposedly. It apparently took place in Wayland Wood, near which stands Griston Hall, traditionally known as ‘the house of the wicked uncle,’ and the ghosts of the children are said to haunt the wood to this very day.”

Marian shivered and clutched Alice’s arm.

“You see, Marian, that was like us being captured by those two brigands. Somebody commissioned them to kill us, but one of them took pity and was persuaded against their evil intentions.”

“Please don’t talk about it anymore, Alice. I’m scared.”

“I’m most dreadfully sorry, Marian. We can pray for the night and”—Alice pulled the scissors out of her pinafore pocket. They were glowing—“claim the Lord’s protection through the keys turned to scissors.”

To be continued...



Issue 247—AM

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale in Eight A.C.T.S.



Act Four

The story so far: After narrowly escaping two hoodlums intent on villainous mischief, Alice and her traveling companion-marionette, Marian, awake from a cold night in a lonely forest. ...

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THEODORE, HOLLY, AND...

The next morning, a merry whistle awakened the two girls, and Alice, damp and shivering, climbed out of the opening in the oak's trunk. Birds were chirping, the sky beckoned blue through the treetops, the air was fresh with dew, and through the rain-soaked forest trail strode a white-bearded giant of a man with an axe slung over his shoulder. He wore a leather jerkin, corduroy pantaloons, boots, and a ruddy smile. He stopped in his tracks a few yards in front of Alice, acknowledged her with a cheery wave and—of no surprise to her—a warm, “Good morning, Alice.”

“Good morning, sir,” Alice replied with a frantic attempt to straighten her hair and irredeemably creased clothes.

“Ah. Thou hast slept.”

“Surprisingly well, thank you, sir.”

“Good. Breakfast is awaitin’ ye both.”

“Breakfast?”

“Aye. My wife has prepared hot buttered toast, scones, bacon, eggs, hot cocoa...”

“Why, thank you, kind sir. It’s most ... ah ... ah ... *choo!*”

“Ah,” said the man, “best get thee into a warm bed with hot water bottles and spiced onion grog.”

By now, Marian had poked her head out of the oak’s trunk.

“So we’re going home with you, mister?” she asked, looking a little terrified.

“That ye are, miss, if ye be so obliged. I’m makin’ no constraint, however.”

“Oh, sir, we would be absolutely *delighted*,” said Alice. She put a hand on her forehead and drew her breath. “Except I do feel rather poorly. And...”

So saying, Alice fell into a swoon.



HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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When she finally came to, Alice found herself tucked in a sturdy oak bed, sweating and shivering under a mound of blankets and a quilt. She hazily surveyed her rustic, softly lit surroundings of whitewashed walls and black oak beams, and suddenly sensed a presence. A woman sitting on the edge of the bed placed a hand on her brow. It felt comforting, and Alice let her eyes close again.

“Where am I?” she muttered.

“Our manor house.”

The woman’s soft, reassuring voice seemed familiar to Alice.

“And yes, my luv,” she continued as if in answer to Alice’s tacit recognition, “we *have* met before—though under circumstances very different in some ways, yet very similar in others. My name is Holly and my husband’s name is Theodore. He carried ye home.”

“A w-woodchopper?”

“Aye. We knew ye were both in need of help and we kept watch.”

“And the puppet ... Marian?”

“She’s well. Being entertained by our son, Joshua. You know him of course. He’s into computers.”

Alice nodded drowsily and smiled. *Into computers?*

“I brought you some sage and onion grog, by the way,” said the woman, “but it seems it’s cooled off a mite. If ye have a mind to drink it, I can heat it up.”

The idea of the concoction being unappetizing, Alice slowly shook her head.

“No matter, luv. Is there anything else I can set before you?”

Set before you. Alice reflected on the familiar phrase, and reconsidered. *Giving thanks!*

“I shall try a little of your grog, if I may, ma’am,” she said with difficulty, being strangely hoarse. “And you really don’t have to heat it up.”

The woman smiled and placed the mug to Alice’s lips. Alice took a sip and then a swallow.

“Mmm, tastes heaps better than it sounds. Thank you ever so much, ma’am.”

“Ye are so very welcome, luv. Drink up and take your rest in sleep. I shall be checking up on ye betimes. There’s a bell on your bedside. Ring it if ye need assistance. Oh, and by the way, your clothes are freshly laundered and folded on the chair over there, along with a nice warm coat, scarf, mittens and a woolly hat.”

“A coat and hat? But...”

“Aye. Ye’ll be a-needin’ ’em.”

“But usually I can’t, you know...”

“No problem with that here, luv.”

Holly placed a kiss on Alice’s forehead, slipped out of the room and Alice slipped back into sleep, only to be woken a short while later by bustle and bright lights.

To her dismay, she was back in the Warren Theatre. Many members of the audience, including her parents and Brandon were chattering and standing up from their seats.

“Oh no!” Alice exclaimed. “It’s *over* ?...”

“Intermission,” said Brandon. “Why would it be of much concern to you? You’re sleeping through the whole thing, anyway.”

“No, it’s just that I am ever so...”

“Well, we’re getting some snacks from the foyer. Want to come?”

“Or do you want us to just bring you something, sweetheart?”

Alice stood up. “Oh, that’s ever so nice of you to offer, Mummy, but I really ought to come and get it myself. I ... do so need to find my bearings.”

Still dazed and disoriented, Alice dawdled in the theatre foyer, staring at the popcorn and refreshment stands, unable to make up her mind which of her two “worlds” was reality at that point. Marian, dear Anne Hastaway, and even poor Larry Larrikin were souls that she felt compelled to pray for, but were they *real*? They certainly *seemed* as real as—or even more so—than the surrounding people who, with plastic smiles, apologised for jostling her while grabbing for their refreshments. She was lost in silent prayer when Brandon approached her.

“Sorry, sis, just bubbly water. Not much choice outside of fizzy pop.

“That will suffice perfectly. Thank you ever so much.”

“Want a hot dog?”

Alice shook her head.

“Let me guess, sis. You’ve been sleeping. ... The deranged look, the Jane Austen lingo... It’s ... another ‘experience’?”

Alice nodded numbly. By this time, their parents had joined them.

“They have battered fish and chips,” said Eileen Godley. “Are you interested?”

“Actually, that does sound rather appetising,” said Alice. “You know how much I like fish ... but it’s not my preference early in the morning. ...”

Eileen and Malcolm looked puzzled.

“Oh, I am most dreadfully sorry. I was somewhere else just then.”

“Hey, sis,” said Brandon, “this occasion was supposed to be special in a good sense. I mean, what’s the deal?”

“I don’t know, I just feel extra sleepy and the play...”

“We’re sorry that the play is not exactly to your taste, honey,” said Alice’s mother, “but Coleen had very kindly provisioned the tickets as a Christmas treat.”

“I’m ever so dreadfully sorry, Mummy. I certainly do not wish to appear unthankful.”

“Are you unwell, darling?”

“Not at all, Daddy. It’s just that last night went very late with Brandon and me watching a video together. ...”

“We stayed up discussing it until two or three,” said Brandon. “My bad, really.”

“You are a growing girl, Alice,” said her mother, “and you do need extra sleep.”

Brandon grinned. “Especially if you go into one of those dream trips. ...”

“Then there was the horse-riding practise early this morning,” Alice added, “followed by the *dreadfully* long drive down in the traffic congestion, during which time I found it impossible to sleep.”

“Well, it’s funny your brother should mention your dream trips,” said Eileen. “You see, I *am* a little burdened, ... and Malcolm and I have discussed and prayed about it, that seeing you are having these ‘experiences’ printed in the *Heaven’s Library* mags and even a book, we do hope and pray that it’s not making you lose touch with reality or even going to your head.”

“Going to my *head*, Mummy? It’s not like the *coolest* thing to get all my comings and goings and, like, innermost thoughts printed for the worldwide Fam. It’s like majorly embarrassing, actually. And I get teased to death at area fellowships.”

“I suppose it does come with a price, sweetheart,” said her father.

“Well, I’m sure you could write to WS and request to not have these experiences published, Alice.”

“I *have* thought of that, Mummy. But Josh ... Jesus tells me I shouldn’t grumble about it because they’re an encouragement to other kids in the Family.”

“True,” Alice’s mother conceded. “And it is sweet that you always say such nice things about Malcolm and me in the stories.”

“And me, too,” Brandon added with a wink.

Alice puffed, and rolled her eyes, and her father suggested they return to their seats.

Torn between her two worlds, Alice prayed that she would remain awake for the rest of the play, and that she could return to Theodore and Holly’s manor house only once she was back home and bedded down for the night.

Nevertheless, within ten minutes of having settled back into her theatre seat with a bottle of bubbly water and a Styrofoam plate of fish and chips on her lap, which Brandon rescued before they fell to their fate on the theatre floor, Alice had fallen asleep.

Presently Alice opened her eyes. The aroma of cooked fish hung in the air and a bearded young man with his dark hair tied back in a ponytail was sitting on the edge of her bed. Alice’s heart skipped.

“I heard your prayers, Alice,” he said. “You claimed my protection through the keys turned to scissors.”

Alice closed her eyes in feigned drowsiness.

“Anyway, I’m so glad you are stirring,” continued the young man. “Mum and Dad just stepped out and asked me to prepare you a breakfast. Hope it’s to your liking.”

“It actually smells rather good,” said Alice. “But for breakfast?”

“I can prepare something else.”

“Oh no, do not trouble yourself, kind sir, for I do feel so very hungry.”

“Then I invite you to enjoy my speciality. Extremely appropriate after a ‘resurrection,’ you might say!”

“Resurrection?”

“You’ve been sleeping for exactly three days and nights, Alice.”

“I have? But I’m still only halfway through the ... oh, never mind.”

“The play, Alice. Yes, I know. But as *you* know, time on this side doesn’t quite have the same span as over ‘there.’ Nutty putty, remember? I’m Joshua by the way, which I am sure you also know.”

Alice shyly nodded. “The cards ... and the Christmas Eve ball ... and...”

“We danced,” Joshua said with a smile, and put his hand on her forehead. “You are a little flushed, but it has nothing to do with the fever. ...”

He paused and winked. “Your temperature is normal.”

“D-did you batter the fish?” Alice asked, hoping to divert his attention.

“Of course! Seeing as we are in England—broiling is *out*.”

Once Alice had sat up, Joshua laid the tray on her knees. She was about to tuck in, when she closed her eyes to self-consciously mutter a prayer.

“Oh goodness,” she blurted, “this is, like, so weird, you know? Here I am about to eat and thank ... er ... *you*. I should just open my eyes and hey, be real, and say thank you to *you*, right?”

“I would like that,” said Joshua. “And you’re welcome, Alice. Please enjoy. Oh, and by the way, I put a honeycomb there on the side. It actually goes quite well together.”

Alice grimaced. “Honeycomb with fish?”

“As I said—an appropriate resurrection meal!”

Alice thought for a moment and smiled. “Oh, of course! It’s at the end of the Gospel of Luke.”

“You’ve met my father, haven’t you?” Joshua asked.

“Oh yes, he rescued us in the wood. Well, he at least found us. We would have been at a dreadful loss if it wasn’t for him.”

“He’s a wonderful man,” said Joshua. “I would like you to get to know him better. He can be a little terrifying at first, don’t you think?”

“To be honest, yes,” said Alice. “Especially when he’s carrying that big axe! Marian was quite terrified of him too at first.”

“You’re right. When people touch the apple of his eye ... like you, well ... the fur flies. You’re the apple of mine, too, by the way.”

Alice blushed again. “Y-yes. But even though I had met him before in that, you know ... adventure with the cards and stuff, I feel a bit more comfortable around you, to be honest. I suppose it’s because it’s like you’re lots younger and can relate more and stuff.”

Joshua chuckled. “I understand perfectly. But he has a heart of gold, and is as gentle as a lamb most of the time.”

“Most of the time?”

“Well, when he knew what those two ruffians were purposing to do to you, he was about to storm out there and give ’em what he knows what!”

“And he didn’t?”

“I prevented him at the door. When I said, ‘Father, give them some time to come to their senses. Let events lead them to see the error of their ways,’ he relented.”

Joshua paused and chuckled. “On the other hand, only at His behest can I do anything drastic! Anyway, Alice, Larry in particular was convicted by your example.”

“Oh, it was only the Lor ... *you*.”

“Yes, but I am proud of you for being a faithful witness. The readers will... Look, I am sure you have many questions.”

“Oh, that I do, sir. I’m not murmuring, you know, but I do find these adventures sort of randomly *bizarre*. Especially when I have to like, switch gears in real life and stuff.”

“Real life, Alice? You’d be surprised what truly *is* real life!”

“Oh, I know the spirit world is real,” said Alice. “Especially after tripping on a key craft and all. But this whole scenario ... puppets and stuff. It’s all so ... and here I am—I can’t even speak the way I’m supposed to under this circumstance. It’s even worse than I speak at home.”

“Let us get together later this evening, Alice, once you are rested and we can talk about this, your latest mission.”

“Oh, that would be ever so ... cool. I mean, tremendous.”

“We can have dinner together.”

Giving Alice a kiss on her flaming cheek, Joshua excused himself to let her finish her meal. Once she was done, Alice climbed out of the bed, bathed, and dressed. Although crisply laundered and ironed, the clothes felt unfamiliar; in fact, her whole body felt that way. It was not an entirely unpleasant sensation, but it took a few minutes to adjust to returning to her life on “this side,” as Joshua had put it. Alice heard sounds of movement in the rest of the house and contemplated exploring.

She pulled on her blue-and-white-striped Victorian hose, stepped into her black, patent-leather shoes, and brushed her luxurious golden locks. Then she noticed the clothes that Holly had mentioned; a blue velvet, double-breasted coat neatly folded together with a pair of mittens, a scarf, and a woolly hat. Feeling a little chilled, Alice tried on the coat and found it fit perfectly without any unusual consequences, picked up the accessories and gingerly stepped out into the extensive hallway. A few paces from her room, a staircase led down to where she heard activity and merry prattle, among which she perceived Marian's voice.

Alice cautiously descended the stairs, and after wandering down the hallway, hovered outside the open kitchen door. Upon seeing her, the cooks and maids therein, along with Marian, fell silent.

"Oh, I am most *awfully* sorry," said Alice. "I do not mean to intrude."

"You're not intruding, girl," chirped a jolly, redheaded woman, apparently the head cook. "All one family, we."

Alice grinned and glanced at the glass in the woman's hand.

"For marinating," the woman added, noticing Alice's observation. "Anyway, your friend here has kept us marvellously entertained with her puppet antics!"

"I ... I am not sure if I'm Alice's ... whatever," Marian said, suppressing a longing look at Alice. "But I am certainly not a puppet!"

The woman broke into laughter. "Then what *are* you?"

"My friend is a marionette," said Alice.

"A *what*?"

"A marionette."

"Never 'eard of it."

"Well, ma'am, a marionette is like a puppet, but fashioned with more exquisite craftsmanship than your average puppet. It seems a lot of thought, care, and even *love* went into her creation. They're usually designed for a special purpose. And she was handcrafted in Italy, you know."

Startled, Marian looked at Alice. "I'm sorry, Alice," she said and lowered her head.

"For what?"

"Lots of things. ..."

"Anyway," said the head cook, "we're amazed at Marian's knowledge of hosting and banqueting protocol. She has been keeping us in stitches at her observations of such occasions!"

"I am not surprised," said Alice. "Marian does have remarkable dining decorum."

"Where did you learn it, by the way?" Alice asked her.

"P-probably the same way you learned *yours*. Parents cramming it down my throat."

“Well,” said Alice, “as much as my parents, especially Daddy, have instilled in me the need for appropriate table manners, they had little to do with nurturing my proclivity towards *extremely* formal etiquette in these experiences.”

Marian shook her head and exhaled. “Seeing as you put it that way, who am I to argue?”

“Did you meet Joshua, by the way?” Alice asked.

Marian sighed, fluttered her long lashes, and broke into a wistful smile.

“Man,” she whispered, “what a *dreamboat*. How well do you know him?”

“*Extremely* well,” Alice said proudly.

“Oh? Do I suspect...?”

“You can suspect what you want,” Alice said blithely as she studied a splendid bouquet of flowers in a vase on the kitchen table.

“So how long have you known him?”

“All my life, really. Well, maybe since I was about two or three years old. To be honest, I didn’t get to actually *see* him until...”

Suddenly Holly was at the door sending the maids scurrying as she inquired after the morrow’s meal, which was apparently a special occasion.

“Tomorrow’s his birthday,” Holly whispered to Alice and Marian.

“He’s a bit oblivious to it, and that’s perfectly fine. Jes’ keep it under yer hats.”

“Of course, ma’am,” said Alice. “But whose birthday is it, may I ask?”

“My son’s, of course! Listen, he’s about to saddle up the horses and was wondering if you girls would be interested in riding. It’s a perfect distraction to give us all here the time to make the most o’ the preparations.”

“Oh, I would ever so much!” said Alice.

“I’ve never ridden a horse,” said Marian. “Too scary. I’ll pass.”

“Oh, *do* go,” said Holly. “Joshua could teach you. It’s right easy at the beginning if ye just take it slow.”

Marian shook her head. “No way am I going to make a fool of myself in front of him.

“Besides,” she softly added, looking at Alice, “two’s company, three’s a crowd, right?”

Alice muttered something inaudible and stared at her feet.

“Then come and spend some time with me, Marian,” said Holly.

“I’ll teach you a handicraft ... basket weaving, embroidery, sewing?”

“You could even learn to make your own clothes,” suggested Alice, who had been hoping for an opportunity to have more time alone with Joshua. Marian seemed pleased with the idea, Holly set a time to meet her and led Alice out to the stables.

“Oh, it’s starting to snow,” said Alice, pulling the hat over her ears.
“Cool.”

“Aye. And that’s why I laid out those winter clothes for ye.”

“Hi, dear!”

Alice blushed and waved in response, struck by how stately and handsome Joshua looked in riding boots, white corduroy breeches, and a brown suede jacket. He had untied his ponytail to let his shoulder length locks blow free.

“You came alone. I take it thus
That Marian’s not joining us?”

“Nay, it seems she’d rather
(Her nature being more inclined)
Learn from your dear mother
A handicraft of some kind.”

Joshua smiled and patted the hindquarters of a white horse.

“Then you can ride young Tristan here.
He’s a gentle colt, you need not fear.”

“Amazing, sir! You called him Tristan,
The name of my Elerian!”

“How well I know,” said Joshua.
“For his help you did implore!
Come, I’ll help you mount him,
Though you’ve ridden, have you not, before?”

“In fact, my Lord, just yesterday—
Well, maybe not. ... It’s hard to say. ...”

“I know,” said Joshua as he lifted Alice by the waist onto the spirited colt.

“One of my angels at your call,
Kept you from a nasty fall.”

“Oh, my goodness gracious me,
You speak of that old fallen tree?
And, hey, how did this come to be,
That I’m, like, speaking poetry?”

Joshua grinned and mounted a snorting, white stallion.

“Of course. Why doth it amaze you so?
Get thy feet in the stirrups. Come on, let’s go!”

At Joshua’s whistle, the horses took off. At first, Alice stiffened and clutched fearfully at the reins, but then she relaxed and let her charger instinctively take her where it knew to go—following Joshua, who turned and smiled.

“Lovely maiden, urge thy steed,
To ride beside me. Pick up speed!”

Alice gave the reins a snap and soon she was galloping alongside Joshua who gazed at her admiringly.

“’Tis a wonder to behold,
Your billowing tresses of flaxen gold.”

“Why, th-thank you, sir, but I must confess
I know not how to handle such address.”

“Ah, said I not to you, remember,
Regarding love’s first flush?
There’s no cosmetic fairer
For a maiden than a blush.”

Bashfully, Alice lowered and shook her head in happy delirium. The circumstances could not have been any closer to her idea of Heaven than at that moment. Here was her Lord, a handsome young man, speaking to her in poetry and she effortlessly responding in kind, and as the hours progressed, its lyrical content covered matters of love and life, family and friends, and home and heart. Alice prayed the day could go on forever.

It did not, of course. In fact, the hours seemed to pass like minutes and the afternoon soon closed on her and Joshua sitting under a tree, drinking cider and watching the sun setting on a sparkling lake. Finally, as they cantered home in the dusk, Joshua sensed and addressed Alice’s sadness.

“But the day is not entirely over,
For there are matters yet to cover.
And so we must needs as we dine
Discuss the mission which is thine.”

IN QUIETNESS AND IN CONFERENCE

Later that evening, with flickering candlelight, a pair of hovering waiters, and a quintet playing Baroque* music supplementing their rendezvous, Alice was nevertheless perturbed. Although she managed to remark on Italian cuisine as being her and Brandon's favourite choice for occasions when they dined out, her tone was sad.

“You see, they never make it quite the same
At home, and I mean to place no blame.
E'en Brandon, who is quite a cook. ...”

“Now Alice, see ye here and look,
Something ails you. Tell me, what
Minutiae* my staff forgot?
An aspect not quite to your taste?
I'll have it rectified post haste.”

“Alas, my Lord, 'tis no such thing.
This day's brought more than wish could bring.
I'm sure you know that my distress
Is but lack of choice for evening dress.
For the readers, one could say it's fun,
But you could hardly say I'm 'becoming one,'
When it seems that on these adventures, sire,
I'm *trapped* in this uncool attire.
So, could you grant for just one trip
A chance for me to dress more hip?”

Joshua smiled and asked the waiters to fill their goblets.

“I'm well aware of your dilemma
Of appearing like dear Austen's Emma.
But Alice, think of all the fruit
You've borne in this outdated suit.
Out of time, but not of spirit,
Your Shepherd's voice, did the sheep not hear it?
And with glad sincerity
Follow your integrity?”

***Baroque:** of or pertaining to the musical period following the Renaissance, extending roughly from 1600 to 1750

***minutiae:** precise details; small or trifling matters

Alice sighed and took a sip from her goblet.

“They did so, Lord, and more’s the pain
To know I’ve no cause to complain.
But ... well, there are no ‘buts.’
’Cos should I be considered nuts,
I’ll take comfort knowing persons who
Were unworthy thought the same of you.”

By now, the third course had arrived—a roasted leg of lamb. Joshua pronounced another blessing on the meal and continued addressing Alice’s concerns in verse until he paused and took her hand, looking steadily into her misty, questioning eyes.

“We’ve talked of trifles, Alice, but admit—
That greater issues do merit
Infinitely more attention,
Not least of which is your commission.”

“True, but Lord, just one more question,
And that’s regarding your protection.
I obeyed and acted on
Your instructions, what went wrong?
It seems our lives were much endangered
Following two malevolent strangers.
We were kidnapped, almost killed.
Surely not what *you* had willed?”

“I grant the event was terrifying,
And for your faith, indeed most trying.
But I had to separate a sheep called Larry,
From his friend, the goat called Harry.
So fear not, Alice, thou didst do good,
Stirred by loving Spirit’s mood,
You performed my perfect plan
By witnessing unto this man.”

“Thank you, Lord, but may I ask,
Just what is this mysterious task
That bids me serve vain etiquette
To win a shallow marionette?”

“Alice, though you’ve cut her strings,
She knows not what such freedom brings,

To humbly carry and remain
True to what she deems a chain.”

Although mystified, upon hearing this, Alice sunk her head into her hands. For some reason, she thought of the book, *Alice and the Baptism of Fire*. She saw no connection, except to ponder if the present “crown,” such as the task of bearing a puppet’s soul in her care, was too heavy.

At that moment, it seemed not, for though Alice was of David’s royal line, she was wearing but a light tiara. She was able to enjoy family, friends, parties, movies, and even banter along with some frivolous conversation and the occasional fling with feminine fancy and fashion. Life was relatively uncomplicated.

As Alice mused on these conclusions, however, with Joshua graciously allowing her the silent space to do so, she perceived that even in those times of frolic, an impending weight of responsibility hung over her. At 13 years of age, Heaven was grooming her for royalty, and it dawned on her that despite her age and attire, she could exert influence on whatever circle she found herself. It was becoming evident to her that, whether unwittingly or surreptitiously, her peers including Brandon would seek her silent imprimatur* on their observations, opinions, and even humour.

Alice sighed and nodded. Yes, even now, the crown was being fashioned and prepared.

“If I could, I’d cast it off right now,
The crown you hereof speak.
For, Milord, to bear it, how?
I am much too, much too weak!”

“Oh Alice, dearest Alice,
It is indeed a yoke.
But ye remember how to bear this,
And what of it I spoke?”

“Oh, yes, I do, sir, very much, sir.
The GNs speak at length.
How in meekness and in weakness,
I will therein find my strength.
But peers will deem it but a joke
And surely put me down
If I should even *hint* a yoke
Is like unto a crown!

***imprimatur**: sanction or approval; support

So, who this secret understands,
And with whom can I share it?
That the crown is ne'er so cumbrous than
For she who has to wear it?"

Joshua smiled sympathetically.

"Tis true, for that bejewelled crest,
Soon to grace thy head,
Though made of gold, for thee it might just
As well be wrought in lead.
For lo, the royal diadem
So glorious to behold
Might just as well, I say again,
Be wrought of lead than gold.
They'll ask you, 'Why such opulence
'And obvious expense,
'When so often to the populace
'It represents offence?'
Ah, but if such was offered them,
It with avarice* they'd grasp,
And their prior sentiments
They ne'er again would rasp.
So, Alice, I will bless thy heart,
With grace and strength to bear it.
And you will find it lighter far,
If you'll just with *me* share it."

So saying, Joshua washed down his last bite with a swig from his goblet and put down his fork.

"Henceforth I'll speak no more to thee
Of position, power, and such.
For this responsibility
Doth burden thee too much.
For I now bequeath to you a task
To hone love's queenly art.
For a piteous puppet's wooden mask
You must replace with heart.
So persevere in trial hot
With faith in my great plan.
For there's a secret I cannot
Reveal regarding Marian."

***avarice**: extreme greed

At that moment, following a gentle knock, Theodore poked his head around the door.

“Father,” said Joshua, “what brings this unexpected visit?”

“I understood that you were confidentially communing with our young guest, but you may want to check your computer, son. It’s urgent.”

Alice’s heart sank.

“There’s an email requesting Alice to attend a press conference. It was CC’d to Holly and me.”

“A *press* conference?” Alice blurted. “Oh my goodness, no. I did so terribly at the last one at the Comfort Convenience Hotel. I do believe I passed out.”

Theodore smiled apologetically and excused himself.

“A rather sudden sharp interruption to our deliberations,” Joshua said, getting up from the table and walking over to his computer; startlingly small and streamlined as far as the casing and keyboard were concerned, but impressively expansive regarding the screen which covered most of the wall.

Brandon would be so thrilled! Alice thought.

Joshua clicked on a file and a woman’s face appeared on the screen.

“Velma Slithers,” Alice said with disgust.

Joshua smiled knowingly.

“Fear not Alice, to drink this cup.

It seems my Father set this up

In answer to her secret prayer.

She’s a child of his, though unaware.”

Another click on Joshua’s mouse and Velma began speaking. “Hi, Alice baby. How ya doin’? Hey, that was quite the kick-butt scene with the fire and all. Don’t worry, sweetie, I don’t believe a word of all that schlock they’re puttin’ out about you bein’ the religious fanatic arsonist behind it all. I’m with ya, honey, and the purpose of this li’l request is so I can put my money where my mouth is. Whaddaya say we do an open press conference interview putting out your spin on the whole deal? People deserve ... well, they at least *need* to hear the truth about you.”

Velma stopped. Alice looked mortified and Joshua whispered in her ear.

“It’s okay, answer her question.

This plays much into your commission.”

“Dearest Lord, what should I say?

Tell me what to do, I pray.”

“Go ahead, agree to do it,
Have no fear—I’ll see you through it.”

Alice nodded at the screen and Joshua chuckled.

“You see her, she can’t see you.
Say you’ll do the interview.”

“I’ll do the interview, Miss Slithers,” Alice mumbled.

“Great! Ten-thirty tomorrow morning at the Shelton Glitz in downtown London. We’ll do it right there in the foyer, that way it’ll also get *prestigious* attention from their *prestigious* in-house clientele.”

“Tomorrow? But tomorrow’s ... you know. ...”

“Sssh,” Velma said with a wink. “Seeing it’s almost midnight! See ya.”

The screen went blank. With questioning in her eyes, Alice looked disconsolately over at Joshua who put a hand on hers and glanced up at the wall clock.

“Trust this duty to my keep.
It’s late—you need your beauty sleep.
I take that back, you’re a beauteous prize
E’en when shadows frame your eyes.”

So saying, Joshua kissed Alice’s blushing cheek, which had been especially prone to doing so during the last few hours, and with a blessing on her sleep, he whispered goodnight.



Happy birthday to you!
Happy birthday to you!
Happy birthday, dear Joshua!
Happy birthday to you!

Although Alice awoke to this joyful chanting downstairs and a sparkling white carpet of snow outside her window, she could have burst into tears. Nevertheless, she jumped out of bed, dressed, and after slapping water on her face, tore at her hair with a brush.

I slept late and on top of that, I don’t have a single present for him, er, I mean ... you! I really should have gone to bed earlier. And then there’s this press conference. ...

Don’t worry, Alice, yesterday was a perfect day for both of us.

It could not have been a moment shorter. And as for a gift? ... You know what I like. See you in the kitchen!

Alice dashed down the hallway, charged down the stairs, and clumsily barged through the kitchen door to face cooks, staff, children, and those she assumed to be Joshua's friends and relatives who packed the sparkingly decorated place. Joshua smiled and waved at her, but the sight of Marian sitting smugly on his shoulders made it difficult for Alice to return a wholehearted smile. Holly waved to her from the middle of the throng.

"My son wanted his birthday party to be informal!" she called out. "And early enough so that you could enjoy it before leaving for your important Christmas Day commission."

"In fact, he turned the whole schedule around on account of you, Alice," said Theodore. "Even had me send an extra fall of snow, knowing that's what you would wish for."

At these proclamations, everyone fell silent and turned to look at Alice. A lump came to her throat.

"Wh-why, thank you, gracious Lord,
But I'm, like, *majorly* remorsed."

Alice put a hand to her mouth. She really did not want to cry in front of everyone.

"I've been but minutes up from bed,
And as f-far as a gift ... well, like I said. ..."

Joshua set Marian on the floor and walked towards Alice.

"And like *I* said, being this occasion's host,
You know what gifts please *me* the most."

Alice nodded, squinting and gulping to hold back tears.

"We need music," Joshua announced with a wave of his hand and took Alice in his arms. "I want to dance."

Oh, great! Alice thought. *I haven't even like, cleaned my teeth, I couldn't find any perfume, and...*

One of the cooks turned on an MP3 sound system. Alice recognised the song as Amanda Tresillo's version of the *Commission Rhapsody*.

"My son can even turn a *kitchen* into a fairy-tale ballroom," Alice heard Holly say as she closed her eyes and rested her head on Joshua's chest. She smiled sadly and whispered,

“Lord, I do not mean to grieve,
But how soon do I have to leave?”

“Don’t you worry, little pet.
It’s nutty putty, don’t forget!”

“True, Milord, I am aware
That we can stretch or shrink it here.
Yet it seems to me, alas,
When I’m with you it goes so fast.”

Joshua chuckled.

“They say it flies when you’re having fun,
So I must ask Dad to explain that one.
’Cos even here, I often think it,
Odd how joy still tends to shrink it!”

And yes, despite Joshua’s success at time stretching, for Alice, that Christmas Day’s morning hours enjoying his birthday feast and attention flew by unforgivably fast before she found herself and Marian standing expectantly in the foyer of the Shelton Glitz Hotel. How they arrived there, neither of them knew.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” Marian said with a teasingly knowing grin. “Right?”

“I do suppose,” Alice disconsolately replied.

“Great to see ya, babe!”

Alice and Marian swallowed their displeasure as Velma Slithers slunk towards them, sheathed in black lizard skin. She pressed both her cheeks in turn against Alice’s, and kissed the air. Alice winced; the woman reeked of unmistakably synthetic perfume.

“I have no idea what the nature of these questions portends to be, ma’am,” said Alice, gazing into the milling crowd of reporters.

“You’ll do great, sweetheart. And most of all, it’ll rake in the attention along with the shekels.”

“I do suppose,” said Alice. “But why Christmas Day?”

“A fantastic publicity ploy, baby. Adds to the tinsel and Wonderland vibe. You know, ‘What will she say next’ on Christmas Day! On top of that, the Man upstairs gave us a white one! Sure-fire.”

“I do suppose,” Alice said again.

Although it was but midmorning, the journalist guests along with Marian were seizing the day and freely consuming its abundant Christmas cheer of champagne, cocktails, and all manner of liquor in the Shelton Glitz foyer. One inebriated middle-aged male reporter lurched over to Alice to demand “her Excellency’s” autograph. Despite Velma’s

curt dismissal of him, Alice smilingly complied with the pitiful man's request, wished him a happy Christmas, and graced him with a curtsy.

"Ya needn't have bothered," said Velma. "Small fry."

"That I know not, ma'am," said Alice, "but he did seem rather sweet."

Velma nodded as the man dazedly walked off. "You're right, what can I say? He's smitten, kitten. Hey, ya know what? I should take a leaf from your book. Your unorthodox angle obviously gets results. He's gonna write some article makin' you out to be at least a *saint*, if not the successor to Lady Dinah."

"That's the name of my cat," Alice said wistfully. "Oh, I do hope they are feeding her well today. She usually gets whipped cream for Christmas. Anyway, Miss Slithers, 'love knows no boundaries,' as the song says. As long as that poor man accepts the invitation."



"So who is this *Joshua*?"

"Is he some secret lover?"

"What do you mean by 'Theodore and Holly's son'?"

A battery of cameras flashed and video cameras whirred with spotlights and microphones held aloft as questions such as these bombarded Alice.

"So you did not start the fire, Miss Pleasance?"

"The only fire I wish to start, ladies and gentlemen, is a conflagration in your hearts. One of love."

"You are speaking in fanciful etherealities, Miss Pleasance," said a frizzy-haired, bespectacled woman wearing fatigues and laden with cameras. "Qualify, quantify, clarify, specify."

"I will, ma'am." And Alice proceeded to tell the crowd about her recent experiences and even her commission. "Joshua is a very dear friend and he speaks to me in my heart."

"He's ... er ... passed on?"

"He did, but he's not dead," Alice calmly replied to her interrogators' wagging heads. "He's very close to me. Although many of you may not realise it, you're actually celebrating his birthday today."

"*Ridiculous*, Miss Pleasance."

"And who exactly *are* this mysterious Theodore and Holly?"

"Mr. Theodore Forrester—a woodchopper, and his wife Holly live in a rustic manor house, and despite their relatively humble estate, have more to do with our existence than most of us realise."

"Introduce them to us then, or this ... *Joshua*, and we'll believe you."

"To be sure, I can only do that by inviting you to invite Joshua into the rooms of your hearts."

“That’s all very ethereal, Miss Pleasance. Can you give us a more concrete answer?”

“Better than concrete, my answer is as solid as a rock, sir,” Alice replied. “The proof of Joshua’s Christmas pudding, if I may say so, is in its tasting. No amount of description or explanation of the recipe, and what have you, can possibly satisfy the intellect.”

“So, we are now talking about recipes and Christmas puddings, Miss Pleasance?”

“It seems so, madam. For instance, what if I should describe tapioca pudding to those of you who like it? ... My brother Brandon hates the stuff, by the way, but I *love* it. Would I be correct to assume that if I were to say it’s of a somewhat viscous or even *slimy* constituency with contents not unlike frog’s spawn, you would no doubt be repulsed?”

A chuckle went up from the gathering, and the atmosphere tangibly lightened, facilitating Alice to deliver her message—the invitation to Joshua’s wedding banquet.

“Please raise your hands if you wish to attend,” she said at last. “I assure you that the proposed fare will be a little more appetising than tapioca or even Christmas pudding!”

Most, if not all, present, did so, and Alice again noted that she was inadvertently snipping with the scissors in her pocket and the strings attached to those raised hands seemed to shrivel up into...

“*Nothingness!*” she said afterwards, while describing the event to Marian. “It’s not like those strings just *disappeared*. It was more than that.”

“Good.” Marian responded with a slur in her speech. “Those journalist jerks were obvious puppets of ... *someone*.”

“Sad but true,” said Alice. “But just think of it, I gave Joshua his favourite birthday present!”

“Really?”

“Umm ... souls. ... You know, *guests* for his wedding feast.”

“Okay. But you know what, Alice? It’s fine for you coming along cutting strings. Hey, *everyone’s* attached to strings. You’re not kidding anyone. Even you.”

I’m going to have to tread softly here, Alice thought.

“I mean, look at our crime minister, Driftwood Blarr,” Marian went on. “Obviously a puppet.”

“I do suppose,” said Alice. “But, like Lance Williams always told us, ‘the world’s a stage, and *every* man must play his part.’”

“Exactly.”

“So in that respect, of *course* I’m attached to strings,” Alice said proudly to Marian’s surprise. “Joshua’s.”

Marian smiled coyly. “That wouldn’t be so bad!”

“Not at all,” said Alice. “It’s only when I insist on doing my own thing that I get all tangled up in my ‘strings!’”

“But don’t you have a mind of your own?”

“Of course. Yet I deem Joshua’s thoughts and opinions much more interesting and wise! In fact, my own summations and assumptions have often proven lacklustre in comparison or even downright *wrong*.”

Marian nodded. “Never thought of it that way. Yah, Joshua’s a pretty smart dude—and dreamy.”

“Anyway, Marian, I met this most endearing woman. This could be the veritable answer to your prayers to find Mario in Italy.”

“My prayers? Do you believe I prayed for that?”

“Since you met Joshua, I *know* you have,” Alice said with a grin. “You are just too ... umm ... *dignified* to show it or tell me.”

“Dignified? Sounds like a euphemism for plain old egotism.”

Alice smiled and went on to describe how she had stepped down from the podium, sighing with relief that the press conference was over, when a young woman dressed in a royal-blue, two-piece mini-skirted suit had approached her. She seemed familiar to Alice.

“A topflight declaration of faith,” the woman had said, extending her hand. “I hope to be seeing you at Joshua’s wedding banquet.”

“You most assuredly will, if you had raised your hand.”

“I certainly did. I could not pass up such an invitation. In return, I want to give you these. ... They’re unlimited complimentary plane tickets, courtesy of Rhombus Airlines. Open-ended. And here’s a Golden Key Cash Card for your commission’s expenses, which also gives you unlimited access to our Golden Key VIP lounges.”

“Why ... thank you, miss ... er...?”

“My name is Twinkie.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Alice. “You are an air hostess, am I right?”

The woman nodded. “I am staying at this hotel between flights, and while on my way to breakfast I was particularly fascinated by this Christmas event. Have we met before, by the way? Maybe on a flight somewhere?”

“I believe so,” Alice said with a smile.

“That is very possible. I meet so many people in my line of work, but a girl such as you, so uniquely mannered and dressed, would be hard to forget.”

“Thank you, ma’am. But pray tell me, what fortune led me to merit this special card?”

“Golden Key cards are for first-class passengers who have gained unlimited credit due to miles chalked up on our *Flights of Fancy* program.”

“Miles?”

“Space City and back while card hunting for instance, to and from the Useless Status involving at least two or three key craft trips. Top-flight Inter-dimensional travel counts as *uncountable*—therefore unlimited—miles on our global hub and spoke. Be our guest.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Alice. “But how on earth did you know all this?”

Twinkie smiled knowingly and excused herself.



“Anyway, I *must* introduce you to her,” Alice said to Marian, and presently returned with Twinkie smiling and trotting behind her. Alice introduced the pretty, petite airhostess to Marian, who offered a brusque handshake and a “Hello, how’s it going?” through pursed lips.

“We are ever so indebted to you for your generous help, ma’am,” said Alice.

“You are ‘ever so’ welcome, Miss Dudley.”

“Dudley? Umm ... my name is Alice. Alice ... Pleasance. At least in this ... er ... *existence*.”

“Whatever,” Twinkie said. “I’m just happy to be of help. Alice, Ailish, Deidre, and suchlike, you know. Names ... labels—all so insignificant in the overall, in-flight scheme of things. The most important thing is that you and others like you are this world’s only hope.”

“Heavy words,” said Marian. “What *is* all this?”

With a clandestine glare, Alice motioned to the marionette to temper her reaction, while she conveyed her appreciation to the beaming hostess.

“Looking forward to seeing you at Joshua’s wedding feast,” she said.

“Of course,” said Twinkie, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“As if that would be offered to most people,” Marian said dryly.

“It has to me,” Twinkie responded, “many times. At least within my limited conception of what such an offer could comprise. From what I gather, the offers, trifling or significant, are usually personalised to the potential customer and non-endorsable. I am sure Alice understands. Anyway, I shall be seeing you.”

So saying, Twinkie smiled and left.

“Any idea what on earth that was all about?” Marian asked.

Alice, even though at a loss, prayerfully attempted to answer. “The god of this world has many individually tailored ways to lure us out of God’s will and presence.”

“Hmmm. Talk about it,” said Marian. “Why should I even ask when of all people, I should know?”

“You do?”

“Er ... hey,” said Marian, “I suppose our next port of call is Italy. Looking for Mario, right?”

“I believe that’s what Joshua bids us do,” Alice whispered excitedly. “So, let’s put these complimentary airline tickets and *especially* the Golden Key VIP card to good use!”

To be continued...

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Issue 248-AM

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale in Eight A.C.T.S.



Act Five

The story so far: Having spent Christmas Day with Joshua, Theodore, and Holly, Alice and Marian are refreshed and ready for the next act in their adventures—a trip to Italy in search of an old flame.

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HOMELAND PRESENCE

After landing in Rome Fiumicino Airport, taking care of the routine necessary for entering the country, and purchasing provisions for lunch, Alice and Marian boarded an underground train to Rome's Termini Railway Station. At the tourist information desk, they discovered that Baldo Striffolino's Travelling Circus had stopped for three days on the outskirts of Patelli, a village situated between Rome and Padua.

Once they had purchased train tickets, Marian, laden with bags of duty-free items, courtesy of Twinkie's Golden Key cash card gift, took Alice to a Sorso coffee bar where she ordered an espresso for herself and a bottle of bubbly water for Alice.

"They make the best coffee here," said Marian. "Sorso's a popular Italian chain."

"I know of it," Alice said with a somewhat sophisticated air.

The marionette was evidently familiar with Italy, spoke the language, and demonstrated a noteworthy aptitude to handle business and to charm officials, amusing them with her odd Italian inflections. When she was asked about the origin of her accent, however, her evasion puzzled Alice. And as they sat down to enjoy their beverages, Alice inquired of Marian about the matter.

"I was fashioned here in Italy," Marian replied, taking a sip of her espresso. "That's all anyone needs to know."

Maybe it was Joshua's hint about a secret concerning the puppet that drove Alice to pursue the question. "But that has little to do with where one acquires an accent," she said.

Marian picked up the menu. "True. Hungry? They make excellent *brioche*s here, a perfect match with their coffee. If you want, I'll order some for you."

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“The breakfast on the plane quite filled me up, thank you,” said Alice. “Though I noticed you didn’t touch yours, so you must be famished.”

Marian shook her head. “That Twinkie chick, how come she gave you a Golden Key cash card? You don’t get one of those every day with a few quid and your name on an electric bill.”

“I know,” said Alice, “but thank the Lord she did. It’s actually a miracle of Joshua’s supply. I would certainly not wish to use Miss Hastaway’s credit card for this venture, even if I could.”

“She’s probably cancelled it by now anyway,” said Marian. “Were you ever able to contact her?”

“Alas, no. As soon as I had the chance I tried to ring her, but it seems she must have changed her phone number, for the Tuck Inn is no longer listed. Curiouser and curiouser.”

“Not really,” Marian said nonchalantly. “Her husband just died while being associated with a religiously fanatical arsonist. Do the math.”

Alice did so and concluded that Anne’s bereavement and the sudden disappearance of herself and Marian may have contributed to the poor woman’s withdrawal. Alice was tempted to castigate herself, but she clasped the scissors in her pocket and the comfort of Joshua’s inward command to trust.

I am working in Anne’s heart. You have but to follow. Stay with Marian.

“Yes, Lord,” she muttered.

“What?” said Marian, downing a second espresso.

“I was praying. ‘Doing the math,’ as you said, and I think that...”

A public announcement that the next train to Padua was departing in five minutes from platform ten prompted Marian to jump to her feet.

“Platform *ten!*” she exclaimed, and the two of them took off running until four minutes and forty-nine seconds later they breathlessly clambered into the nearest train carriage on the said platform.

“First class?” the ticket inspector inquired. Marian impatiently shook her head.

“This is first class, *signorina.*”

“I am well aware,” she panted in Italian, then turned and spoke to Alice in English. “I’ll toddle on ahead and check if there are any less-occupied compartments. Wait here with my duty-free stuff. No point both of us going on a wild goose chase.”

Shortly, Marian reappeared, and she and Alice hustled through the rattling corridor of the speeding train. Three carriages later they arrived at a compartment occupied by only one passenger, a crestfallen, white-haired man in a wrinkled, black suit who sat with a large anvil case between his worn-down shoes. As the two girls sat down, he acknowledged them with a sad, fleeting smile.

“I suppose we can break open our lunch,” said Alice, who had been carrying the recently purchased picnic ingredients of *formaggio*,* *prosciutto*,* *pagnotta*,* and bubbly water for herself and a bottle of champagne for Marian. Despite Alice’s cheerful observations of Italy’s delightful weather and its beautiful countryside speeding past the train’s windows, the puppet appeared especially put out.

“I am not particularly hungry,” she said snippily. “Have to watch it, you know.”

“Watch what?” Alice asked.

“My figure. Mario will have a *cow* if he sees I’ve put on weight. But I *will* take some champagne.”

Alice exhaled. “Marian,” she said while pouring the marionette a Styrofoam cup of the beverage, “you’ve barely eaten since we left England. It seems hardly wise to forego nutrition. Besides, being a puppet...”

“A marionette.”

“Sorry. But being a marionette,” Alice retorted with what was becoming unsuccessfully suppressed exasperation, “it seems being fashioned out of wood hardly allows you to gain weight.”

“According to *Twig* magazine, they are now discovering that even the most *perfectly* carved marionettes can weight gain if they are not mindful of ingested resins, oils, and waxes that can *seriously* swell the wood.”

“Anyway, I for one feel rather peckish,” said Alice, and, using her keys turned to scissors, divided the food and laid it out on the empty seat in front of them, “at least *I* can savour our purchased victuals.”

Finally, as Alice tucked into the appetising fare, Marian requested “just a taste” of the prosciutto. Alice grinned and handed her a generous sampling, which the puppet voraciously devoured.

“Of course, after such a portion, you most certainly wouldn’t want any more, would you?” Alice slyly suggested.

***formaggio**: a kind of Italian cheese

***prosciutto**: (Italian) ham dried and smoked

***pagnotta**: Italian bread

“*Bene*, maybe I’ll take just a *little* more,” Marian said, and Alice promptly served her an even more generous portion. Alice also offered some to the accompanying passenger who up until then had been silently observing the curious pair with fascination. He declined.

“But if you will excuse a-me,” he said, “and I do not mean to interrupt your a-lunch, but I could not help but notice that your friend is a most exquisitely fashioned puppet.”

“She most certainly is,” said Alice.

“I am not a puppet,” said Marian. “I’m a marionette.”

The man respectfully lowered his head. “That is true, miss. Do accept my apologies. But I happen to a-deal with marionettes.”

“Deal with them?” said Alice.

“Well, I used to make them, but due to arthritis in my hands, now I merely ... er ... *sell* them. I just a-wondered where the young er ... marionette was a-fashioned.”

“Here in Italy,” said Marian. “Mario, my boyfriend also.”

“He is not here?”

“I am on my way to meet him.”

“Oh, my name is Geraldo, by the way,” said the man, and he extended a bony hand. “Geraldo Petto. And yours?”

“Marian.”

“And, of course, your friend is...”

“Her name is Alice.”

“Yes, I know,” the man said, addressing Alice. “I read about you being mixed up with a-white rabbits, caterpillars with hookahs, walruses, mad hatters, and a-march hares, but not with a-puppets!”

“I’m not a puppet,” said Marian. “I am a marionette. Do I *always* have to remind people?”

“I apologise. Although you *do* a-seem familiar,” Geraldo said, scrutinising Marian’s features.

Only Alice, reflecting again on Joshua’s words regarding Marian, noticed the marionette’s perturbed response.

“W-well ... I’ve spent most of my show business career in England. London, actually.”

“Very impressive, *signorina*,” Geraldo continued. “It escapes me, but it has a-nothing to do with a-show business. Besides, Marian is not an Italian name.”

Marian shrugged.

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen. Wh-why?”

“I don’t know. I wonder if I ... a-never mind.”

Marian shrugged again. Geraldo Petto cleared his throat and opened the anvil case between his feet. “Well, let a-me introduce you to some of *my* dear friends.

“This is a-Sergio,” he said, lifting out a small wooden puppet dressed in a white tuxedo, “I’m sure he’d a-love to meet Marian.”

Marian folded her arms and looked out of the window.

“*Buongiorno, signorina,*” said the puppet.

“*Buongiorno,*” said Marian, still with arms folded and looking out of the window.

“Not fashioned from the best of a-wood, I admit,” said Geraldo.

“I would have done a much better job, but he’s a charming a-gentleman just the same.”

“See?” Sergio said to Marian. “We’re a-being made merchandise of.”

“I’m just a-trying to make a living,” said Geraldo.

“*Si,* at our expense. ...”

“Now a-let me introduce you to Loretta,” Geraldo quickly interjected, pulling another puppet out of his case. She sported a short Afro hairstyle and was dressed in a garishly patterned robe. “She appears to be a-made out of ebony, but it’s merely black-stained Chinese pinewood.”

“Hi, y’all,” the puppet said with a smile. “Yah, you’re right, Mister Petto. We may not be made from the best o’ wood (bin listenin’ to the whole conversation ’bout resins and oils and whatnot), but how do you think it makes us feel to hear you say so? You just gives off the vibe that we’s cheap *burattini*.* ‘Made in *China,*’ he says, as if it’s some kinda stigma.”

“Well, it’s not exactly something to be proud of,” said Marian.

“Look,” said Geraldo, “it doesn’t a-matter what class of wood you’re made of, it’s what you a-do with it.”

“Exactly,” said Loretta.

“And we actually *do* have a-hearts,” said Sergio.

“Ridiculous,” Marian retorted.

“No, it’s not. Put a-your hand on my chest.”

Marian did so. “Hmmp. Well, yes, I admit it feels like there’s *something* beating in there. Must be some tawdry, sentimental sales gimmick.”

Sergio smiled and launched into a husky croon.

***burattino:** Italian for a wooden puppet

*Can't you see I love you?
Please don't break-a my heart in two.
That's not hard to do,
'Cos I don't have a wooden heart.
Treat me nice; treat me good.
Treat me like you know you should.
Though I'm made out of wood,
I don't have a wooden heart.*

“I know that song,” Alice merrily remarked. “My grandpa sings it sometimes. It’s ever so cute. And you sing it most awfully well.”

“*Grazie, signorina.* Well, I don’t know what a-my heart is made of, but I know I have one.”

“Big deal,” said Marian.

“Well, girl, don’t seem you even have no *wooden* one,” said Loretta.

“Maybe not, but I couldn’t care less. I get by just fine without one. Why would you need one?”

“Hey, a li’l question I want to put to you, Miss Marian hoity, is when wuz da last time you done made someone happy, huh?”

Marian sat up straight—astonished. “What on earth do you mean, er ... Loretta?”

“What I mean, er ... *Marian*, is when’za last time you made a li’l boy in an orph’nage, or even a li’l girl dyin’ of cancer in a hospital, *smile?*”

Marian snorted and resumed her uninterested gaze out of the window. “I’ve had standing ovations at my shows.”

“Show biz. Pah.”

“Well, Alice has a heart,” said Marian. “Ask her the same question.”

Loretta turned and looked at Alice. Alice blushed.

Oh, Lord. I’ve said so very little about my life at home, and I haven’t made any mention about my missionary life to her. I mean, it’s been so busy and she just hasn’t seemed worth it. ...

“Well, er ... on outreach and CTP, I get to sing and umm ... witness. ...”

“Outreach? CTP?”

Just then, the compartment door slid open.

“These here seats taken?”

The gruff enquiry drew the attention of all to the looming presence of two American soldiers in uniform. The one who spoke

was a gum-chewing superior officer, and his companion was a private of about eighteen years old who appeared to need his assistance. He had a bandage over one eye.

“They are vacant,” said Alice, clearing the lunch items from the seat in front of her.

“Thanks,” said the officer, and guided the younger one to the seat facing Alice. “Okay, kid. Siddown right there.”

Alice gasped and was about to let out a shriek, when she stopped her mouth and falteringly excused herself to use the lavatory.

“Just down the corridor to your right,” Geraldo whispered.

Trembling, Alice shut the toilet door, sat down, and buried her face in her hands.

Oh, Lord, why? Why? If this is really just a non-real life experience, then please help this not to be real. ...



“Unfortunate occurrence,” the officer was saying when Alice returned to the compartment and sat down. Seeing Alice’s eyes were red and her cheeks tearstained, Geraldo discreetly passed her a tissue.

“But we can proudly say the young man suffered for the cause of Iraqi freedom.”

“So he was in a tank a-when it happened?” Sergio piped up.

“Hey, this is cool,” said the officer. “Sittin’ in a train carriage with talkin’ puppets! You a ventriloquist* or somethin’, mister?”

Geraldo shook his head. “But you can still a-go ahead and answer his question.”

“Okay. Well umm, ... it wasn’t a *direct* hit, but the impact of the shell somehow caused the tank to jolt and knock him unconscious. He was the only one to survive.”

“Do you think he’ll ever be normal again?” Marian inquired.

“Remains to be seen,” said the officer. “That’s why we’re tryin’ to get him to our base in Vicenza, where he’ll undergo some tests. There was some mix-up back there in Rome with the military medic vehicles, so we ended up having to take this *kaddam* train. Anyway, as soon as we can establish his identity, we’ll ship him on back home. Memory loss is tricky business, especially when accompanied with coordination difficulties.”

***ventriloquist:** a performer who projects his voice into an object or puppet

“Memory loss, sir?” Alice said and burst into tears again. Geraldo handed her another tissue.

“What’s with you, Alice?” said Marian. “I grant you he’s in sad shape, but do you know this guy or something?”

“Most certainly. I-I know who he is.”

“You *do*, miss?” the officer asked.

“Yes,” said Alice, “his name is Rummy ... er ... Ronald Trucker.”

“Can you verify that?”

“Of course. He’s the son of Miss Betty Trucker, a lady lorry driver who lives in, oh dear ... I’ve forgotten the exact name of the town, but I know it’s in the Useless Status ... I mean...”

The superior officer leaned into Alice’s face. “Now, missy, I know you Europeans may have issues with us Homelanders, but in as grave a situation as this, I see no call for you to be vocalisin’ your resentment.”

“I wasn’t, sir. It just slipped out. I *do* apologise.”

“So you have a base in a-Vicenza?” Sergio asked.

“For sure,” the officer replied with a smirk.

“And you are enlarging it?”

“For sure,” the officer said again with the same smirk.

“What’s the point?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I believe many of us a-wonder why you even have *any* a-base here in Italy, let alone enlarging one. You ought to be a-diminishing it.”

The officer shifted in his seat. “I think it’s understood by most of the civilised world, young ... er ... *man*, that global Homeland Presence is necessary to maintain liberty, peace, democracy, and a world free of terrorism.”

“We can do that on our own soil, mistah,” said Loretta, “wit’ out no help from you.”

“Hey, you sound like a Homelander,” said the officer. “What are you doing echoing anti-U.S. policy?”

“I’m *against*,” said Lauren. “Plain and simple.”

“Against what?”

“Doesn’t matter. When asked if I am for or against, even if I don’t know, I say I am *against*. It’s more acceptable.”

“That’s stupid,” said Marian. “I’m against some things and *for* others. It depends.”

“Whatever the issue, sir,” said Sergio, “we are *against* your country’s presence in mine. What a-right have you to a-swagger all over the world as self-appointed policemen?”

“You the owner of these puppets?” the officer asked Geraldo. Geraldo nodded.

“Then can’t you get them to shut up? Pull a few strings?”

“They have a right to their opinions, sir. In fact, I am a-rather pleased to see they have them. It’s a free world ... *as you said.*”

“Nothing and no one is free,” the officer said with a sneer. “No free lunch, right?”

The officer then turned to Alice. “And what about you, young lady. Are these your friends?”

Alice, having her mind and heart set solely on Ronald Trucker’s predicament, responded with only a blank expression and a nod.

“And you are aligned with their views?”

“What views are those, may I ask, sir?” she answered dazedly.

“That Homeland Presence in their country is unwarranted and unneeded.”

“I am afraid I do not quite understand, sir.”

“The question, Alice,” said Geraldo, “is a-whether U.S. military presence is necessary in civilised countries such as this.”

“Methinks,” Alice began with thoughtful deliberation, “that the Useless Status regards this country and many others, not only as uncivilized but potentially hostile to their very existence.”

At Alice’s reply, the puppets and even the salesman clapped their hands. Gnashing his teeth, the officer again leaned into Alice’s face, this time even closer.

“That is uninformed *treason*, young lady, and if you were residing in the Homeland, I would have had you apprehended.”

“Doubtless,” she replied, wiping the officer’s spittle from her cheek, “and gladly I would have suffered such, if only for the sake of...”

Alice sighed, looked over at Rummy and burst into tears again. Geraldo handed her another tissue. Alice wiped her eyes and directed her following words to the somnolent* young soldier.

“Rummy ... listen, it’s me. *Alice* ... Tumbleweed Diner ... remember? Milkshake...?”

The soldier gave a start and smiled. “Milkshake ... blueberry...”

“Yes,” said Alice. “Blueberry.”

“Does the kid want a blueberry milkshake?” the superior officer bellowed. “Then grab the *kaddam* catering service!”

“I don’t think such a beverage is available on this train,” Marian said coolly.

***somnolent:** sleepy, drowsy

“And *Herbie*,” Alice persisted, peering into Rummy’s dazed eyes, “Herbie Hasseldork.”

Rummy nodded. “Herbie ... yeah ... prayed.”

“He did, Rummy. He *did*, and you did too.”

“Can someone tell me what the hell is goin’ on around here?” the officer demanded.

“Obviously something between Alice and a long-lost love fantasy,” Marian replied, catching her breath as the train slowed to a stop.

“Hey, is this Patelli?”

“Looks a-like it,” said Geraldo, causing Marian to jump up from her seat.

“Nice to make your acquaintance,” Marian said to the remaining passengers.

“Our pleasure,” returned the salesman, and the two puppets concurred with reserved nods and smiles.

“You coming, Alice?” Marian asked. Alice responded with a plea for a paper and pen, and Geraldo produced both from his jacket pocket. Alice scribbled her name and an email address, and handed the memo pad leaf to Rummy, who—staring into space—smiled and numbly stuffed it into his breast pocket.

To her delight, he mumbled, “Thank you, Alice,” as she and Marian stepped off the train.

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THE PANTOMIME HORSE

A refreshing Mediterranean breeze stirred the surrounding wheat fields and the few fleecy clouds in the late afternoon sky as Alice and Marian encumbered with her duty-free purchases, climbed the slight hillock from Patelli’s train station.

Presently, they arrived at a fence overlooking a patchwork of broad meadows from where they could see the colourful tents and trailers of the distant circus. Hearts beating with anticipation, they clambered over a nearby stile and took a well-trodden dirt path flanked by cherry trees that wended its way through the meadow.

“So, do you think you’ll actually get *married* to Mario?” Alice glumly asked, still preoccupied with the events on the train regarding Rummy. “If we find him, that is.”

“Depends,” said Marian. “If so, I would certainly not want to be a doormat.”

“A doormat?”

“You know, be subordinate. I’m my own boss. I could never be in submission to anyone. Especially a man. Right?”

“Hmmm,” said Alice. “I don’t know if, as yet, I have any feelings on the matter.”

“Hey, is that a horse?” Marian asked, seeing a figure approaching them from about fifty yards up ahead.

“A rather odd gallop, if so,” Alice replied. “Maybe it’s lame.”

“It’s clearly a pantomime horse,” said Marian, as the figure clumsily bounded more clearly into view.

Deciding to lighten up and trust the Lord, Alice managed a smile. “Brandon had to be a part of one of those in a Christmas play—except it was supposed to be a donkey. I played Mary and he was the part that I rode on.”

Shortly, the “horse,” evidently exhausted, stumbled to a halt in front of them.

“Greetings,” said Alice.

“Greetings,” a woman said pantingly through its large head fashioned from heavyweight brown felt and stuffed with straw, stalks of which were protruding through its eye sockets. “Is the Patelli train station up ahead?”

“Just over the fence and down the hill, ma’am.”

“Splendid, child—that will be much easier. This costume is unbearably hot. And do you know the schedule for the next train to Rome?”

“There is a timetable on the platform,” said Marian. “But why? Are you planning on taking one?”

“Yes. We’re *escaping*.”

“Escaping from what?”

“From *whom*, more likely. Baldo Striffolino, the sexist, slave-driving owner of Striffolino’s Travelling Circus.”

“Were you in the show?”

“Of course. I ... *we* were billed as ‘Liberty, the Pantomime Horse.’”

“Wow! Actually, we are going to the circus to inquire after a marionette called Mario. Is he performing with you?”

“No idea. My first concern is my ... er ... *our* performance. Puppets come and go.”

“Excuse me saying so, miss ... er...,” said Alice.

“*Mrs. Liberty Gelding.*”*

***gelding**: a castrated horse or other animal

“But I was wondering if you and...” Alice paused and quizzically perused the “horse’s” hindquarters.

“That’s Joe Gelding in there,” the woman said. “My miserable excuse for a husband.”

“Greetings, Mr. Gelding,” said Alice.

“Mmmph, mmmph.” The muffled, indecipherable response was emitted from under the costume’s drapes. The woman continued.

“Me and Joe got together many years ago playing a pantomime *steed* in a fairground until we got snapped up by Striffolino. Anyway, little girl, what were you wondering?”

“Pardon my suggesting this, Mrs. Gelding, but would it not be easier if you divided up now and carried the costume? You could move faster and it would be ever so much cooler.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, child. Joe and I have an agreement from the beginning of our relationship that we only doff it when we eat or sleep.”

“So you do everything *else* together wearing that horse costume?” Marian asked.

“*Steed* costume, sweetheart. I believe I speak for my husband also when I say that the word ‘horse’ is far too sexist. Anyway, to answer your question, yes, we do. As I said, we agreed at the beginning of our relationship.”

“But do you ever like, swap roles?”

“Roles?”

Marian giggled, drawing an askance look from Alice. “Well, like you take a turn being the *back end* sometimes!”

“At the beginning of our relationship, dear, Joe and I agreed that I would take the stand-up, speaking role, and he would take the more ... er ... *supportive* role. I believe I speak for my husband also when I say that it would never do for me to bear the weight of the rider, and the consequent striking of the hindquarters in the event that we should be encouraged to move faster.”

“Sounds horribly unfair,” said Marian. “To poor Joe, that is.”

“It must take an amazing amount of coordination to gallop together,” Alice quickly said.

“We don’t gallop,” said Mrs. Gelding. “We *galumph*.”

“Galumph?”

“What, child? You of all people should know what *galumphing* is.”

Alice shook her head. “I have not the foggiest idea, ma’am.”

“I am referring to an old book about you where the word is coined in a poem of quaint whimsy called “Jabberwocky.” It describes an

ungainly combination of running, skipping, and galloping in the manner of a two-legged human being.”

“I can see that, ma’am,” said Alice. “It’s a word that sounds like what it is. No other word would ever do.”

“Exactly.”

Evidently bored, Marian exhaled and shuffled her feet.

“I suppose we should introduce ourselves, Mrs. Gelding,” said Alice. “This is my friend, Marian. ...”

“A most *charming* puppet,” the woman said and Marian, with predictable curtness, stated she was a marionette.

Alice quickly began to introduce herself. “And I’m...”

“*Alice*,” said Mrs. Gelding. “I knew it as soon as I laid eyes on you. I feigned nonchalance as it doesn’t do to *gush* when one famous personality meets another. Well, we must be getting along. I believe I speak for my husband also when I say that it has been a pleasure meeting you.”

“A pleasure meeting you too, ma’am,” Alice said with a curtsy. “And ... er—” she peered at the “horse’s” hindquarters again, wishing she could give it a reassuring pat on the back—“Mr. Gelding, too, of course.”

“Mmmph, mmmph,” was the response.

“Can I offer you both a ride anywhere?” Mrs. Gelding inquired.

“Oh, thank you, ma’am,” said Alice, “but we would be much too heavy a weight on your husband’s back.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, child. We can handle it.”

“Besides that, ma’am, you really ought to be hastening your *escape*,” said Alice.

“What exactly are you guys going to do?” Marian asked the woman.

“Strike out on our own in the name of *equality*,” she announced. “From now on we will be billed as ‘Liberty, the Pantomime *Mare*.’”

“You know,” Marian whispered to Alice as the odd pair bounded out of view, “after seeing that woman’s disgusting attitude towards her husband, I take it all back.”

“Take what all back?”

“About not being subordinate. If Mario wants to marry me, I’ll be his doormat, his dishrag—even his *geisha*. I hope to goodness that he’s not as wimpy as poor Joe.”

“I do suppose,” Alice said distantly, wishing she would have remembered to offer Mrs. Gelding, and especially “poor Joe,” an invitation to Joshua’s wedding feast.



The sun had set and circus hands were lighting lamps when Alice and Marian expectantly entered the grounds of the circus, walking past cosily lit caravans and cages containing lions, tigers, bears, elephants, and even penguins. Except for one curious, dark-skinned boy wearing a turban who followed them from a distance (apparently an elephant rider), no one acknowledged their presence.

Alice decided to ask “Mario, is with you? A puppet?”

“A marionette,” said Marian.

The boy shook his head.

“No speak a-much English,” he said, and Marian went on to explain their quest in Italian.

Marian translated to Alice once the boy had finished speaking. “He says there have been many rumours. He’s unsure. He said to check with the pretty blonde marionette in the tent over there.”

“Her name?”

“He forgets—some Irish name. But says she’s playing Goldilocks in a scenario with porridge, chairs, beds, and three real live bears.”

The pair thanked the boy and made their way over to the tent. Lifting the flap, they peered in and saw, sitting despondently among many seemingly lifeless puppets, one with long, wavy reddish-blond hair and dressed similar to Alice herself in a white, pinafore dress over a royal-blue skirt and blouse. Beside her lay a small lute.

“We came to find Mario,” Marian said bluntly.

The puppet shook its head and glanced at her with cloudy, red-rimmed eyes before returning her gaze to the floor. “I do not wish to discuss it.”

“Discuss what?”

“The whole dreadfully absurd affair. ... Look, ye might as well come in and make yerselves comfortable. Although I daresay there is little ’ere with which to do so.”

The two companions entered and squatted on the sawdust floor. The puppet picked up the lute, strummed a little, and began singing in a plaintive hiccoughing wail.

*Gone,
And I’m still a-grievin’.*

“What or who’s gone?” said Marian.

“Sssh,” said Alice. “Let her finish her song.”

*Gone,
I couldn't believe you'd be a-leavin'.
Gone,
My life's a tuneless song.
The nights are cold and long.
What's the use in a-carryin' on?
Now it's gone,
Now it's gone.*

“What’s gone?” Marian insisted.

“What we had together,” the puppet said with her eyes still fixed on the floor as she laid aside the lute.

“Are you talking about Mario? Is that who that song’s about?”

“Oh, do be discreet, Marian,” said Alice. “Anyway, miss, you sing most beautifully. Reminds me of the girl that Brandon really likes who sings in the Loganberries.”

“Look,” said the puppet, “I wish I could be offerin’ ye something. A drink or a morsel to eat perhaps, but Baldo sees no reason to feed us, being puppets.”

“*Marionettes*,” said Marian. “It’s good to remember that. Let’s assert ourselves.”

Despite her sorrow, the puppet giggled. “Little difference in most people’s book. But about Mario ... why do you ask?”

“Umm ... Marian here,” Alice began, “she’s looking for him. They were ... she was ... you know...”

“Join the club,” said the puppet. “I was the latest in his long line of conquests.”

“What!” Marian exclaimed. “There were others?”

“Apparently, especially the one he left this here circus to find. The love of his life,’ he said. By the way, what’s your name?”

“Marian.”

“And you...?” The puppet finally lifted her head, stopped, and let out a gasp. “Begorrah! Never thought I’d see the day!”

The puppet jumped to her feet, curtsied, bowed, and introduced herself as Ailish.*

“I u-understand how it could be a mite disconcerting for you, Alice,” she said, “b-but I chose the Celtic version of your name after me maker, a merchant named Mr. Petto, sold me to this circus.”

***Ailish:** Irish version of the Norman name Alice or Alicia

“Hey, we just met him,” said Marian.

“It disconcerts me in no way,” said Alice, “but as has been common in my, umm ... experiences, many like you have known my name and who I am.”

“Of course,” said Ailish. “And they, like me, strive to follow your example.”

Alice grimaced. “Goodness, no.”

“My dream actually is to one day play you collecting the cards. Fat chance.”

“Not really. All things are possible to them who believe.”

“Of course,” the puppet continued. “Anyway, you were and always have been me ‘mentor,’ if you like. Cheerin’ people up, great or small. That’s why, as much as I loathe some of the requirements, I’m loathe to give up the circus, because I bring hope and happiness into people’s lives. Even if I have to play Goldilocks! I’m no royalty, not by a long shot, but it’s like a crown o’ responsibility, ’cos they look up to me so much. Know what I mean?”

Alice nodded uncomfortably, convicted by the puppet’s earnest gaze.

“So,” Marian said with a sharp raise of her voice, “where’s Mario?”

“He escaped. He wanted me to go with him, but I felt it right out o’ place to desert the people who depend on me.”

“That’s fine for you, but where’s he gone?”

“He’d heard somethin’ about the love of his life being a disco dancer in Dublin, Ireland. Me home, by the way.”

“What?” Marian exclaimed in horror. “He thought that I... I mean, *his girlfriend*, was a disco dancer?”

“Aye. And he planned on doing burlesque* to make ends meet.”

“Well, I never...,” said Marian.

“Sssh,” said Ailish upon hearing a heavy tramping of feet and a rustle outside. A large hand drew the tent flap aside and Ailish, aghast, sank into the sawdust. Alice and Marian turned and gasped at a hulk of a man wearing colourful Gypsy-like clothing and big boots towering over them with legs astride and arms folded.

***burlesque:** a humorous and provocative stage show featuring slapstick humour, comic skits, and bawdy songs

ALICE CRACKS THE WHIP

I heard strange a-voices, Ailish.”

“I-I’m sorry Signore Striffolino, they were just paying a visit. M-making enquiries.”

“Enquiries, huh?”

The man bent down, and leaning in their faces, scrutinised Alice in particular. He was unshaven and wore a heavy handlebar moustache and a large gold earring. He grinned menacingly, and in so doing, Alice smelled liquor on his breath and noticed he had many gold teeth. As terrifying as he was, she tried to stifle a giggle. She couldn’t help but amusingly reflect that Brandon would have considered him the stereotype epitome of a Gypsy villain in some cartoon movie.

“Stereotype-a?” he suddenly bellowed. “Me?”

Alice, shocked, shook her head and muttered something unintelligible. The man grabbed her collar.

“You *lie*, little princess. You consider me a cheap a-cartoon a-villain.”

“I n-never said anything of the s-sort, sir.”

“Of course you didn’t! You *thought* it. Stand up!”

Trembling, Alice did so. The giant lurched a little, and suddenly noticing Marian, his face broke into a leer. He seized her. She screamed and Striffolino slapped her face.

“Ah, you could a-make a fine improvement and replacement for our one that got away.”

“Th-the one that got away?”

“Mario the marionette. You’re far prettier too. Hmmm ... gimme some a-time and I’ll think about a-what I can do with you. But ahh...”

Striffolino grabbed Alice by the arm. “And *you* ... I have just the perfect a-job for a-you.”

“Job?” said Alice. “But we are not staying here. We just came to...”

“You were trespassing. By rights I could have...”

“Look sir, we apologise. We had no idea.”

Baldo sat down on the sawdust and tugged at his moustache. “I tell you a-what, my pretty young thing, I will say or do nothing more about it if you perform your duties as you should.”

“*Duties?*” said Marian. “You’re talking as if we, like, *belong* to you.”

Baldo nodded. “As from this moment, you do.”

“No way,” said Marian despite Alice’s eye contact signalling caution. “I’m out of here.”

Baldo called for his guards and two surly, burly bruisers dressed similar to him appeared at the tent door. After berating them for having failed to spot the two intruders, he ordered them to throw Marian into the empty peacock cage and afterwards bring him a flagon of Chianti.

“But Mr. Striffolino,” Alice exclaimed over Marian’s cries of resistance, “you have no right!”

“No right? Of course I don’t. But I have a-*left*.”

He waved a fist in Alice’s face. “A left a-hook-a that can crush all opposition from the likes of you!”

“But what are you going to do with Marian?”

“Nothing, right now. You’ll be a-barter for each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s talk business, Miss Alice.”

He knows my name! But what is the use in telling him I’m...?

“I know you’re not,” Baldo said with a wide grin. “You’re Alice Godley of number seven, Birdwood Lane, Winsley Barnes.”

Alice nodded, bewildered.

“So we can a-proceed from there, right?”

“I suppose,” said Alice.

“*Bene*, we can do away with preliminaries. I have a job for you, young lady, that could a-save the circus. I know it.”

“I already have a job,” said Alice. “At least in the other...”

“Right now you have a job right here in this a-realm whether you like it or not-a.”

Striffolino grinned again, happy that his guards had returned with a flagon of cheap Chianti. He placed it to his lips and guzzled. Then, after wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he burped. Alice strove to control her thoughts.

He’s actually rather charming, she managed to think.

Baldo’s eyes widened and he beamed. “Why, glad you a-think so.”

Alice gulped and strove even harder to keep her mind blank.

“But I think you will do a-splendid.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Your little puppet friend is a-sawdust for the circus floor. *Come*.”

Flanked by his guards and swinging his flagon, Baldo led Alice through the sleeping circus grounds to a large cage on wheels.

“*There*. Your job.”

Alice gasped. Baldo took a swig of his flagon and grinned.

“It was our show stopper and biggest crowd-a draw, but those involved ran away or were unfortunately...”

Alice was tempted to scream, and would have fainted if one of Baldo’s guards had not intercepted her swoon by catching her in his arms.

At Baldo’s instruction, the guards unlocked the cage and shoved Alice inside.

“Climb up into the top of that bunk,” said Baldo. “Quickly, before he wakes up.”

Dazed, Alice clambered up the iron stepladder to the rusty bunk bed overlooking a sleeping lion. Speechless, she lay down upon the straw-filled mattress and gazed insensibly at Baldo Striffolino and his guards who were peering into the cage from outside.

“We’ll leave-a you two to become acquainted!” Baldo jeered and he and his bodyguards stumbled off into the night.

A lion trainer? Oh, Joshua, please ... if this is for the sake of the story and the readers ... then fine. But like ... I mean, I’ve never ... Look, this is like, majorly horrible.

Although Alice was tired, the presence of a sleeping lion at her feet and the strains of Gypsy-flavoured, techno music wafting from a distant tent made it impossible for her to fall asleep. Baldo Striffolino was apparently throwing a party, so Alice resigned the night to sleeplessness. After about an hour, however, she started to drift in and out of slumber, and at one point of wakefulness, she heard the lion stir. He looked up at Alice and their eyes met. She was terrified.

To her astonishment, the lion let out a rumbling chuckle. Alice pinched herself and rubbed her eyes to make sure she was not experiencing a dream within a dream.

“Calm down, honey,” the lion growled. He sounded familiar to Alice. “The last thing I would ever want to do is harm you.”

“That is most assuring, er ... sir. I would ever so not like, want to be your next breakfast. ...”

“Rest assured you won’t. So you are to be my tamer?”

“I do suppose.”

“Very well. I hope I like you, otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?”

“I’ll make it *scary* for you.”

“Oh dear,” said Alice. “I’ll do my very best.”

“I am joking, actually,” said the lion. “Like you, I am from another dimension. The future to be exact ... *guess*.”

“Heaven?”

The lion nodded its large, shaggy head and smiled. “The Millennium.”

“I see,” said Alice. “That’s when you won’t be eating ... I mean ... you know—*lambs* or anything.”

“No. But while I’m doing this flaming job, I have to pretend that I’m ferocious, carnivorous, and all of that stuff. Become all things to all men ... and women, of course. But I already know I like you, so you have nothing to fear.”

“That’s encouraging to know,” said Alice.

“But you *do* have to tame me.”

“*Tame* you? So that means you are like, wild?”

“Not really. I roar when I’m mad, especially at all this flaming folly. I’m sick of it actually.”

“Sick of what?”

“The circus of this flaming world and its vanity. Problem is, I tend to scare the livin’ daylights out of every poor little thing who is assigned to be my ‘tamer.’”

“I am so sorry, sir,” said Alice.

“But”—the lion paused, and Alice detected wistfulness in the beast’s eyes—“one such tamer was not so intimidated. ...”

Although she wanted to ask who it was, Alice waited, saying nothing.

“Margot,” the lion finally said. “Beautiful little thing. A ballet dancer, actually. Anyway, she had me eating out of the palm of her hand.”

“That’s ... er ... sweet,” said Alice. “Whatever happened to her?”

“She went on to a higher calling. She’s royalty.”

“Margot?” Alice gasped and put her hand to her mouth. “Queen Margot? You mean? Oh, my goodness! The Queen of Hearts.”

“Most certainly, she was the queen of mine,” said the lion.

Wistfulness returned to the beast’s eyes as he continued. “She would lead me down the street by a rope, so proudly. No one would dare harm her. ...”

“And where is she now?”

“Attending to her queenly duties, of course! Whatever else?”

“Oh ... er yes, of course, sir.” Alice felt a little fearful, it seemed the lion was becoming angry, or at the very least impatient.

“Don’t you read your old MLs?”

“Y-yes, sir. Well, a lot of them in like illustrated form. ...”

“Pictures.”

“Y-yes. But there’s sufficient text to get the...”

To Alice’s relief, the lion chuckled again. “That’s good. I was always an advocate of making many words few and saying it with pictures. You know, on a different note, it does feel rather unusual to be visiting you in the body of a lion.”

By now, the beast’s identity had dawned on Alice, and she timorously broached her discovery with leading questions.

“So ... what is your name, sir?”

“Papa, at least for you kids.”

“Papa Lion?”

“What do you think? Papa Tiger ... paper tiger?”

“N-no, it could have been Papa Furry for all I know. Oh dear, this is ever so confusing.”

The lion stretched himself and yawned. “She checked my teeth, you know.”

“Umm ... Margot?”

“Who else? It’s a very intimate thing to have someone check your teeth—you don’t just have *anyone* do it.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Alice. “Only a dentist ever checks mine. And it’s dreadfully embarrassing ... him scraping out all that smelly gunk and stuff.”

“Amen, amen,” Papa Lion said sadly, and Alice thought it better to not just talk about herself.

“S ... so, do you miss Margot, sir?”

“I do, but we have a special communication even to this day. Anyway, tell me about yourself. Might as well do something while that flaming racket is going on.”

Alice sat up and introduced herself.

“Alice ... of course, I know. I’m proud of you.”

“Me ... er ... sir?” (Alice had some difficulty deciding how to address a lion, especially knowing who he was.)

“Yes, and all you little Princess Alices who are taking up your crowns of destiny.”

“Wh-why, thank you, sir. That is most encouraging.”

“Ah, but I still have a heart for my own dear little Alice. ...” Papa Lion paused and began to weep. Moved with pity, Alice clambered down from the bunk and squatted in front of him. Not quite knowing what to do, she gingerly patted and stroked his nose.

“Your ‘dear little Alice,’ sir?”

“Yes. Poor little thing ... after getting involved with that evil magician,* she cast off her crown and turned against me. So sad ... so sad ... poor little thing. ...”

Papa Lion’s tears were now flowing so copiously* that Alice looked around for something to wipe them with. Seeing nothing, she used a corner of her pinafore.

“She’s going to be so ashamed when she arrives here, do you understand what I mean?”

“I-I think so, sir. But that Magic Garden story did have a happy ending, and Truco slunk away.”

“Truco? That was his name?”

“Er ... well, at least in these adventures, I mean. ...”

Papa Lion yawned and closed his eyes. “Yes, yes, yes. ... Anyway, it won’t be long, now.”

“Nevertheless, I’ll be sure to include her in my intercessory prayer vigils, sir.”

“Good, good. But please tell me about yourself, Alice.”

At his behest, Alice related the events of the past week along with an explanation of her and Marian’s quest to find Mario, and of course, Joshua’s commission. Papa Lion made no comment, and presently Alice heard him snoring and she clambered back up into the iron bunk where she lay down, prayed and dozed off, the distant carousing having died down.

They were both woken early the next morning with the rattle of the cage door opening and one of Baldo Striffolino’s young hands tossing the lion a few meaty bones and Alice a hefty, leather bullwhip

“He told me to give you this. You’ll need it, at least for show if nothing else.”

“Just gotta learn how to *crack* the flaming thing,” Papa Lion mumbled once the boy had gone. “Don’t worry, I’ll play along, even if it means jumping through a flaming hoop!”

“Oh, I do not think it would go that far,” said Alice, “at least not with the flames.”

In accordance with her instructions, Alice, cracking the whip and holding out a hoop, spent that morning rehearsing for the late afternoon, lion-taming show, in which she was billed as the “Alice, the Return of the Lion Trainer.”

*See “Alice and the Magic Garden,” ML #290.

***copious:** large in quantity or number; abundant; plentiful

Because Papa Lion was remarkably compliant, Alice, who found herself in the learning seat for the occasion, had no qualms about taking such an unusual role, even if it was at such short notice. Her afternoon act, with Papa Lion growling and snarling and leaping through the hoop at the crack of Alice's whip, was a resounding success, garnering a standing ovation and press coverage that gave glowing reviews.

"However," Papa Lion whispered as he and Alice prepared for the following evening's show, "I have a plan."

"A plan?"

"A plan to expedite your and Marian's escape in order to find ... what is his name?"

"Mario."

"Precisely. I fell asleep during your monologue the other night, forgive me, but I caught your drift."

"So what is the plan?" Alice asked.

"Leave a cage door open," said Papa Lion. "The one surrounding the ring."

Alice looked furtively about her as they spoke. "Very well, sir. The cage door—*open*."

Papa Lion nodded, and basking in the spotlight and applause, padded regally out into the ring. News had evidently spread that this odd "Alice" personage had so subdued this ferocious beast to the point that he was as putty in her hands.

And so he appeared to be. As though choreographed to every crack of Alice's bullwhip and sharply whispered command, he performed his routine with remarkable aplomb.

Suddenly, however, while the astounded spectators stamped and applauded, Papa Lion bounded through the cage door and towards the audience, whose ovation quickly turned into horrified screams and the flimsy wooden bleachers creaked and quaked as the panic-stricken spectators scrambled over one another for the exit.

With teeth bared, Papa Lion landed at the feet of Baldo Strifolino and his entourage of adoring women.

"Release them!" Papa Lion roared.

"R-release wh-who?" Strifolino inquired, he along with his companions sitting bolt upright in terror.

"Alice and the marionette."

"W-we have not yet a-come to an..."

"I said *now!*"

Baldo snapped his fingers at the guards and they were immediately at his side.

“Let them go,” he whispered, not wishing to draw more attention from any of the audience that had not already dispersed.

“*Who, signore?*”

“Alice and the puppet.”

“Alice is right here, sir. How do we release her?”

“Just a-get her puppet a-friend out of the cage we once a-used for the a-peacocks.”

“*Certo, signore.*”

Bustle and clamour was growing outside for it seemed that reporters and police had gathered in light of the news about a circus lion being on the loose.

“Lord, please help Marian to get here quickly,” Alice whispered.

Her prayer had no sooner left her lips, than Striffolino’s henchmen warily entered the tent escorting the bewildered puppet. Upon seeing Alice, Marian broke into a smile that quickly faded at the sight of a lion growling and prowling around the ring.

“Okay, Alice honey, climb onto my back,” Papa Lion commanded as he surveyed the almost empty tent. With impressive confidence, no doubt built up by her crash course in lion training, Alice did so.

“Come,” she said to Marian. “Climb aboard. I have a feeling this is going to be a rather surprising ride.”

“B-but he’s okay?” Marian asked.

“*Okay, young ... er ... lady?*” Papa Lion roared. “I’m *more* than okay.”

“He’s just adorable,” said Alice.

Trembling, Marian climbed onto Papa Lion’s back and held onto Alice’s waist.

“Have no fear,” Papa Lion said with a twinkle in his eye. “I have absolutely no taste for wood. Ever seen a lion gnawing on trees in the savannah?”

“I ... s-suppose not,” said Marian, clutching tighter to Alice but managing a chuckle. “You’d upset the EPA* if you did.”

At Marian’s wry remark, Papa Lion laughed and took off through the entrance of the tent, and from there, before the astonished crowd of police, reporters, and onlookers, leapt into the air.

“Pigs might fly,” Marian said in astonishment as she and Alice sailed through the clear night sky astride Papa Lion’s back. “But *lions?*”

***EPA:** Environmental Protection Agency

“All things are possible,” said Alice, who although she did recall flying in her experience with the cards, was not a little surprised herself. “Especially in this realm.”

“Hold on tight to my fur,” said Papa Lion.

“Where are you taking us?” Marian asked.

“To Rome Airport, of course.”

“But why?”

“Have faith, my little wooden one. To catch a plane to Ireland, am I right?”

“I do suppose,” said Alice.

“How did you know?” Marian asked Papa Lion.

“Extrasensory, prophetic perception, my little wooden one.”

“Know something?” said Marian. “I take exception at being called...”

“Sssh,” said Alice.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, Alice,” said Papa Lion. “Much like you, your puppet friend...”

“I’m a marionette.”

“Your marionette friend has spitzerinktum. I like that. Not afraid to speak some of her mind. Only a fool utters *all* of it, as you well know.”

“I do, sir,” said Alice. “Proverbs twenty-nine eleven, ‘A fool speaks all his mind; but a wise one keeps it in until afterwards.’”

“Very good, young lady!”

“Daddy has drilled me with the book of Proverbs since I was but a child.”

“Good for him. A manual for kings—and queens—written by the best. Solomon ruled well, you know, for many years, but alas, he was human like all of us. ... Well, I can’t speak for myself at the moment, dashing around in a lion’s body.”

Alice giggled. “That’s okay, sir. Daddy says that when he was a child he was convinced that you were actually a lion.”

“What on earth are you both talking about?” Marian asked.

Alice mumbled something in reply, inaudible to the authors of this story.

“Looks as though you have some educating to do, Alice,” said Papa Lion. “Marian, like many other rulers, would do well today to follow King Solomon’s rules for rulers. ...”

“Rulers?” said Alice. “Marian...?”

“Hey, isn’t that Rome down there?” Marian exclaimed.

“That it is, my dear,” said Papa Lion. “In a few minutes we’ll be at the airport. In order to avoid airport surveillance, which is mighty strong, I will drop you in the knoll some distance away. From there you will have to walk or even take a taxi.”

“But, sir,” said Alice, “can you not fly us all the way to Ireland? This is ever so much fun.”

Papa Lion shook his head. “I, like both of you, have a responsibility I cannot shirk. My present ‘assignment,’ if you like, is dear Ailish. For now, she is to be my tamer for Baldo Striffolino. A puppet and a lion—a sure-fire hit!”

“If I may ask, isn’t that a little, umm ... *different* for you to be involved in as a spirit helper, sir?” Alice inquired.

“I never know what I am going to be called on to do these days,” Papa Lion replied. “It sure tests my flexibility! Only God knows what Ailish’s destiny is to be. Most likely similar to yours and Marian’s.”

Presently they touched down on a soft grassy knoll a few yards off from a small coppice.*

“You won’t be able to hail a taxi from here,” Papa Lion said softly. “So you should make your way on foot. May God be with you as you take the plane to Dublin, in Joshua’s name, amen.”

“Thank you ever so much ... er ... sir,” Alice said, still unsure of how to address him as she planted a kiss on his mane.

“Thanks, Mr. Lion,” said Marian, and hesitantly did the same. “Much appreciate getting to know you. Seems you and Alice are well acquainted—maybe she can fill in the blanks.”

“She most certainly could, even with one of the *12 Foundation Stones* classes.”

“I’m most *dreadfully* sorry, sir,” said Alice. “This situation has been rather...”

“Don’t worry, honey, the time will come. And so, I must take my leave. Until we meet again, God be with you.”

And having bidden them farewell, Papa Lion took off into the sky, leaving the two companions—especially Marian—shaking their heads in astonishment.

“Did that really happen?” Marian asked as they started towards distant lights of Fiumicino Airport.

“In this realm, it’s rather commonplace,” said Alice, adopting nonchalance.

“Really? Could have fooled me. Lions talking and flying?”

***coppice:** a thicket, grove, or growth of small trees

“I suppose it *can* happen,” said Alice, reconsidering the puppet’s reaction and her own condescending air. “I mean, to me for instance, the very idea of a ... marionette walking and talking is, quite frankly, *absurd*.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. It’s unheard of in the real world.”

“We’ve gone over this before, Alice,” said Marian. “You just don’t consider me and my world as *real*.”

“I do in many ways, Marian. Yet, as I have told you, how I do wish it to be so. Quite honestly, I am at a strait betwixt two. I will surely miss you and all the friends I have met and made in it. Oh, do promise me that you will visit me in *my* world.”

Marian looked bewildered, and just as she promised the same, she and Alice found themselves amidst taxis, bustling passengers, and rolling luggage outside the airport’s arrivals entrance.

As they stepped inside, Alice clutched her scissors and claimed the keys of guidance.

“Here ye go! Free tickets to Dublin, courtesy of Emerald Irelines!”

“Twinkie!” Alice exclaimed at seeing the hostess trotting towards them, dressed in a green, mini-skirted, two-piece suit decorated with white shamrock patterns. “So you work for this airline also?”

“I work for whate’er airline is important to your quest o’ the moment.”

“I see,” Alice said reflectively. “Air Rhombus to Mayhem ... London to the Useless Status ... England to Italy. ... Would you by any chance be an angel, ma’am? You know, like Grandpa saw in the ‘Registration or Scatteration’ dream?”

“Be sure to have ye boarding passes ready, and fasten your seatbelts,” Twinkie replied with a wink before disappearing into the swarm of check-in passengers.

To be continued...



Issue 249—AM

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale in Eight A.C.T.S.



Act Six

The story so far: Maneuvering through the topsy-turvy world of an Italian circus, Alice is called on to display lion taming skills to the most surprising of lions, who helps her escape imposed indenture by the circus master. Meanwhile, her search for Marian's erstwhile boyfriend takes them to Ireland.

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THE RAINBOW TROUT

Oh no, it's raining!" exclaimed Marian.

In almost mischievous contradiction to Italy's sunny weather, Ireland had greeted Alice and Marian with grey skies and showers.

"For me that most certainly poses a problem," said Alice. "But for you?"

"It means I'll get wet."

"Really? Whatever happened to the 'wet look'?"

"I was just looking at the latest issue of *Twig* magazine in the airport bookshop, and they say that studies have now shown that undue exposure of H₂O to the bodies of marionettes could possibly seriously swell the wood fibre and make them appear—if not actually *be*—overweight. Even if they have been lacquered with the best varnish, which of course I have, it is feared that the results could be catastrophic. Apparently, the damage could be irreversible even with the use of the best wood-drying facilities."

"But that could be just a scare story," said Alice.

"Ah," said Marian, "they had actual *digitally simulated* pictures of the possible effects of swollen wood grain. Horrific. I had to close the magazine and stuff it back in the rack."

"An excellent rule of thumb to follow when under such circumstances," said Alice. "Anyway, we must needs hail a taxi."

Marian was concerned that the damp would swell her wood and that she would appear overweight. Alice was concerned that she would catch a cold. Both were eager to find Mario.

"He's doing—what did that Ailish puppet say?" Marian asked while they sheltered from the drizzle in the airport's taxi stand.

"Burlesque?" said Alice.

"Hardly hip," said Marian, flipping through a small entertainment guide. "But I suppose we should check this for a 'Mario,' if he's still going by that name. ..."

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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Her face fell, and her finger did the same on a page. "Oh, God! ... That's *him*."

Alice looked over Marian's shoulder at a photo of a slick, handsome puppet wearing only a tuxedo top.

"Sordid," said Marian. "Look at this blurb. Truth unvarnished! Mario Burratino in full Marionty at the Rainbow Trout Tavern in Dublin.' How low can you go? Oh *God*, I can't *believe* this."

"You say 'oh, my God,' and so on, ever such a lot," said Alice.

"Yah, so?"

"Are you addressing Him?"

Marian shrugged. "Means nothing. Well, never really thought about it, actually. ... Why?"

"I just wondered. ..."

"Anyway, the cover charge seems quite steep, so maybe at least it's not just any old dive," said Marian. "But, hey, you've got your Cupie-doll hostess friend's Golden Key cash card."

Alice grinned. "Should more than adequately cover any necessary expense."

"His show is on in about an hour," said Marian.

Presently, the two girls took a taxi and about forty-five minutes later were standing in the rain outside the Rainbow Trout.

Besides the possibility of coming down with another chill (although she did hope that such an occurrence would land her back in a bed in Joshua's manor), Alice was concerned that she would be demanded an ID. It was Saturday night, however, and the pub was crowded. Therefore, she, silently praying and clutching the scissors in her pinafore pocket, entered with no difficulty and in time to hear a drum roll and a brassy synthesised introduction to, "*Unvarnished truth! Full Marionty.*"

Alice and Marian settled down at a small, corner table kindly vacated for them by an elderly couple who considered the upcoming act not quite according to their taste. Although Marian secretly agreed with them but did not want to be associated with their viewpoint, she dismissed their overt declaration as being stuffy. Five minutes into Mario's display however, she herself was sinking her head into her hands and Alice was trying to console her with the reasoning that, although it wasn't her personal preferred choice of entertainment either, Mario was at least doing it to cheer people up.

"To fatten up his wallet, more like it!" Marian retorted. "Oh, I'm so ashamed."

"His show is almost over," Alice said after suffering about ten minutes of Marian's simmering silence. "Don't you wish to at least go up to the stage and greet him? After all, isn't that what we've come all this way for?"

"To see my boyfriend disgrace himself in such a manner? This was not the sort of thing that was encouraged in my upbringing."

"And what upbringing was that?" Alice inquired.

“It’s not important,” said Marian.

“Anyway,” said Alice, “I’m going to introduce myself and tell him you are here.”

Alice wended her way through the jostling, chattering crowd to the stage. Mario, in a silk robe, with a towel around his neck, had just finished signing autographs for a giggling bevy of middle-aged females, and was about to disappear down the backstage steps when Alice called to him. He appeared to be put out until he turned and, unsurprisingly to Alice, seemed to recognise her.

“It’s a-been a long time, *bambola*,”* he said, extending his hand. “You’re looking just *gorgeous*.”

“Why, th-thank you.”

“Now I see what I’ve been a-missing. Sometimes it takes a-stepping back from the picture.”

“T-to be sure,” said Alice. “But I’m *not* sure about what you...”

“So, you wear a-the Goldilocks outfit full time now?”

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t the foggiest idea of what you mean.”

Puzzled, Mario shook his head. “I don’t know what your *gioco** is, *bambola*. Maybe you are playing a-dumb because we are in company. Hey ... come backstage while I dress.”

Alice hesitated. “I think that would be rather indiscreet of me, young sir, to be sure.”

“Indiscreet? Are you a-turning prim and a-proper on me? Sounds like you’ve a-been taking elocution lessons, too.”

“Look, I am here to inform you that Miss Marian Twynette has journeyed all the way from England through Italy and finally here to find you.”

“*Marian!* Look, Ailish, give me a-five minutes.”

So that’s it! Alice realised as Mario darted backstage. *He thinks I’m his puppet girlfriend from the circus! I must be sure to set him straight.*

Easier said than done, Alice. Claim the power of your keys turned to scissors.

Alice was still mulling over this extraordinary turn of events when Mario reappeared at her side, wearing a white suit and looking in her opinion quite swarthy and suavely handsome—for a wooden puppet.

“Please, *bella*,” he said, “I’d rather not meet her right at this a-very moment. This is all rather sudden with you coming a-back into the picture. It’s complicating things. ...”

“Stop right there, kind sir, for I must inform you that I am not Ailish your puppet friend.”

“You are not a puppet—you and I never were, *we* are marionettes, remember? We agreed. *No one* controls us.”

“Look, Mario, I am *not* Ailish.”

***bambola:** (Italian) doll

***gioco:** (Italian) game

Mario waved his hands. "I understand, *bambola*. You've obviously had a transformation and do not a-want to associate with your old wooden self. But can I be a part of your new one? The world of flesh and blood?"

"Listen, I know this all may seem rather abstruse, young sir, but"—Alice faltered, Mario's dark eyes reminded her of a hurt puppy dog—"er, you could if you..."

Mario grasped her hand. "It's true, I've a-searched high and low for Marian, but I must be truthful, Ailish. For some a-reason you've turned into the most..."

Alice withdrew her hand and steeled her will and tone. "We will go and sit with Marian. Right *now*."

At her command, Mario sheepishly followed Alice through the crowd. Marian, however, was coldly reserved when Mario approached the table, and merely extended a hand for a kiss, causing Mario to joke about clichéd chivalry. Marian was not amused.

"You took your time," she said.

"I had to dress, *bella*. And Ailish here a-detained me. ..."

"*Ailish?* Her name is Alice. She's not your little circus-puppet girlfriend."

"Th-that's what I tried to explain," said Alice. "But he..."

"Conveniently ignored the fact," Marian said, turning up her nose and staring at the ceiling. "Typical."

"Pardon me, but I am going to explore the premises a little," said Alice, who had suddenly become fascinated with the fishing and fishermen artefacts such as antique rods, nets, and appropriate paintings that adorned the pub's pale blue walls. "And leave you both to sort out ... renew your ... oh, goodness gracious. ..."

Suppressing tears of frustration, Alice excused herself and stumbled her way to the ladies' lavatory. Finding it occupied, she agitatedly waited outside. Presently, she heard the toilet flush, and an elderly, rosy-faced Irishwoman staggered out. Although she had obviously imbibed an elegant sufficiency of the local brew, the woman's eyes sparkled with ethereal light.

"Aye," she slurred, "sometimes when it gets too much, dearie, ye just have to go into the closet where 'He that seeth in secret will reward ye openly.' Be my guest."

Alice smiled. "Thank you, ma'am. That is the truth to be sure. God bless you."

"And may the good Lord bless ye too," said the woman.

Yes, Lord, that lady was right, Alice silently prayed once she had sat down. I need this time to talk to You, and it seems that these are the only occasions when I can. But quite honestly, I just don't understand it. Here I am with this experience possibly going out in a Heaven's Library story during the Offensive, and I can't help but question where this is going. Most likely, the readers will have questions, too. I should be doing

something toward winning and teaching others. But instead I feel like I'm stuck with this shallow puppet girl.

I mean, is Marian potential to help Your work? I just don't want to waste my time. And quite honestly, I'm tired of her selfishness and shallowness. Look, she fell in love with You back there at Your manor, or she was at least attracted—why hasn't she changed? Become sweeter?

I'm not murmuring, Lord, really, and I know You know that, but You have to admit it is rather embarrassing. Can I just go back home right now and be a part of the Offensive in my Home in Winsley Barnes, and just forget this experience or like have it get dropped as an HL? It would save me a boatload of embarrassment. ...

An impatient rapping on the lavatory door jerked Alice out of her communion and she apologised to the unseen intrusion, saying that she was almost finished. Undeterred, she listened for an answer to her supplication.

This experience with Marian has everything to do with the Offensive, Alice. Trust Me. The answer is almost here.

“Anne!” Alice exclaimed upon opening the lavatory door. “Anne Hastaway! What a nice surprise! To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“To the good Lord, Alice. Believe it or not, this is of no surprise to me! Pardon my rather brusque manner in unwittingly hurrying ye up just now, but I took rather poorly after consuming a questionable Irish pork pie earlier this afternoon.”

“Oh, that is perfectly understandable, ma'am. In fact, I was dallying a little too long. But how did you get here?”

“It's a long story, my dear, and I cannot wait to tell you.”

“Oh please do, ma'am. Marian and I are sitting at a table on the right by the entrance.”

“I know,” said Anne. “We'll join ye in a couple of minutes.”

“We?”

Anne winked. “Another surprise!”

Alice returned to the table, relieved to see that Marian and Mario had apparently solved their differences and were behaving quite amorously toward each other, even to the point of ignoring her.

“You'll never guess who I bumped into when coming out of the lavatory,” she ventured to remark.

The couple behaved as though she didn't exist, so Alice shrugged and picked up the menu. “I suppose we should order something.”

“You will order *nothing*, miss. It'll all be on me.”

“Mr. Sage!”

Alice stood up and hugged the beaming old man.

“And Anne!” she exclaimed. “Do sit down, ma'am. So Mr. Sage is the other party to the mysterious ‘we’ of whom you spoke?”

“Quite so! Percival and I have been getting to know each other on a more ... intimate basis,” said Anne.

“*Percival?*”

Mr. Sage, looking quite dapper in an olive-green, Harris Tweed suit, blushed and straightened his scarlet bow tie. “I don’t believe I ever revealed ... er ... *told* you my first name.”

“But ‘Percival’ is such a noble name, sir. King-Arthur’s-knights sort of thing, I suppose. Brandon would say it’s pretty cool.”

“Not in my day it wasn’t,” said Mr. Sage. “Especially when shortened to ‘Percy.’”

“Anyway,” said Alice, “I am ever so happy for you, Miss Hastaway.”

Anne took Mr. Sage’s hand. “A ‘miss’ and a Hastaway no longer, Alice. I am now *Mrs. Anne Sage*.”

“Romantic to be sure, ma’am! *Married*.”

“Yes,” Sage responded, lowering his voice. “However, I have found it expedient to read her one of Lance’s odes every night, as my own attempts fall miserably short.”

“But Mr. Williams is undoubtedly happy that Anne is so wonderfully cared for, sir,” said Alice. “And I’m sure your odes are most beautiful in their own right.”

“Oh, that they *are!*” said Anne.

“What I don’t get, Miss, Mrs. ... *Anne*,” said Marian, “is how come you get these guys to write odes about you, while I hardly even get a get-well-soon card?”

“Marian, it might behoove you to mind your tongue,” Alice whispered, seeing Anne was somewhat unnerved.

“Anyway,” Mr. Sage interjected, “once Anne knew you girls were missing, she went into despair and recluse. She refused to see *anyone*, including me, although I tried to drop by many times.”

“We tried to ring you from where we were,” said Alice, “but we found your number had been changed.”

“I was getting a lot of crank calls,” said Anne, “and I’d closed the inn. But that’s when I... Do you folks mind if I tell the story?”

“Oh please do,” said Alice, although Marian and Mario seemed somewhat apathetic. “And *do* sit down.”

Anne stroked her chin and stared into space. “Well ... Let me see. ... How shall I start? ...”

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MORE INVISIBLE INK

“**S**hall I get you something, darling?” said Sage. “A drink perhaps? Something to loosen the tongue?”

Anne threw her head back and laughed. “I most assuredly need no such thing. Unfortunately, like some acquaintances of my gender, I

must needs keep a tight watch over my tongue! But thank you, darlin', I will take a small sherry."

"Coming right up," Sage said and snapped his fingers for a waiter.

Anne lowered her voice as if to draw everyone into her confidence. "The script ... I found the *script*. ..."

"The script?"

"What script?"

"Lance's last play ... the one he gave to Alice."

"I am so sorry, ma'am," said Alice. "There was no opportunity to..."

"Fret not yourself, dear. It worked out for the best, as you will see. When Alice and Marian failed to return to the Tuck Inn, I was darn near beside meself with worry."

And so, to the huddled gathering of Alice, Marian, Mario, and Mr. Sage, Anne began her story, pausing now and then to take a sip of her sherry and allow the anticipation to build before continuing.

"A natural storyteller," Sage remarked. "Even though I have heard the account before, I am positively riveted."

Anne smiled. "Long ago, I found it necessary to hone the skill in order to keep Lance's attention! He was heard to say I could tell a good story."

"Speaking of stories, ma'am," Alice urged, "do go on!"

"So, once it seemed that the two dears had gone missing, I sent out feelers, mind you. Even had Monsieur Truncheon embark on an investigation. I asked around ... and a rather gossipy acquaintance o' mine informed me that she'd seen you both at The Nail's Head with a couple of iffy hoodlum types."

"Confirmed by others," said Mr. Sage.

"Oh dear," Alice said with a wince.

"Anyways, needless to say that got me a-worryin' an' kickin' meself that I'd ever let you go out on the town without some sort o' chaperonin'. ..."

"We didn't need that," said Marian.

"Ah so? And ye still feel this'a way after all that happened?"

"I suppose not. But how do *you* know what happened?"

"I'm a-gettin' around to that. Anyways, not havin' Lance around, I succumbed to watching a TV documentary called 'Malice in Wonderland' all about you, Alice. ..."

"A *big* mistake," said Sage.

"My husband's right. But it showed footage from your shows and the things you said. Then a young man called Harry Hooligan came on saying that you and Marian had enticed yourselves into their car, and Alice was talking in witch language and deceived his friend Larry into thinking she was a saint."

"He said that you had cast a spell on them," said Mr. Sage.

"Aye," said Anne. "That's what the scoundrel said. I was shocked that my dear departed Lance would have endorsed such a villainess."

I felt stupid at having been deceived and went into, as you say today, “total incommunicado.”

“Oh dearie me,” said Alice. “But you...”

“I’m gettin’ there, dear girl. Well, I had cleared out Alice’s room at the Tuck Inn, and I’d put her and Marian’s belongings in a pile in the corner o’ me livin’ room. I left them there for ... oh, must’a been over a fortnight. Then one evening, I decided to throw it all out in the rubbish, and me eyes happened to fall on the folder containing Lance’s last script—*Alice Cuts the Strings*. Curiosity got the better of me and I started flipping through it. I saw that it was the story of our dear Alice Pleasance’s life since she started her *ad-hoc* theatre shows.

“But the weirdest thing about it was...”

Anne paused and ordered another sherry, for which she awaited, basking in the rapt attention of her tiny audience.

Sage clapped his hands. “Anyway, this is an occasion to celebrate. As I said, the drinks are on me. What will you have, Alice?”

“A bubbly water, please.”

“And you lovebirds?”

Marian and Mario shrugged.

“Whatever’s good,” said Mario. “Chianti, Champagne?”

“Most certainly,” said Mr. Sage. “If they have it. But you know, ‘when in Rome...’”

“We are certainly a-not in Roma!” said Mario.

“Then I do suppose an Irish dark stout will suit just fine?” Alice sharply suggested.

Mario looked into Marian’s eyes and the couple burst into laughter.

“I suppose it’ll be bubbly water for them, too,” said Alice. “Thank you ever so much, Mr. Sage.”

“You are more than welcome. Come, Anne, help me with the orders, the story can wait! Keep them on tenterhooks.”

“Pardon my bluntness, ever so,” Alice whispered, turning to Marian and Mario as Mr. Sage and his wife edged their way through the throng, “but I would think it appropriate to show Mr. Sage and his wife the respect due them. They have put themselves out on a limb, bent over backwards, and stuck their necks out for us.”

“*Mamma mia*, what are they?” Mario asked. “Contortionists? Baldo should have a-signed them up in his circus.”

Mario’s sniggering quip sent Marian into a fit of giggles and Alice into a quiet rage. A silent prayer, a clutching of her scissors, and a claiming of keys helped Alice to simmer down sufficiently to resume speaking.

“Despite your childish facetiousness, Mario, I do believe some appreciation would be forthcoming at this point. I understand that you and Marian haven’t seen each other in an awfully long time, but if you

pardon my saying so, I think you ought to pull out of your cosy little lovers' moondream for a few moments and think about others. *There*, I've said it. I hope you enjoy your bubbly water."

Lord, You said the answer is almost here. I honestly don't think I can stand another moment of Marian, especially with her awful boyfriend. We've had some cool times together, I know, but then she can be so selfish, unthankful, and whatever, and I just like, lose it and end up being a horrible S.R. example. ...

*I've been a wild rover for many a year,
And I spent all my money on whiskey and beer.
And now I'm returning with gold in great store,
And I never will play the wild rover no more.*

In spite of her fuming, Alice cocked her ear and grinned.

*And it's no, nay, never,
No, nay, never, no more
Will I play the wild rover,
No, never, no more.*

"That's a charming song," she remarked and stood up to watch a robust, bearded male trio wearing grey tweed, peaked caps, blue paisley neckerchiefs, and brown leather waistcoats who were now singing on the stage unannounced. "Who are they?"

"The 'Wild Rovers,'" Marian replied with some disdain. "They were mentioned on the bill. Typical."

"But I like this type of music," Alice said once the song had finished. "And Brandon does too. He's ever so much into the old Irish folk stuff."

"I can take it or leave it," said Marian with a display of jadedness, which Alice perceived was an effort to impress Mario.

*I had a young maiden in Old Stackford town,
Everyone knew her as "Nelly,"
Her real name took a little too long to write down,
So Nelly's tattooed on my belly. ...*

"I know this song!" Alice exclaimed. "It's ever so cute ... listen. ..."

*Tara lara la yay, tara lara lai yo.
Here we go up on a wave,
I push to and fro and I heave and I ho,
And huff like a rough galley slave.*

“But it *can’t* be,” Alice wondered aloud as she peered through the crowd at the trio. All three sang, one played acoustic guitar, one played the accordion, and the other played a stand-up bass.

Alice gasped. The bass player happened to be singing the song.

*I once had a girl in me rugged old boat,
As fair as the statue of Venus—*

“It *is*. It’s *him!*”

“Do you know these guys?” Marian asked.

“The one singing the song! Dear old Stortok—they call him the vulgar boatman.”

“That figures,” said Marian. “Even if *he* isn’t, the song is a bit. I’m surprised you like it.”

“Oh, I *do*. Would you mind ever so if I go and say ‘hello’ to him?”

“Go ahead. But if he’s anything like his song, I’d be careful.”

Alice inched her way to the foot of the stage. The bass player had just finished his song and was basking in enthusiastic applause, when Alice asked him if he remembered her. He quizzically glanced at her and gave a start.

“*Alice!* ’Course I do. How could I forget? However...”

His face fell, and he fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and pulled out a pipe. He was about to light it, when a fellow musician who was packing up his guitar gave him a wag of a finger.

“Oops. Forgot. Not e’en a fireplace can puff smoke in an Irish pub these days.

“But there ain’t any law against *this...*,” he said and pulled out a hip flask which he put to his lips. “Least at the moment.”

“Polignac?” Alice inquired.

“*Course*. Want a swig?”

“Oh, no thank you, sir. But you were saying...?”

“Ah, yes. I didn’t forget you, but it seemed ye forgot *me*.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You didn’t give me no invite to the Woodchopper’s Ball.”

“Oh, I’m so dreadfully sorry, but that was because I was supposed to just gather the playing cards. How on earth did you know about that?”

“Read the book, miss. *Alice and the Cards*.”

“You did? Even though it’s not GP? I mean...”

Stortok shrugged. “Ordered it online at Bookleggers.com, I did. *Loved* it. Even gave me the idea for the blue paisley neckerchief motif for the group.”

“So I notice.”

“And I came off looking like a decent sort in the book, don’t ye think?”

“Most assuredly,” said Alice.

“Glad ye think so. At least I trusted you were on the right page and I gave ye both a ride across the lake and back—you and Mr. ... the bent-old-card fellow...”

“Mr Sage,” said Alice.

“That’s right. Sage.”

“Oh, Mr. Stortok, you wouldn’t believe it, but Mr. Sage is actually here tonight. He would be ever so happy to see you again. He’s not a card this time, though. He’s a real person.”

“Really? How does that work, Miss Alice—someone that’s a playing card suddenly turnin’ into a human being?”

“Alas, I have no idea, sir, but...”

Stortok leaned over to Alice and lowered his voice. “Tell me, miss, ye be havin’ another one of them story things happenin’ right now?”

“I venture to say I am, sir.”

Beaming, Stortok straightened his back, his waistcoat, and his cap. “So we’re on Candid Camera?”

Alice chuckled. “I do suppose it is similar, sir. Admittedly, it is a little unnerving to know that your every deed, word, and even *thought* is being written down for a *Heaven’s Library* story.”

“Aye, it must be. But ye know, this old world would be a mighty better place if everyone knew that. It’d certainly make *me* take better stock of me ... ahem ... *comin’s* and *goin’s*.”

“That is so very true, Mr. Stortok, I actually believe that we are all...”

“Miss Alice, my wife, your friends, and the drinks await you at the table.”

“Oh, Mr. Sage. I’m sorry.”

“What’s more, everyone is bating their breath to hear the rest of Anne’s story. She refuses to continue until you are present.”

“I apologise for my delay, sir, but I suppose you remember Mr. Stortok here. ...”

Sage gave what he considered a hulking oaf a disdainful once-over. “I’m afraid I...”

“You know? The vulgar boatman?”

“Not to my recollection, Alice. But I presume his alias accounts for the bawdy ballads we are hearing tonight?”

Stortok threw his head back and roared with laughter. “As a matter o’ fact, I just wrote one dedicated to our dear young lady here! It’s my bawdiest yet. ...”

*A pretty young princess named Alice
Dwelt in a peculiar palace.
Its spire had been built
At a ten-degree tilt,
And was curiously shaped like a...*

“I believe our dear young lady has neither time nor taste for such ribaldry,” said Mr. Sage.

“...*chalice!*” Stortok sang with a twinkle in his eye, and took a bow.

“You can sing the whole thing to me later,” said Alice. “It sounds like ever so much fun.”

Sage smiled diplomatically and addressed Stortok. “Well, *do* join us ... if Alice agrees, that is.”

“Oh, I *do*,” said Alice. “Ever so.”

“Very well, sir. A friend of Alice is a friend of mine. So, what would be your pleasure? The drinks are on me.”

“A pint of Irish stout and a shot of polignac, if that be okay wit’ ye,” said Stortok.

“Champion,” said Mr. Sage.

“I bought the lovebirds a martini each,” he whispered to Alice as they made their way back to the table. “I couldn’t bear to see their disappointment at mere bubbly water. And I got you a cherry-flavoured one, however. Bubbly water, of course.”

“That’s awfully sweet of you, sir,” said Alice. “Thank you.”

Once Alice, Sage, and Stortok had returned to the table, Anne, who was now on her third glass of sherry, continued her story.

“Well, as I was telling ye, I was flipping through the script and finally came to the last page. As was usual with my Lance, he handwrote his plays—no typewriter, he insisted, and *certainly* no computer. Nothing but a dip-in feather quill for him, not even a fountain pen, much less a Biro. He succumbed to using a pencil when directing his plays, though. Wouldn’t have done for him to be strutting around with an inkhorn* and be ridiculed as an inkhorn-mate!

“Anyways, to my amazement, the words suddenly started appearin’ on the last page as the seconds went by. Seemed as if it was being written as it happened, but like in Lance’s usual, poem-play form. Strange, isn’t it? I mean, I’d seen it happenin’ on his death bed, but after he passed on?”

Except for Alice, who was familiar with the occurrence, and Mario, who was skeptical and excused himself to go and smoke a cigarette, the rest of the gathering nodded in amazement as Anne continued her story.

“The comforting thing was that, besides seeing that my dear Lance was still writing...”

“From beyond, ma’am,” said Alice. “More alive than ever!”

“Seeing as you put it so poignantly, Miss Alice, yes, it is even more hopeful.”

***ribald**: vulgar, lewd

***inkhorn**: an inkwell (sometimes portable) made out of horn; the inkhorn was an important item for many scholars and soon became symbolic of writers in general.

***inkhorn-mate**: (Shakespearean) a bookish person, a scribbler

“What I don’t understand is this,” said Marian, who was by now waiting to be about enjoying Mario’s wooing once he returned, “it’s one thing to believe that Lance is now writing it, as Alice says, ‘from beyond,’ but how come Mr. Williams could have written such a script while he was still alive?”

Not waiting for the answer, Marian, evidently preoccupied, left the table.

“Channelling, I ... er ... suppose,” said Mr. Sage, and all eyes, including his, seemed to fall instinctively on Alice.

As though I have all the answers? Alice wondered, and clutched the scissors in her pinafore pocket.

You do, because you listen to Me, was the reply.

“Yes,” Alice said bravely. “You could describe it as ‘channelling.’ While on Earth, Mr. Williams was writing the script of my life in this unusual dimension by just listening, either to spirit helpers or even to Joshua himself. Sort of like getting dictation. That’s how they receive *Heaven’s Library* stories, really. How the words appear on the pages of this script, however, I find unable to comprehend or explain. One thing I do know is that in this dimension *anything* can happen!”

“That is true,” said Anne, “as Lance and I could well attest.”

“So what did you do once you’d found the script, ma’am?” Alice asked.

“Anne came running into my shop with it in hand,” said Mr. Sage, eager to talk about his involvement in the tale. “I must admit I was flabbergasted ... seeing the words appear on the pages. I too thought Anne was playing some trick with invisible ink.”

“Until we read backaways,” said Anne, “then Percival believed me. But besides that, we could see that although you two girls had been through some unfortunate scrapes with the two hoodlums and Baldo Striffolino and all, you were as safe as houses, thank the good Lord.”

“Amen,” said Alice.

“But even with all of the information showing up and you obviously being in Italy,” Mr. Sage added, “we couldn’t place exactly where you were until there was talk of going to Ireland and deciding to drop in here at the Rainbow Trout in Dublin.”

“It got to where we were literally ten minutes or so behind you,” said Anne.

“And it seems zat *I* am at least about an *hour* behind you!”

“Monsieur Truncheon!” Alice exclaimed. “What an awfully nice surprise!”

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“ZE CAT IS OUT OF ZE SACK”

A minor hubbub ensued at the table as Anne took the unexpected visitor’s rain-soaked trench coat, Alice hugged him, Stortok made room for him to sit down, and Mr. Sage offered him a drink, which he politely declined.

“How on earth did you find us, Monsieur Truncheon?”

“Not in the same peculiar manner zat Mr. and Mrs. Sage with zis remarkable script did, Mademoiselle Alice. We at Ireland Yard have other methods!”

“But you used it to apprehend Larrikin and Hooligan,” said Anne.

“True. With ze irrefutable detail zat ze script had provided, ze two felons were convinced zat ze young ladies had ‘squealed,’ as they put it. Neverzeless, Alice, I now know from recent intensive investigation zat you are well acquainted with not just estrange stories, but actual *events*. You have ze rabbit hole, ze looking glass, and zen ze cards to add to your wealth of experience, so nothing should surprise you. In fact, you might find this rather mundane.”

“I most assuredly shan’t, monsieur,” said Alice.

Truncheon smiled. “Maybe. But before I go too much further, I want to say zat zis meeting must be quick and to ze point. It is not a social visit.”

“Oh dear,” said Anne.

Truncheon lowered his voice. “I was sent to apprehend Alice and in particular, Marian.”

At this, the whole table gasped, those present at it did also.

“Now, do not panic. I have arranged ... where *is* Marian, by ze way?”

“She retired to the outside back area, monsieur,” said Alice. “To accompany Mario who is smoking a cigarette, I presume. It has been a rather long time, though. I shall go and fetch them.”

“Needn’t bother—I’m back.”

“*Marian.*”

“Something wrong?”

“Where’s Mario?”

“Gone,” Marian said stonily and sat down. She was clutching a rolled up magazine. “And he’s not coming back.”

“But I thought you two were serious,” said Alice.

“*Were*. Now he’s going back to Italy and that Ailish puppet. He said his friends would despise him if he hitched up with *bourgeoisie*.”

“Bourgeoisie? What on earth do you mean?”

“Mario’s a staunch member of the Italian Socialist Party, and even in the circus he would promote his views. Now that he’s found out about me, he told me to stop pinning my hopes on him.”

“Oh, Marian, *please!*” said Alice. “Do explain. What do you mean ‘found out about you?’”

Marian slapped the magazine onto the table.

“Ah,” said Mr. Sage, “last week’s edition of *Newsbleak*,”

“Yah. Mario had just found it in the smoking area. Anyway, the cat’s out of the bag. I’m going home.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Flights leave from Shannon Airport.”

“Home to where?”

“*There. On the cover.*”

Sage cleared his throat and read from the magazine cover’s headline. “Search for San Romani’s runaway Princess continues as new evidence comes to light!”

He then turned the pages to the featured article. “Why, this is *you*, Marian. And taken only recently.”

“At the Tuck Inn, sipping an espresso,” said Marian. “How, I have no idea.”

“I think *I* do,” said Anne.

“The smoothing iron?” Alice whispered with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Anyway,” Marian went on, “my name is not really Marian. ... I chose as close an acronym as I could think of to Marina, my real name.”

“I believe the word is *anagram*,” said Mr. Sage.

“Her Highness Princess Marina!” Stortok exclaimed, as the fact appeared to suddenly dawn on him, and he stood up reverentially to take a bow. “The daughter of King Alberto and Duchess Victoria of San Romani.”

Marian commanded him to sit back down.

“What and where is San Romani?” Anne inquired.

“A small puppet country bordering Italy with a puppet government that still has nominal marionette royalty,” Marian nonchalantly replied. “Anyway, the responsibility was too much—stuffy etiquette, dress, formalities, and all that, so I left my family a note saying I couldn’t take it any longer and I ran away. It was in the news for quite awhile about the ‘runaway Princess Marina.’ I cut my hair short, dressed like a tramp and lived on the streets. That’s when I met Mario and we joined the circus together. He was a troubadour and he had a b-beautiful singing voice. ... He ... he *sang* to me. ...”

Suddenly Marian drew her breath and winced.

“And on top of it, my father, King Alberto, is d-dying. That’s why it’s b-back in the news. It’s breaking his heart. ... I was the apple of his eye ... oh, *God*. ...”

Water was welling up in Marian’s eyes and she gave a start as a droplet rolled down her cheek and plopped onto her arm. Alice held the puppet’s hand and silently prayed.

“Oh, what is *this*?” Marian exclaimed, wiping her arm on her mouth. “It tastes salty.”

“It’s a tear, miss,” said Mr. Sage, and handed her a tissue.

“I know that. ...”

She turned to Alice. “But *me*?”

“It *can* happen,” said Alice, “especially after suffering something like this.”

The puppet pressed a hand to her chest and looked imploringly at Alice. “And inside here, it *hurts* like hell, and I can’t stop this water coming out of my eyes.”

Mr. Sage handed her another tissue.

“Thank you. But it feels weirdly *good* in a painful sort of way. ... Oh, Alice, *you* understand, don’t you, what with that soldier boyfriend of yours?”

“I understand perfectly,” Alice replied and burst into tears herself.

“Of course she does,” said Mr. Sage and handed Alice a tissue. “Alice almost drowned in a pool of her very own tears.”

“That sounds rather unlikely, sir. When?”

“When you went down the warren.”

“I beg your pardon, sir. Down the *what?*”

“The rabbit hole.”

“Do you think it will affect my wood?” Marian whispered to Alice through a misty smile.

“Only for the better, I’m sure.”

“There is no better beauty lotion than tears to sweeten, soften, and brighten a woman’s countenance,” Mr. Sage said.

“Lance would have said something like that,” Anne remarked with a wistful look at Mr. Sage. “Or if he’d not have *said* it, he would have at least put it in words in one of his plays. You and he are so wise, darling. ... Well, he *used* to be.”

“And still is, ma’am,” Alice said with a sniffle. “We must not forget that.”

At Alice’s statement, Anne also burst into tears. Her husband handed her a tissue.

Stortok cleared his throat and shuffled in his seat. “Well, I think I should sort of better be gettin’ along. ...”

“Oh, *do* stay, Mr. Stortok,” Alice pleaded. “I’m sure Marian appreciates the support after such trauma.”

“It’s not just that,” sobbed Marian who was accepting another tissue from Mr. Sage. “I’m just amazed, Alice, that you stuck with me through all of this, with me being such a creep, and especially you not knowing who I am. It’s meant a lot to me even though I didn’t show it.”

“You most certainly didn’t,” Alice responded with a sniffled giggle. “But it wasn’t really *me*, all the credit must go to Joshua. He told me to stick with you no matter what.”

“I’m so glad you did. I certainly didn’t make it easier, and ... I’m just so sorry to all of you and everyone else I must have ... oh, I wish I could just go to them all and ... you see? I’m imagining all the faces of those I’ve hurt and I can *feel* it, you know? Oh, it hurts so much in here—it’s as if it could *burst*. ... Am I going to die, Alice?”

Alice signalled to Mr. Sage for another tissue. He indicated that he was out of them, and Alice put her arm around the convulsively blubbering puppet.

“Of course not,” she said.

“Shall I call ze waiter for a mop?” Jacques said in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere.

He received no response, laughter or otherwise, and so he, along with the other two men who were also markedly uncomfortable in the presence of three weeping females, ordered a drink.

“Ah, *bon*,” Jacques said, his face falling into sobriety. “Now zat ze cat is out of ze sack, I suppose I can speak freely. As soon as Princess Marina disappeared, ze kingdom of San Romani put out a reward for information leading to her whereabouts. Larry and Harry decided to capitalise on zis and capture her and hold her for ransom. Furthermore, a higher power put out a sum zat topped it all as a reward for ze capture and possible death of both Princess Marina *and* Alice.”

His glass of Bordeaux arrived and Jacques Truncheon suddenly glanced at his watch. He pushed his glass away.

“You need to leave, Alice! You and Marian, right *now*.”

The two startled girls sat upright, puzzled.

“As I said at ze beginning of our impromptu rendezvous. I am here to apprehend you. Ze instructions were zat if I was gone for more zan half an hour, and I did not give ze signal, a...”

Jacques broke off. The wail of police sirens was filling the air outside.

“I’m sorry, it’s already too late, mademoiselles. I apologise, Princess Marina’s confession was so captivating. I don’t know what to do because ze streets and motorways will already be blocked.”

“But Marian needs to go *home*,” said Anne. “We need to get her to an airport.”

“And Shannon Airport is about a four-hour drive away,” said Mr. Sage. “Even after you manage to get through Dublin.”

“I know what we can do,” said Stortok. “I have a motorboat moored on the Grand Canal, right out back there—me home these days. It’s not much, goes a mite slow, and it’s in a state o’ disrepair. ...”

“Zat is irrelevant at zis point,” said Mr. Truncheon. “What’s your plan?”

“Well, the Grand Canal is linked to the Shannon River that runs all the way to where the airport is on the north banks o’ the river. Ye don’t have river blocks, do you?”

Jacques smiled. “In a situation such as zis? Most likely not, fortunately for you.”

“First leg of the Grand Canal to the Shannon is the slowest, with forty-four locks* to tackle,” said Stortok. “But we could be at the airport at least by early morning, if not before dawn.”

“Zen do not tarry,” said Jacques. “Girls, follow Monsieur Stortok *tout de suite*.”

***lock**: a short section of a canal or river in which the water level can be altered to enable boats to pass to a higher or lower part of the waterway. The lock has gates at each end with a mechanism for letting water in or out

“I just have to get my bass,” Stortok said.

After bidding hasty and tearful goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Sage and Jacques Truncheon, Alice and Marian slipped through the crowd and the back door of the Rainbow Trout and onto the small wharf that led off the pub’s rear car park. The clouds were clearing and moonlight was shimmering on the black waters of the Grand Canal where Stortok had moored his motor boat. He dumped his double bass inside it and helped Marian aboard, and was about to do the same for Alice when Jacques Truncheon softly called to her from the Rainbow Trout’s back door.

“Un moment, s’il vous plaît, mademoiselle.”

Alice, remembering a little ‘school French,’ hurried back to the stooped and dejected police inspector. The sirens had stopped.

“Zey are here,” he whispered. “I will go back in now and say zat I could not find you. I did not wish to tell you this in ze company of so many inside, but ze truth is ze ‘powers zat be’ promised to give me a ‘pardon’ from their trumped-up charges of police brutality, and I would be vindicated if I turn you and Marian in. I agreed to this only after I was tortured, and my wife and family threatened with ze same.”

“That is most *awful*, monsieur,” said Alice.

“So, what was I to do, mademoiselle? I agreed to their offer. Zey needed my expertise and allegiance. Alas, I do not have, as you do, ze faith zat will lead me to ze stake.”

“Oh, Monsieur Truncheon, I trust that that will be neither your nor my er ... fate. But should my convictions lead me thither, I know that my Lord will walk me through to victory.”

Inspector Truncheon smiled. “Ah, a mademoiselle of whom to be proud. Like ze Maid of Orleans.”

“You mean Joan of Arc?”

Jacques nodded. “Of course. *Jeanne d’Arc*, my favourite story and personage as a child.”

“Mine too, actually, monsieur.”

“*Vraiment? Ecoutez*, we have little time, but if I may ask you a question, mademoiselle? ...”

“Most certainly, monsieur. You have had my express permission to interrogate me!”

Jacques laughed. “*Eh bien!* Are you planning to create a disturbance? Upset ze *cart de pommes?*”

“I don’t quite know what you mean, monsieur,” said Alice. “But I am planning to—and *have*—cut strings by inviting people to Joshua’s wedding banquet. That is my commission.”

“Strings, mademoiselle?”

“The strings of the puppeteer.”

Jacques Truncheon sighed and shook his head. “Very appropriate. Although I feel I am doing you and others like you a service by being

what you call a ‘mole,’ I must confess that I sometimes feel more like a puppet.”

“But I see no strings attached to you, monsieur.”

“*Vraiment?* Zat is most encouraging.”

Alice patted Trucheon’s arm and smiled. “You have suffered for the truth, monsieur. You did not deny our Lord’s name.”

“*Merci, mademoiselle.* But you must go.”

Alice gave him a kiss on the cheek and dashed down to Stortok’s boat.

“See you at Joshua’s wedding banquet!” she called back as she clambered aboard.

“*Certainement!*” said Jacques.

Despite Stortok’s deprecating description, his old motorboat had retained a rustic charm. The boat’s enclosed upper deck, illuminated by hanging oil lamps, was fitted like a small dining-cum-living room with the table situated in the middle surrounded by wall cupboards and green velvet-upholstered benches. Two cabins, one with a bunk and the other with a double bed, comprised the lower deck.

Having revved up the engine, and finally being able to puff on his pipe, Stortok, through the expression in his eyes, humbly besought the two girls’ approval of his quaint abode. Alice, and to her surprise, even Marian, perceived it and spared no accolade.

“The wood and its workmanship is outstanding!” said Marian. “It’s beautiful.”

“I imagine taking a holiday in it would be lovely,” said Alice.

“Ye both be welcome anytime—just say the word.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Stortok, Brandon would be ever so thrilled. He likes to wakeboard, you know, and he’s ever so good at it.”

“Well, miss, if ye have a mind to do so, we can take our time right now and enjoy the ride.”

“That would be most awfully nice, sir, but according to Monsieur Truncheon this is a matter of some urgency.”

“Ye be right,” he said. “But forty-four locks? Might as well relax. Polignac anyone?”

Marian nodded and Alice shook her head.

“Thank you, sir, but I think I shall retire for slumber shortly,” she said.

Stortok shrugged, fulfilled Marian’s request, and took his place at the helm. Shortly, with Stortok merrily singing bawdy sea shanties, one of which was his song about Alice’s peculiar palace that made Alice giggle and Marian blush, the boat was in motion.

“So,” said Alice as she joined Marian at the table, “you’re returning home.”

Marian sipped her polignac. “Yes. Disappointed?”

“In a way. This has been quite the adventure, what with walking, talking puppets and...”

“I’m not a...,” Marian began, and then broke into a smile. “Oh, it doesn’t matter really, does it?”

Alice smiled and continued. “*Marionettes*, Punch and Judies, pantomime horses, and suchlike. ... It’s actually been ever so exciting, and I never know when these adventures will befall me. Though I must confess it keeps me on my toes in real life, as I do not wish to fall asleep in untoward circumstances that would be printed for the whole Family!”

Marian giggled. “Circumstances such *as...*?”

Alice giggled too. “Oh, I am sure that such *highly* improbable circumstances to which I assume you are intimating would be edited out! Nevertheless, dear Marian, I will miss you terribly, but you cannot abandon your crown. Actually I’m learning a huge lesson about that during this experience.”

“I know.”

Alice looked startled and Marian placed a wooden hand on Alice’s. “You probably didn’t know I’d seen it. I covered the fact well, you must admit.”

“You most assuredly did, but I am afraid I don’t quite comprehend your implications.”

“Let me explain.” Marian gestured upward with a bewildered expression. “He, it ... *Something* ... the great *good* puppeteer up there, has granted me the gifts necessary for my station. One of which is an ability to ‘read’ people. It’s too much sometimes. ...”

“Uncomfortable,” said Alice.

“Exactly. You just want to kick back with someone and not see it ... whatever it is that’s *mismatched*. You know what I mean, don’t you? Get down with them, type of deal.”

“I think I do. It’s nice to just be ... er ... *normal* sometimes.”

“For sure.” Marian went on. “Anyway, I *read* you, almost from the moment I met you. I wondered ‘she’s *royalty*, but what’s her kingdom?’”

“The Kingdom of Heaven,” Alice said.

“I knew it! Then why the shame?”

“Shame? What on earth do you mean?”

“You’re blushing and hanging your head, Alice. Don’t kid me that it’s humility.”

Alice stared into the puppet’s earnest large black eyes, and tears came into her own.

“It’s just not in me to say ‘no’ to Joshua, Marian. It’s not in my destiny. ‘Many are called,’ he said, ‘but few are chosen.’”

“Explain.”

“The few who are *chosen* cannot get away with second best, like some of the prophets, for instance. If they go back on their commission, they become a jinx to everyone they’re around.”

“Like Jonah the prophet,” Marian pensively remarked.

Alice was surprised. “*Exactly.*”

“Just like I’ve jinxed *you*, Alice. I was disobedient to what Joshua had for *my* life and me.”

“I do suppose that’s what happens when you just do what you think you want,” said Alice.

“Yes, but I didn’t know what I *did* want, Alice. I just knew what I *didn’t* want.”

“And what was that?”

“*That.*”

“That *what?*”

“Dog-eat-dog politics,” said Marian. “Licking boots and a lot of other things to stay up there.”

Alice fell silent, but she was inwardly praying. How was she to answer this puppet who was now paradoxically teaching and convicting *her*?

“Whether I like it or not, I can’t get out of it,” said Marian.

“Me neither,” said Alice and took a swig of Marian’s polignac. “So we might as well get used to liking it!”

After all, it’s still only a dream spirit trip, she thought.

“*Carry* it, Alice,” said Marian, “as I have now decided to carry mine.”

Alice knew exactly to what Marian was referring.

“Then I pray thee, Queen Marian, wilt thou help me carry it?” Alice asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “We can like, email our requests to Joshua!”

At her last remark, the pair collapsed into giggles.

“Of *course*,” said Marian.

“We can, like, *counsel*-type thing on random heavy-duty matters of state such as the recommended serving temperature of fish and chips!” said Alice, feeling a sense of rollicking relief at what she knew was Joshua’s granting of a temporary respite from her admittedly rather staid Victorian speech and demeanour.

Marian roared with laughter. “And *you* can like, *shoot* me pearls of wisdom about raising taxes on pasta. ...”

Marian’s tearful mirth stopped short. Mr. Stortok had stopped singing and had turned to look at them, perplexed.

“Seems like both ha’ been nippin’ at the polignac.”

Silence met his observation.

“Okay, but maybe you lasses will want to turn in soon. Ye can take the bunk room.”

“Thank you ever so, Mr. Stortok.”

“It would be cool to have some music right now, though,” said Marian.

“To be sure. Umm, what sort of music do you like?”

“*Drone*,” said Marian.

“*Drone?*”

“You don’t know what *Drone* is?”

“Well, I know what the *word* means,” said Alice, “but a music style?”

“Yeah, it’s the latest.”

“Goodness! I should ask Brandon. He would know.”

“Hey!” said Marian. “Where have you been?”

“Living under a rock, I do suppose,” Alice said and broke into a giggle. “Rock of Ages cleft for me,” she sang laughingly. “Let me hide myself in Thee!”

“Hey, you have a good voice,” said Marian.

“So I’ve been told. Brandon thinks it’s wonderful, but I confess I cringe when I hear myself recorded. Like once after a show in a country music barn!”

“You should sing for me sometime,” said Marian.

“What? When?”

“Like now?”

“With no accompaniment?”

“Yah. I’ll just thump a beat on the table.”

“Very well,” said Alice, and set the metre with a tapping foot. Marian grinned and thumped her wooden hands on the table in time.

“The advantage of being created with built-on drumsticks!” she said and Alice began singing.

*Come hell or high water,
I’m the King’s daughter.
Though I burn, though I drown,
I’ll not forsake my crown.
No matter what the scene,
I’m destined to be a queen,
Come hell or high water.*

“That’s a cool song!” Marian exclaimed. “You wrote it?”
“Joshua just gave it!” said Alice and continued singing.

*Yes, a-come hell or high water,
I’m the King’s daughter.
No matter what the world lays down,
I’ll not forsake my crown.
I was born for this day,
No matter what they do or say.
I’m claiming my destiny
To be what I’m meant to be,
Come hell, hell, hell
Or high, high water!*

*Though I burn, though I drown,
I'll not forsake my crown,
Come hell, hell, or high water!
Though the flames or the floods rise high,
It's a case of do or die.
And as the King's daughter,
I'll do what I oughta,
Come hell, hell, hell
Or high, high water!*

Marian gleefully joined in on a repeat of the chorus, and after more chatting together, she and Alice bid Stortok goodnight and descended the steps to the lower cabin.

"Do come home with me, Alice," Marian said once they'd climbed into their bunks.

"To San Romani?"

"Of course! It'd be great fun, and I'd love for you to meet everyone at the palace. They would simply *adore* you."

Alice immediately thought of her wardrobe, or lack of it. "I would love to, but I suppose you understand that I will have to ask Joshua about it."

"By now, I know that's a given, Alice," Marian said drowsily.

Meeting people in a palace, Lord? Alice wondered.

Yes.

Like this?

Yes.

"Anyway, Marian, thank you ever so much for the invitation," Alice said.

The marionette did not reply: she was asleep.

I was so ready to kick back and relax, Alice thought as she lay in the creaking bunk, *but I was almost afraid to, as it seems that at other times I do so in these adventures, I end up in trouble.*

Only when you kick back without including Me, Alice. Tonight you did include Me.

Thank You, Lord. But I wish we could, like, relive that day of horseback riding forever. ...

Presently, lulled by the rocking of the boat, the chugging of its engine, and the lapping of the water, Alice fell asleep.

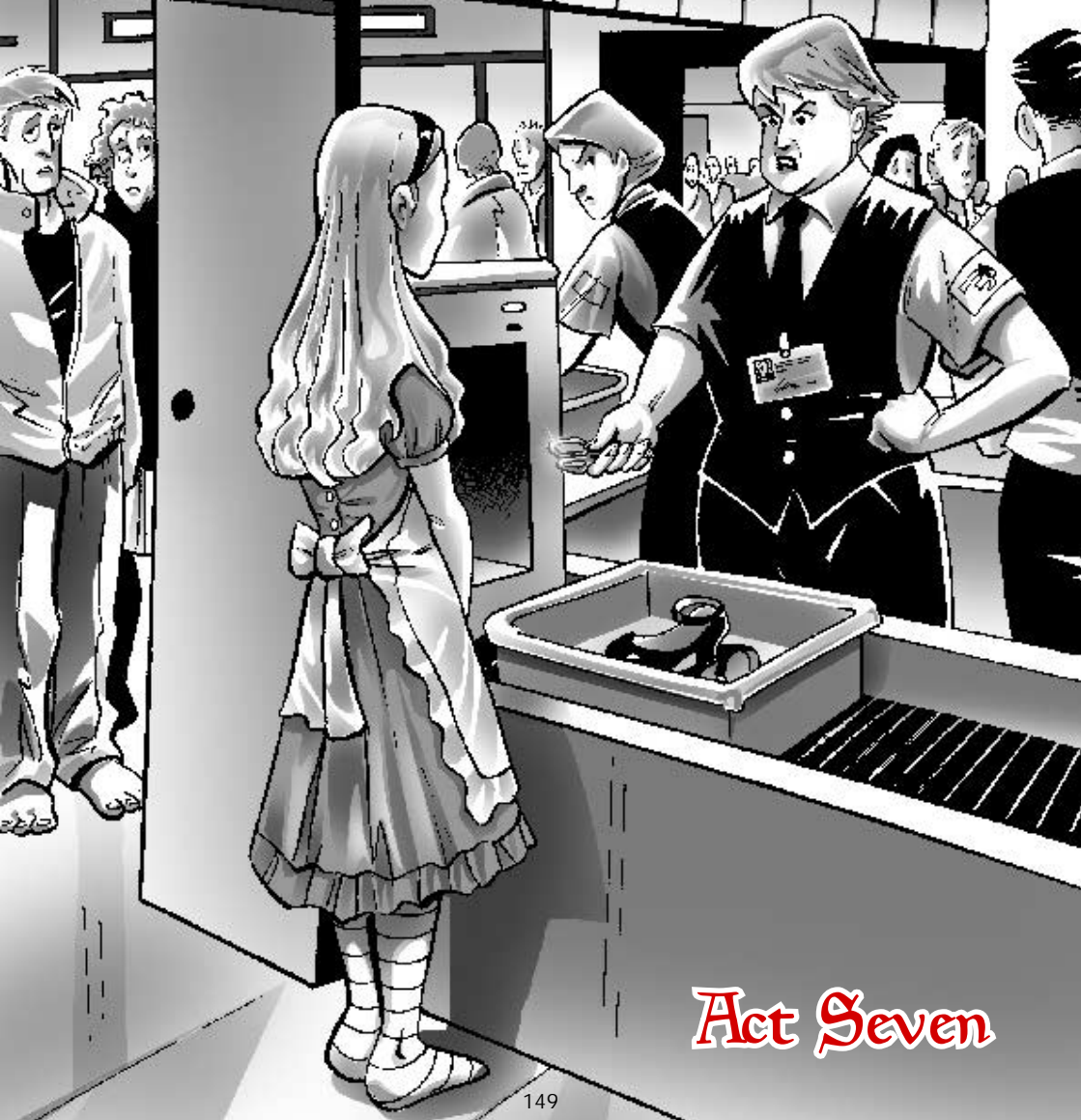
To be continued...



Issue 250—AM

Alice Cuts the Strings

A Tale in Eight A.C.T.S.



Act Seven

The story so far: Marian is discovered to be the long-lost princess of a marionette country, Mario is found—only to jilt Marian again, Sage and Anne Hastaway turn up to reveal startling revelations on the nature of this mysterious out-of-time play that Alice is starring in, Inspector Jacques Truncheon warns Marian and Alice of sinister plots afoot, and Old Mr. Stortok helps Alice and Marian narrowly escape a warrant for their capture. ...

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A TURN-UP FOR THE BOOK

Once Stortok had moored his boat and dropped Alice and Marian off where they picked up their courtesy tickets, a speaker announcement informed the flight passengers of a further one-and-a-half-hour delay before boarding. This turn of events mattered little to Marian who decided to browse the shops. Alice, however, after dawdling in Shannon Airport's departure area and glancing restlessly up at the clock, decided to take advantage of the Golden Key Executive lounge.

The lounge was indeed plush, complete with magazine racks and well-stocked bookshelves, reclining armchairs—on which some guests were snoozing—each with individual reading lamps, and desks equipped with Internet access. Being rather hungry, Alice was mostly interested in the complimentary bountiful buffet, which displayed a broad range of hors d'oeuvres from pâté to caviar, main courses of all manner of meats, fish, and game, and a variety of desserts to which she was particularly drawn.

She took a tray, piled a couple of plates high with her choice, selected a bottle of the finest French bubbly water and sat down. A young man reclining on a couch to her left impatiently looked at his watch, rolled his eyes and returned to reading a small book. He wore a Victorian-styled black velvet suit and seemed familiar to Alice. She wondered from where.

Could have been one of the cards? she conjectured. *But which one?*

As though in answer to her unspoken question, he smiled at her and invitingly patted the empty couch beside him. Looking longingly at her plates of food, Alice nevertheless walked over and sat down.

"Travelling to Ashkemar?"

Alice shook her head, feeling it was best to keep her and Marian's ultimate destination covert.

"You will shortly," said the man.

"I know of no such place, sir."

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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“You will presently.”

Alice wrinkled her nose, sighed, and looked around.

“You’re wondering who I am,” the man nonchalantly added as he brought his attention back to his book.

“Actually, I was, sir.”

“Then I will put you out of your misery.”

“Misery, sir? I beg to differ. Maybe I am a little put out about the flight delay, but I am far from miserable.”

“Good. Then I will not put you out of it if you are not already in it. Hmm ... interesting. ...” The man had become engrossed in his book. Feeling a little uncomfortable and desirous to get back to her food, Alice stood up.

“Oh wait,” said the man and extended his hand. “Do stay and converse. I’m Lewis, by the way. Lewis Charles.”

Alice gasped. “Oh, of course! In the cottage up in ... oh, I suppose it was ... oh, never mind.”

She took his hand and curtsied. *The second time on this journey*, she wondered. *Or was it the third?*

“And I’m Al...,” she began.

“Alice. Of course. I know you *very* well. I am so proud of you and how you’ve grown.”

“Thank you, sir. But...?”

“You’re my creation,” said the man.

“What?”

“Yes. More precisely the *fruition* of a figment of my creative imagination.”

“Nay, sir! At the risk of being ever so dreadfully rude, *God* is my creator.”

Lewis nodded sagaciously.* “Oh, I do not deny that indirectly He played a most important part in creating you through my imagination. For that I am most thankful to Him.”

“Indeed you should be,” Alice said rather huffily.

“But it *is* a bit like playing God, to create a personality such as yours, and watch it develop and bring such joy. It gives me enormous pleasure to see how you’ve grown from the world of Wonderland, white rabbits, the looking glass and such, to the cards and so on.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said Alice, “and I really don’t mean to be rude or anything. Forgive my bluntness, as I no longer go into contesting this with the many who make assumptions about my identity, but for one thing, I am *not* this Alice of Wonderland—Looking Glass or whatever. And for two thing, I am a *real* person. My parents are Malcolm and Eileen Godley of...”

“Winsley Barnes,” Lewis said soothingly. “And you’re a member of the Family International. I know.”

***sagacious**: acutely insightful and wise

“Then why purport me to be a figment of imagination, sir? It’s discouraging and demeaning to say the least.”

“This may *seem* distressing, dear Alice, but let’s face the facts. Do those who read your stories in the *Heaven’s Library* assume you are real?”

Alice sat for a while in stony silence until answering. “I never really thought about it, sir, I must confess. But I suppose they don’t. The most important thing is that *I* feel like a real person.”

“Very well. Then we can move on with the story. But have you ever considered how Marian feels at not being what she considers a ‘real’ person in your eyes?”

Alice shook her head. “But I imagine it’s awfully distressing.”

“So, now you understand. Anyway, Alice, you started out as a mystery given by the Creator. ...”

“My *creator* ... you?”

“No, dear Alice, *God*. He wants to see how people perceive you.”

By now, Alice was baffled and Lewis could tell.

“Anyway, on a different note,” he said, “I must say it is fun playing with time! Though you probably wish we could do so right now with all this waiting.”

“Playing with time, sir?” asked Alice. “How on earth do you do that?”

“Don’t you remember? It’s like Silly Putty!”

“Silly Putty? Oh, yes of course, in my adventure with the cards when I danced with Joshua at the Christmas ball ... and recently...”

“Exactly. Where I live, you can bend it, stretch it, and turn it inside out—all sorts of things. Time *does* exist there in some form, as there will even be silence for the space of half an hour, but we will no longer be subject to it. It obeys our whim—even becomes a *plaything!* ‘Here’s a déjà vu,’ for instance. ‘Want to see it again?’ ‘Want to speed this activity up? Want to slow it down?’”

“Most curiouser and curiouser,” said Alice, and stopped her mouth. “Oh, pardon me, sir, that is most *dreadful* English.”

“On the contrary, it is *delightful* English, Alice. It *nostalgias* me for your namesake!”

“*Nostalgias?*” said Alice. “Isn’t nostalgia a noun?”

“Of course, but in English nowadays you can verbize nearly *any* noun. Awful really. Many departed literary luminaries are turning—not in their graves, but in their hammocks, or whatever, over it.”

“I don’t understand, I’m afraid, Mr. Charles, sir.”

“Well, to be in vogue in your modern-day speech, especially in the Useless Status, you can take *any* noun and *verb* it.”

“How?”

“Make it a verb. Let me show you. Say a noun—*any* noun.”

“Very well ... umm ... *cot*.”

“Let me see ... ah, ‘the mother would usually *cot* the baby at half past eight in the evening.’”

“That’s a little absurd,” said Alice. “No one would *ever* say that.”

Lewis snorted. “Just wait. All things are possible to those who ‘linguicide’ the English language.”

“Linguicide? That’s certainly not a verb, sir, probably not even a noun.”

“Not yet. I am coining it here and now to mean killing a language. Now, dear girl, try me with another. We might as well—dare I say it—‘time redeem’ as we await the delayed aircraft.”

“Very well, sir ... *pig*.”

“Ah ... shouldn’t be too difficult. Oh yes ... ‘On the morrow, I shall *pig* the empty sty.’”

“I shall *pig*’? What does that mean?”

“On the morrow I shall *staff*—there’s a verbed noun if ever I heard one—with pigs! Like saying *man* the ship. Of course, we can barely get away with *that* one nowadays.”

Alice shook her head and thought for a while.

“I have one!” she exclaimed. “Kettle!”

“Easy,” said Lewis. “He *kettled* the water and boiled it on the stove.”

“I suppose that *could* be said,” Alice mused. “It’s stretching it somewhat ... but I most assuredly wager that you cannot ‘verb’ the word ‘*history*.’”

“Simple, Alice. That event is *historied* in MacCallister’s *Chroniculum Mundanum*.’ Now *you* try. I’ll suggest a word.”

Alice giggled. “This is fun, actually. Brandon would just *love* to play this game. He’s ever so good at Scrabble and he would probably think of how to verb *heaps* of words.”

“Very well, Alice. How about verbing ‘hotel’?”

“Oh, my uppity Auntie Wallis uses that one a lot when she brags about her expensive holidays with her boyfriend. ‘Oh, Simpson and I *hotelled* in the Bahamas.’ That sort of thing—*dreadfully* snobby.”

“Times have not changed in that respect,” Lewis said wryly.

And so for awhile he and Alice played the ‘verbing’ game, discovering to Lewis’ chagrin that many of his suggested related nouns such as ‘holiday,’ ‘bed,’ ‘guest,’ ‘lunch,’ and ‘taxi’ had already ‘verbed’ their way into the sanctum of English grammar.

“Probably coined by that very same ‘holidaying’ crowd,” he concluded. “Anyway, seeing as we are ‘journeying’—how’s that for a rather antiquated ‘verbing’?—to Ashkemar...”

“I’m sorry, sir. But as I mentioned earlier, I do not believe I am going there.”

“Wait and see,” said Lewis.

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Alice, wrinkling her nose.

“Well, that’s the first thing on my next portion of the script.”

“Yes, but, sir, if it doesn’t go with what I’m...”—*Joshua, help me to be yielded*.

“Alice, allow me to read you something I ‘poemed’ recently while fervently meditating on life’s challenges. ...”

Lewis stood up, and with rise and fall of tone and volume in his voice accompanied by oratorical gesticulations, quoted Alice the following poem.

*Though bloatish blift and frumious veltry,
Strike your striff and amptous chartry.
Ne'er let the whumsish milted nar be
Treel to snoke and snar.
On the road to Ashkemar.*

*And when the marped flot be morrid,
No betroken bount can tarrid,
If ye the slinting mudge can flarrid
To the glotted crarr.
On the road to Ashkemar.*

*Though stricken by deborted creening,
Doth it be no less aveening
Knowing that the faintest pleaning
Can ne'er your best bedar
On the road to Ashkemar?*

*So rask your grimption to the crestle,
And with those malevores wrestle,
Bringing your fractitious mestle
To the tattened lar.
On the road to Ashkemar.*

*And you will more the crinting tainage
Grasp, when to your introvanage
Lasp, with neither bont nor bainage
Flort with ganst and garr,
"I'm here in Ashkemar!"*

*"Despite the fancious, frinted hudby
And the strantious crim that would be
Mortid tole, and thus betrood me,
I've stroken noll and narr,
To be here in Ashkemar."*

Lewis took a bow and Alice clapped. "Why, Mr. Charles," she exclaimed through tears of mirth, "now that is *absolute* nonsense! If I were to quote a poem like that, I might be rebuked for being foolish, at least by Aunt Melanie. ..."

"Really? Well, I wrote it not necessarily for your aunt, but for the readers. The story was getting a little serious in my opinion, and I felt it needed some humorous relief."

"Hmm...", Alice mused. "But on the other hand, sir, I sort of understood the poem's allusions. It was actually a call to fight through the battles in order to make it to Ashkemar."

Lewis nodded. "You've hit the head on the nail."

Alice wrinkled her nose again. "I ... er ... suppose I did. But isn't it supposed to be that I've 'hit the nail on the head?'"

"Same thing."

"How indeed?"

"It's simple, Alice. You've hit the head that's on the nail. The nail's head."

"The *nail's head!* That was the name of the pub in Ireland that..."

"Exactly," said Lewis and looked at his watch.

"Look, I am ever so sorry, sir," said Alice assuming the man was bored. "This conversation must be awfully trifling considering the gravity of our mission."

"Not *our* mission, dear girl, *your* mission. Thank God I'm not involved."

"Oh." Alice stared sullenly at the floor.

Not involved? she mused. *So you like, help write this story and put me in any situation you please without like a second thought? That's like, hardly fair! Wait until Brandon reads this.*

"A thought for your penny?" Lewis asked, noticing Alice's pensive glower.

"I believe the correct saying is 'a penny for your thoughts,'" Alice said curtly.

"Not in this case. I want to give you some advice for your penny."

"I don't have a penny."

"I know. And in general, neither do most people *literally* have a penny, especially nowadays, to give someone when they want—to say in your modern vernacular—to 'tap his brain.'"

Alice said nothing and resumed staring at the floor as Lewis continued.

"Our dialogue right now may very well be entertaining for some, but this story has to be *exciting*, Alice, otherwise the readers will just yawn, put the magazine, book, or whatever down, and return to their computer game or whatnot. I just wanted to tell you that I'm glad I'm not in your shoes."

"What on earth do you mean, sir?"

"What I mean is I don't know what *I* would do in the situations you've been through or will yet go through."

"That's so dreadfully encouraging ... *not!*" said Alice. "It makes me want to, like, wake up right *now* and go back to Winsley Barnes, home, family, and friends."

"Very well. We can arrange it if you really want that. Let me see. ..."

Lewis pulled a Biro from the inside pocket of his jacket and a printed manuscript from his carryon bag through which he began to leaf, muttering to himself.

"Hmm. Well, right now, the plot needs a bit of a '*cliff-hanging, skin-of-the-teeth, nail-biter,*' something that has the readers on the edge of their seats, holding their breath ... and biting their nails, of course."

"At my expense," Alice said glumly.

“Ah!” said Lewis, as a slight man dressed in a brown-chequered tweed jacket, a pair of cavalry twills and highly-polished tan brogues approached them. “Let me introduce you to a good friend of mine. He has been working with me on the script. Alice, meet Mr. Charles Lewis.”

Alice stood up, took the man’s outstretched hand and curtsied.

“Lovely,” Mr. Lewis cooed.

“How curious,” Alice said. “He has the same name as you, Mr. Charles, but er ... turned around!”

“I’d say more like curiously *twisted* by fate,” Mr. Lewis said with a chuckle and sat down. “Marvellous samples of cologne in the duty free, by the way, Lewis. An amazing range compared to our day. Some of them, apparently synthetic, smell like sticky plums, however. Anyway, have you discussed the plot with our young protagonist?”

“Alice is not too keen on the possible Ashkemar turn of events.”

“Fine, we can drop that.”

“But I loved the poem,” said Alice.

“Fine, we can keep that.”

“She is, however a little ... shall we say ... *hesitant* ... about any further nail-biting cliffhangers.”

“Fine, but we have to consider the readers. ...”

“This may sound most awfully selfish of me, Mr. Lewis, but to be quite honest I am not thinking of the readers or of nail-biting predicaments right now. I just want to get through the rest of this adventure as simply and painlessly as possible. I most certainly would not wish for another Larry and Harry situation. That was absolutely *dreadful*.”

“You can rest assured, Alice, that we will be sure to write you out of any potentially *death-dealing* circumstances at least,” said Lewis.

“I would appreciate that, sirs.”

“—At the last minute, of course,” said Charles. “Have to respect those cliffhangers, you know.”

Alice shook her head and stared again at the floor. “Nail-biting cliffhangers,” she muttered.

Lewis spread the manuscript on the desk in front of him and he and Charles studied it. “Hmm ... we could cut it right *here*, and it still could be okay. ... Not the best build up, but...”

“What is that, if I may ask?” Alice inquired.

“The script,” Mr. Lewis replied as he scratched through pages with his Biro. “The plot of your...”

“Yes,” said Mr. Charles. “We could soften the blow here ... cushion it a little there. Make this hunky dory here, a little more warm and fuzzy there, comfy cosy right here ... not *quite* the climax, but...”

“*Wait*,” said Alice. “Are you rewriting the plot?”

“*Adjusting* it,” said Mr. Lewis.

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying so, sirs, you really have no right to do so.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Because Lance Williams is actually the one that’s writing my umm ... *story*.”

“We know,” Lewis said nonchalantly and continued furiously scratching with his Biro, “he’s *one* of them. We’ll run this all by him, of course. But I am sure he will agree with our proposals. He’s very soft hearted.”

“What proposals?”

“To make this umm ... *narrative*, would you call it?”

“*Adventure*, hopefully,” said Alice. “Isn’t it?”

“Very well. To make this ‘adventure’—if you could call it that after these changes—more to your liking. Not quite so intense or unpredictable.”

“Can I see that?” said Alice, reaching for the script.

“Certainly.”

Alice perused the pages, noting the strikethroughs and corrections. Her mouth fell open as she read.

Alice, after a nail-biting, cliffhanging day of schoolwork, is sitting by a fireside in the living room, of Anne Hastaway’s newly purchased semi-detached in Dullsbury. She is cosily crocheting and watching the sixty-eighth episode of the television series Vanished and sipping a Horlicks. Presently, Anne invites her for a game of Scrabble with a couple of Anne’s relatives who suddenly arrive. (Suspense can be added when the doorbell rings.) She can then view a selection of clips from Upload Yours on her computer. This can go on for a further hour or so before Alice retires to bed.

The following day, the sequence of events can be more or less the same, except it could be spiced up by replacing Scrabble with Monopoly or Ludo. Then she could while away some hours with live chat or email to friends. This can be repeated for the next few months to a year of readership perception with little change except the nature of the board game and Internet time. Other essential elements of a fast-paced, gripping story, such as mystery, for instance, can be introduced when she loses a comb or her “Alice” band. A perfect moment for heartbreaking poignancy could be when she spills her Horlicks.*

Alice stood up, handed the script back to Lewis and looked Lewis Charles and Charles Lewis in the eyes.

“I am so terribly sorry, sirs, but at the risk of sounding awfully impudent, I am most concerned that this umm ... *adventure* is how it is supposed to be. I would hate to disappoint Mr. Williams, yourselves, the readers, and of course, *Joshua*. These revisions are *dreadful*.”

Lewis beamed and returned the manuscript to his bag.

“Attagirl!” Mr. Lewis said.

“Rehearsing or something, Alice?”

Alice turned at Marian’s voice. She, with an armload of duty-free bags was looking quizzically at Alice.

“No, why? I was just talking with Mr. Charles and Mr. Lewis here. ...”

Turning her head, Alice saw that Mr. Charles and Mr. Lewis were gone.

***Alice band:** a wide hairband of coloured ribbon or other material (as worn by Alice in Tenniel’s illustrations to *Through the Looking Glass*)

FLOATING ECONOMY

As they trooped in the queue towards security control, Alice was so preoccupied with her strange encounter with Lewis Charles and Charles Lewis that she said nothing to Marian. It struck her as peculiar to be so consulted by the authors on the development of her adventure “script,” especially when they had avoided specifying any future events, except to hint that all was not going to be smooth sailing.

*Smooth sailin', not a cloud in the sky.
Smooth sailin', let the world drift on by.
Everythin's rosy,
Peaches and cream.
In our comfy cozy
Homeland security dream.
We can close our eyes,
Bask in the sun.
'Cos it's smooth sailin' from now on.*

Yah, right! Alice thought as she cocked her ear at the slick, uncannily inappropriate country-styled song piping over the airport sound system. Although its expressed sentiments seemed more appealing at that moment than the uncertainty facing her, Alice wondered if she would truly embrace them.

*Smooth sailin'; life is now a breeze.
Smooth sailin'; we can take our ease,
And just kick back
Knowin' all is well.
Put our feet up and relax,
Let the world get on with its hell.
It's a-smooth sailin'; all our cares have come and gone.
Smooth sailin' from now on.
Safe 'n' snug,
Like smug little bugs in a rug,
We can close our eyes,
Bask in the sun.
'Cos it's smooth sailin' from now on.*

Alice clenched her fists and strode to the security check, saying ‘no’ to herself and the very idea of such an uneventful life.

“You look very serious,” said Marian.

“Tell me, pray,” said Alice, “would you wish it so?”

“Wish *what* ‘so?’”

“Your life to be like that dreadful song.”

“What song?”

“The one that just played.”

“Didn’t notice,” said Marian.

Alice chuckled. “Hmmm, I suppose that is not surprising, considering its innocuousness.”*

Oh no! Alice thought as they approached the security check. *They will most certainly confiscate my keys turned to scissors!*

After taking off her shoes, just as she had expected, the moment Alice stepped through the checkpoint, the metal detector set off a shrill beep. A hefty, stone-faced woman in a navy-blue uniform called her aside and to Alice’s consternation, rather audaciously frisked her. Her nametag read “Thelma Confiscates.”

“And what were you planning on doing with *these*, may I ask?” the woman said upon discovering the scissors.

“Oh, besides trimming some split ends, I am not exactly sure, ma’am. ...”

“I’m sorry, but we will have to confiscate these.”

“I beg your pardon, Madam Confiscates, but they’re...”

“My name is pronounced Con-*fis*-ca-tees, miss, as in ‘Socrates.’”

“Of course, ma’am. I apologise. It most assuredly makes you sound more important.”

“Thank you. So, are you planning to pull some of your Wonderland or Looking Glass tricks on this flight?”

“Alas, ma’am, but I don’t quite understand.”

“You know *exactly* what I mean. The rabbit hole ‘eat me,’ ‘drink me,’ expanding and shrinking tricks could result in dire security-threatening circumstances. Do you have any liquids on you?”

“As you can see, I am carrying no baggage. The only fluids I could possibly be carrying are my bodily ones.”

Alice rolled her eyes in despair even as the words came out of her mouth. She was tempted to blame the “authors,” but knowing that through her silent but desperate claiming of keys and prayers, Joshua was leading her, she smiled.

The woman did not. She folded her arms and looked Alice squarely in the eye.

“Do you realise, miss, that such an answer could mean us detaining you for a full body search?”

“I realise my facetiousness could mitigate strongly against me under the circumstances, ma’am, but I in no wise wish to cause any trouble on this flight.”

“Okay. Where are you travelling to?”

“San Romani.”

“Really? That country has been in the news quite a bit of late. A thorn in the side, apparently. Drug cartels, cults, laundered money, and hidden Nazi gold, not to mention Ant flu and of course, the renegade princess.”

“I have no idea about all of that nonsense,” Alice said with a wince, wishing she could have stuffed her words back into her mouth.

“*Nonsense*, miss? Come with me.”

***innocuous**: not interesting, stimulating, or significant; pallid; insipid

“I-I am going there at the request of a friend,” Alice protested.

“Not right now, you’re not!” the woman snapped, motioning at an armed security guard to follow. As they marched her off, Alice looked helplessly back at the security check queues and seeing no sign of Marian, assumed the marionette had passed through unscathed.

Presently, Alice found herself sitting on a bench under dim neon lights in a guarded, green-walled waiting room with a number of other detainees. Among them was a perplexed elderly woman from Eastern Europe; an irate slick-suited businessman who kept glancing at his watch; a bewildered, tearful teenage girl; and even a helpless young Latin-looking couple with two small children.

Once someone informed Alice that she would be notified when an official would see her, the hands on the grimy plastic wall clock seemed to move exceptionally slowly.

I wish time was Silly Putty right now, she thought. I’d shrink it in a ... well ... to a second.

It soon became apparent that time was in no such subjection, and Alice decided to pray silently for the surrounding people. She did so until her heart hurt, and she started to cry.

“It’s not that bad, Miss Alice,” a uniformed guard suddenly said, standing over her. He handed her a tissue.

Alice wiped her eyes. “Oh, do pardon me, sir. I am not sorrowing over my state but that of the others in here.”

“I see. Most unusually noble of you, miss. I daresay I haven’t seen the likes of such concern in all my born days. Anyway, Mr. McFlagrant will see you now. Your case has been given top priority.”

“Truly?”

The guard nodded and indicated her passage to a frosted glass office door. “He’s a die-hard fan of yours, Miss Alice,” he whispered, “from Wonderland to the pack of cards and your recent trucker adventure.”

“That could prove to be most fortunate,” said Alice. “Thank you.”

“This is a moment to *die* for, darling,” a slender, white-haired gentleman gushed, standing behind his desk as the guard ushered Alice into the office, “meeting my heroine face to face.”

The man minced towards her and held out his hand. “I’m Seamus McFlagrant, Chief of Immigrations.”

Alice took his hand and curtsied. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine. Do sit down, dearie.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Beaming and wringing his hands, the man continued. “So, you were apprehended by ‘Frisky’?”

“The lady’s name tag said Thelma Confiscates.”

“‘Frisky’ is a nickname. Anyway, nothing escapes her. In this case it proved to be a blessing in disguise, darling—for *me*, at least. So, can I get you anything? A fizzola perhaps?”

“Would you have such a beverage in this ... er ... situation?”

Patting his tidily coiffed hair, the man winked and lowered his voice.

“Oh, with my inside connections, cutie pie, I can procure a generous supply of whatever you wish.”

Although puzzled, Alice in no wise found herself unnerved by the gentleman’s plentiful use of endearments, as she perceived herself as being of no untoward interest to him other than for her eminence. Considering the implications of this realisation, she silently claimed the keys of understanding for the man’s heart.

“A bottle of bubbly water would suffice most admirably, thank you, sir,” she said.

“No sooner said than done. Oh, I can hardly *believe* this is happening, honey. I’m actually in the same room with Alice Pleasance herself! Tell me, was it ever resolved who stole the tarts?”

“The tarts? Actually, that has little to do with me, sir, though I discussed the affair at length with his majesty, King Coal—I mean, the King of diamonds. To the best of my recollection, the matter was never resolved.”

“Delightful, dearie,” said Mr. McFlagrant. “A perfectly suspenseful element for an *Alice* soap opera. You’d have the viewers on the edge of their seats with a nail-biting cliffhanger.”

Becoming a little weary with these metaphors, Alice couldn’t see anything nail-biting, cliffhanging, or otherwise about a stolen-tart mystery. She merely nodded in apparent agreement, concluding that this pitiful official’s life was so uneventful that he could regard such an event as exciting.

“Have you ever considered such a project?”

“A project such as what, sir?”

“An *Alice* soap opera?”

“For what? Television?”

“Of course.”

“Not really,” said Alice.

“You should, sugar. Oh, by the way, if it’s not too personal—and *please* do not answer if it is a sensitive issue—but do you think you will ever actually get together and have a *serious* relationship with that *delightful* Rummy?”

Alice lowered her head and stared at the floor.

“It’s sensitive,” said the man, “I’m sorry, sweetie.”

“No need to apologise, kind sir, but Master Trucker is terribly injured as a result of this asinine war the Useless Status is involved in.”

Silence filled the room for a short while until the official softly posed a question.

“Is there anything I can do to help, honey? It would be an honour.”

“There is probably little you can do regarding Master Trucker, but just now Madam Confiscatees confiscated my special pair of golden scissors. I understand that they—like a pair of nail clippers or a squirt bottle—could be instrumental in starting a terrorist hijack situation, a potential 9/11 affair, or even a full-scale world war, but you can rest assured, sir, that neither my friend nor I shall attempt any such endeavour. I would so appreciate them being returned.”

“And you are travelling to...?”

“San Romani, sir.”

“That could pose some difficulty, darling, but I will do all within my power to retrieve those golden scissors for you and even expedite your exit to San Romani. Wait here.”

About ten minutes later, Mr. McFlagrant minced back with the golden scissors in hand and a beam on his face indicating that all was well for Alice to continue her journey.

“Do you have anything warmer to wear?” he asked as an afterthought once he had bid Alice Godspeed. “The flight will be rather nippy.”

“Actually, no, sir. But they usually supply blankets—I admit the air-conditioning can prove to be chilly. Although I always close the air vents.”

Mr. McFlagrant cleared his throat. “Er ... this is a floating economy flight, foo-foo. I have grounds to be concerned that you may not be warm enough. I could see about supplying a fur coat.”

“Oh, please do not fret yourself, kind sir,” said Alice. “Really. In fact, I have reason to fear that should you indeed equip me with such a garment, I shall be unable to wear it!”

“I see, sweetie. Then a microfibre quilted coat—a guilt-free wear. I assure you that if I have anything to do with it, it will be *gorgeously* fashionable.”

“I do apologise, sir, but I meant that it would be literally *impossible* for me to wear it. I have my reasons.”

Suddenly realisation dawned on McFlagrant’s mystified face, and he smiled apologetically. “Of *course*, Miss Pleasance, from what I have read about you, it seems you are irreversibly consigned to this mode of dress, as delightful as it is. Do forgive me.”

“For what, sir?” said Alice. “You have been most kind.”

“The pleasure has been entirely mine, darling,” said McFlagrant, and after procuring Alice’s autograph on his identity tag, bid Alice another beaming adieu along with a peck on her cheek. The uniformed guard then escorted her out to the boarding gate where she was relieved to see Marian awaiting her with a grateful smile. A few minutes later, over the airport sound system came the call for “squatting” on Washington Airlines floating economy, flight number one to San Romani en-route from the Useless Status. Upon hearing this unusual announcement, Alice and Marian looked quizzically at one other, while the rest of the passengers appeared nonchalant. Alice remarked that they were dressed as though they were going skiing or mountain climbing.

“San Romani does happen to be up in the mountains,” said Marian. “Quite a high altitude. I’m used to it. And it does have some ski resorts.”

“But being attired in this manner on a plane journey?” Alice wondered.

Marian shrugged. The gate opened, and following another identity check, the passengers trooped out onto the tarmac where they lined up at the foot of what seemed to be a giant threadbare, green carpet imprinted like a dollar bill. Alice giggled and looked around. But for

Marian, the rest of the passengers still appeared unruffled. Then, to Alice's surprise, Twinkie herself, clad in rough Middle-Eastern clothing with a headset over her headdress, trotted out. She winked at Alice and led the passengers to their allotted places on the "carpet."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Alice said under her breath. *This is way weird*, she thought.

"I could go for this big time in my banquet hall," said Marian inspecting the carpet's deep pile. "But for a plane flight?"

"As you may all know," Twinkie announced once everyone had settled, "floating economy flights are seatbelt-free. It therefore behoves us all to commit our destiny to God the Compassionate and His merciful protection."

The passengers concurred with bowing their heads, and some muttered a few guttural words.

"Also," Twinkie went on, "in the event that nature should call, be sure to stand or squat as far as possible on the edge of the aircraft in order to avoid the scattering of undesirable matter onto the rest of the passengers. And in the God-forbidden event that a more untoward incident should occur, may I remind you that as we have no oxygen masks, life-preserving paraphernalia, or even a pilot, you must be prepared to hang on to the fringes of the craft for dear life.

"Oh, and be sure to commit your souls to the boundless mercy of the God we trust. Thank you for choosing Washington Airlines. We hope you have a pleasant flight."

"Not the most positive heads-up I've ever heard before a flight," said Marian. "What on *earth* is this?"

Puzzled, Alice shrugged. "I suppose this is all that was available. Whatever the reason, we should pray for complete protection and claim a key craft to go with us."

"Claim a what?"

"Oh, I can explain sometime."

Suddenly the giant green carpet shimmied a little and began to float about two feet above the tarmac. Twinkie squatted down in a lotus position before all the passengers and put her hands together in front of her chest. She muttered what seemed to be a prayer then she let out a sigh and smiled. The carpet took off into the sky and after some time settled into gliding at a speed presumably similar to that of an air balloon. Although Alice was relieved that it seemed to be travelling relatively smoothly, the temperature at such an altitude did prove to be rather cold, and she prayed that she would not catch another chill.

You have nothing to fear, said Joshua. *Whatever happens, you are in my perfect will. Lie back and relax ... for a while.*

Alice did so, and found herself enjoying the exhilarating buoyancy of this unusual flight while Marian stretched out languidly and snoozed.

After about an hour, the carpet shuddered; some of the passengers shrieked and Twinkie informed them that they had encountered some unexpected turbulence.

It was not, however. A helicopter was suddenly hovering alongside them, its blades violently whipping waves of air at the carpet “craft.” The helicopter’s occupants wore turbans and held machine guns.

“Terrorists!” some of the passengers screamed.

Although distraught, Twinkie remained true to airhostess’ protocol and placidly endeavoured to reassure the passengers who were now frantically clutching at the undulating carpet’s pile, that all was under control. The pilot of the helicopter radioed Twinkie and she listened to his instructions.

“And just who *are* these ‘criminals?’” she inquired into her talkback. She listened for a few moments and laughed. “Really...? *Them? Criminals?* They hardly seem...”

The helicopter suddenly drew closer, causing the carpet to shudder so intensely that some of the screaming passengers almost slid off and were barely managing to hold onto its edge. Alice, having heard nothing but perceiving Twinkie’s predicament through communication with Joshua, assured the hostess that all was well, and to surrender her and Marian to their unknown fate rather than chance the fate of all.

“But you’ve done nothing wrong!” Twinkie protested.

“Of course not, ma’am, but it’s imperative you turn us over. It’s all part of Joshua’s plan.”

At Alice’s behest, Twinkie reluctantly relayed her agreement to the helicopter pilot who smirked, drew back his craft, and let down a ladder that swung above the carpet.

“What’s going on?” Marian demanded, and Alice explained to her their dilemma. Although distressed at having to abandon yet another newly purchased load of duty free, to Alice’s relief Marian demonstrated admirable trust, and complied by climbing the ladder into the helicopter.

Once inside the cockpit, handcuffs were clamped on their wrists, and blindfolds were bound around their eyes.

I suppose this whole exploit was designed to like get me used to these! Alice silently joked with Joshua, and he chuckled in response. She leaned over to Marian.

“Seems our adventures are far from over!” she whispered.

“In a strange way, I’m glad,” said Marian. “But I’m scared.”

“There’s no need to be,” said Alice. “The authors assured me that we would be rescued from any potentially death-dealing circumstances!”

“Colour me clueless,” said Marian.

“It’s going to be all right,” said Alice.

After about an hour of an infinitely more shuddering ride than that on the carpet—during which time the captors said nothing to one another or their captives—the helicopter settled onto the ground. Once their blindfolds were removed, Alice and Marian, despite being hampered by their handcuffs, managed to climb down the ladder.

“Hey, looks like we’ve landed in the Middle East,” said Marian.

“It appears so,” said Alice, shutting her eyes to the windswept sand. “Although...”

“Of course,” said Marian. “Where else do terrorists live?”

“Get movin’ guys!” barked one of their captors, jamming his machine gun into Alice’s back. “Over there.”

“You’re an *American*?” Marian exclaimed, as they trooped towards an enormous purple edifice with high-bulwarked walls that stretched from its sides to the horizon in both directions. Alice thought it all resembled something from ancient Babylon.

“Shaddap and keep walkin’,” said another.

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ALPhAMEGA AND FLAgS

Alice!—to quote an archetypical villain—‘we meet again!’” At first, Alice was unable to identify the tall figure striding towards them wearing a deep purple workout suit, tennis shoes, and sweatband, but as it drew closer, she recognised the sallow, saturnine features, the sweptback, oiled hair, and the piercing yet lightless eyes.

Truco!

“No need for the shackles!” he said, glaring at Alice’s captors. “When someone is helplessly in my custody, such tawdry show of force is an insult to me!”

The bodyguards hastened to unlock the handcuffs, and Truco stretched out a hand of welcome. Alice timidly shook it and shuddered, unable to bring herself to perform a curtsy. Truco laughed and wiped his sweating brow with the towel draped about his shoulders.

“I was working out, sweetheart, forgive the sweat. My wife will join us shortly—she’s having her weekly makeover. Er ... can I get you a drink?”

Alice shook her head. “I th-think not ... sir.”

“And your companion...?”

“I’ll take an espresso.”

“A talking puppet. Intriguing.”

This time, Marian gave no retort.

“But I know who you are, Princess Marina! You should congratulate me at having killed two birds with one stone.”

“Sounds awfully ominous,” said Alice. “Explain.”

“Well, you are both quite a catch. Alice for obvious reasons, and you, Marina because you abandoned your crown—a politically charged situation which I can use mightily for my benefit.”

Marian bowed her head and said nothing.

“Bring the puppet an espresso,” Truco agitatedly said to the guards, then dismissing them. “We can take it from here.”

He resumed his stride, and Alice and Marian trundled behind him.

“Look, Alice, my every intention—at least on my part—is to make this long-awaited reunion free from all vestiges of past hostilities. Come.”

Clasping a hand on Alice's shoulder making her shudder again, Truco led them into a courtyard, where above a pair of towering iron gates, a sweeping sign wrought in brass read STAGEWORLD.

At Truco's command the gates opened electronically, and the two girls gasped at the panorama before them. Colossal simulations of cities and streets in all manner of countries and environments spread as far as their eyes could see. In the midst of it all, battalions of movie cameras on dollies and cranes cruised among teeming directors, actors, and extras.

"Hey, it's a gigantic Hollywood *movie* set," said Marian.

"This is where it all begins," Truco said with a cryptic chuckle, "and *ends*."

"Ends?" said Alice.

"Yes, my dear. Alphamega Studios! As you can see, I concluded that it's easier to stage it all from a central point. After centuries of endeavouring to bring the 'mountain' to 'Mohammed,' I have found it more efficient to bring 'Mohammed' to the 'mountain.'"

Mystified, Alice wrinkled her nose, and Truco let a snicker bubble up into a triumphant cackle.

"Excuse us, sir," said a member of a group of men dressed in terrorist costumes and carrying machineguns. Alice recognised them as the men from the helicopter. Truco apparently did not.

"Speaking of Mohammed," he said, "what do you want?"

"Which studio are we to report to now, sir?"

"How would *I* know? I may be the sovereign of Stageworld Empire, but I do not involve myself with trifles. You have your itinerary, I assume."

"Yes. It was the Alice and Princess Marina's supposed 'welcomed by the terrorists' scene, and now...?"

"Inquire at one of the information centres."

The men ambled off, and Truco turned to Alice.

"Terrorist attack at a trade fair," he whispered, "somewhere in ... I forget. Anyway, it's supposed to have happened at ten o'clock this morning."

"But it's already six o'clock in the afternoon," said Alice.

"Doesn't matter," said Truco, "the world will get it on their news by this evening."

"How amazing," said Alice.

"And you thought you'd landed in the Mideast," Truco smugly said. "A testimony to Stageworld's authentic simulation! As you can see, we are situated in one of those rare locations on Planet Earth, where within a six-hundred-mile radius we can benefit from a vast variety of terrains. Snow-capped mountains to the north, desert and prairies to the south, forests and woodland to the east, and rolling fields to the west. A deity-send for Stageworld."

"So I see," said Alice. "Brandon once told me that Italy's equivalent of Hollywood, I forget the name, is situated in just such a place."

"But what about the news from the *real* Middle East?" Marian asked.

"It's blocked, baby, so who sees it? The few that do are inconsequential. Let's continue the tour. ..."

Truco broke off to welcome the approach of a tall, raven-haired woman wearing a long black cape and black leather boots. Alice recognised her from her experience with the cards.

“*Sharla!*”

“Darling!”

“Makeover done so soon?”

“I cut it short. Wouldn’t have missed this occasion for the *world*—oh, what a lame expression for me to use seeing as I ... *we* already have it!”

The woman leaned over and kissed the air, and Alice wincingly kissed her cheek.

“To what occasion do you refer?” said Alice.

“Meeting our nemesis!”

“Nemesis? I do believe you exaggerate.”

“Actually ... my wife and I *respect* you, Alice,” Truco said, momentarily disarming Alice with his sweet tone.

“Respect me?” she responded, and looked suspiciously over at Sharla Tann who nodded towards her husband.

“Very much so, dear,” Truco said. “I confess.”

To avoid appearing flattered, Alice feigned nonchalance. “Really? And why is that?”

“You see, Alice. You, being so deceptively naive and seemingly inconsequential have been one of my most formidable foes.”

Alice, smelling a rat, drew herself up to her full height. “That’s quite a statement. I venture to say it would merit some qualification.”

“Well,” Truco went on, “imagine. I have presidents, priests, and pop stars under my control along with the parade of Pavlov’s dogs, and one little girl in fancy dress can send all of Stageworld into a frenzy, influencing and subverting my subjects. How does that make you feel?”

“Rather proud of myself, actually,” said Alice. “However, should it truly be so, it is not *I* who am instigating such turbulence, but rather the power of...”

“Don’t say it, dear,” Sharla whispered, “you’ll only upset my husband unduly.”

“It’s okay, babe,” said Truco. “You’re speaking of *Him*, right, Alice? God?”

“I am, sir.”

“Of course! It’s His idea of a joke. I know the clichéd David-and-Goliath principle—take foolish insignificance to cripple the mighty! I must admit I wish I could somehow employ the same tactic. It seems to elude me, however. Inculcating* my subjects with the illusion of self-worth only works against it. What am I to do? Damned if I do, damned if I don’t.”

Alice giggled. “Literally. But I would appreciate a little further clarification as to exactly *how* little old me is disrupting your domain.”

“For one, Alice, I realised I was losing control of certain key elements ... influential figures. ...”

***inculcate**: impress on somebody’s mind through frequent, forceful repetition

“For instance,” said Sharla, “Lance Williams’ burning of the script that had been ‘dictated’ to him by one of my husband’s nearest and dearest henchpersons had not gone unnoticed. We were in non-agreement with his blatant non-alignment.”

“But that had little to do with me,” said Alice.

“Maybe. But then you influenced Punch and Judy’s professors to twist their shows into lovey-dovey, non-aggressive fare for kids. Even to the point that instead of whacking Judy with his stick, he now gives her a hug and a kiss. Absolute perversion.”

“Wonderful,” said Alice.

“However,” said Truco, “for me, Sir Dickey Lewd was the last straw.”

“Dickey Lewd?” Alice exclaimed. “The singer in that punk rock band *Elsie Dee* ... I mean ... *Lowest Common Denominator*? They replaced the Strolling Bones the following night.”

“That is correct.”

“But he was most dreadfully offended because I...”

“Was. Apparently, after he’d vented his ire about being with you on *What Will She Say Next?*, he thought twice and publicly reneged on his opinion of you. He’s going around now proclaiming that you are indeed a daughter of a King, ruler of the Kingdom of Space City. *Intolerable!*”

“I think it’s awesome actually,” said Marian. “Dickey Lewd’s cool for an older guy. Pretty *hot*.”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Marian, *please*. That has absolutely nothing to do with this whole issue.”

“Even more non-tolerable for *me*, though,” Sharla said, shaking her head sadly, “was losing a very near, dear and trusted henchwoman in the person of Velma Slithers. After coming in contact with you, Alice, she absolutely *botched* her job by arranging you space to promote your views at a press conference. ...”

“Which you must admit I turned to our advantage, dear,” said Truco, “by blocking it and using most of its footage to create ‘Malice in Wonderland.’”

“Maybe so, but the crowning crime was that during the press conference, Velma accepted Alice’s invitation to Josh...”

“So, in light of all this subversion,” said Truco, “I told my henchmen...”

“Hench*persons*,” Sharla corrected.

“Right. I told them to get out there on the world stage and find out what the heaven was going on. They found out all right. The heaven was *you*, Alice!”

Alice grinned. “*Splendid*.”

Sharla Tann smiled patronisingly at her husband and then addressed Alice. “Occasionally my husband gets a little worked up, dear, and I think it would be an appropriate time to retire to our guesting chalet for dinner, and hopefully far lighter conversational topics.”

“A good idea,” Truco muttered.

“And oh,” said Sharla, turning to Marian, “let’s not neglect to acknowledge our charming little puppet friend. You and your naughty little country ... er ... what’s the name of it again?”

“San Romani.”

“Ah, yes. It has been somewhat of a thorn in my husband’s side.”

“More like a mosquito on an elephant,” said Truco.

Marian glowered, and as they strolled along Sharla linked her arm in Alice’s. “Anyway, my dearie, it has been an admittedly overwhelming day for us all, and you must be rather tired.”

“I am, rather,” Alice said, deciding it was unnecessary to address Sharla and her husband with titles of respect. It had apparently been inoffensive to them so far, and so Alice remained calmly detached. They presently entered a sparsely but classily furnished and low-lit living room of a sprawling “Ultimate” bungalow.

“I am sure some respite of light-hearted ‘fellowship,’ as you call it, would be in order,” said Sharla. “We can have dinner, and then you can both retire to our ‘honoured guest’ rooms in the Shelton Glitz Hotel.

“It’s true, my husband admires you very much,” she continued in a whisper to Alice, seeing Truco was perusing a Compact Disc tower with Marian. “He mentioned to me earlier how he wants to make this time unique, even down to the choice of music. ...”

Strains of what Alice could have perceived as contemporary Christian music suddenly surged from the speaker system, strategically situated for enhanced aural experience.

If I ever get to Heaven, what will I see...?

Sharla smiled. “Which we trust is to your liking?”

“Not mine,” said Marian.

“It is ... er ... rather sweet,” said Alice. “But I didn’t think that you and Mr. Truco would appreciate ... er...”

“That’s where you and others of your ilk ... I mean others *like* you are misled, dear girl. Truco and I are very open-minded in matters where music, art, poetry, literature, and even religious sentiment are concerned. There’s room for everything in *Stageworld*. Every opinion and belief system has equal voice. We regard no tenet as being above another.”

“Hmmm,” said Alice.

“You are not convinced?”

Alice frowned. “I thought you were against *all* religions.”

Truco laughed. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“You know, ‘exalting yourself above all that is called God or that is worshipped.’”

“Ah, you quote the Bible, Alice! Very astute.”

“I will,” said Alice, “even though you hate it.”

“Hate it? Come, come. Contrary to popular assumption, I’m not against the Bible. In fact, I have promoted *hundreds* of *modern* versions.”

“Why would you of all people do that?”

“Ah! Simple. Suppressing the Bible in the past has only worked *against* my plan and made it more sought after. I’m constantly adjusting my tactics too, you know.”

“So I see,” said Alice. “That’s why so many of them are at odds with one another and say different things. Confusing.”

“Actually, my husband’s idea is rather to avail humankind with plenty of options,” Sharla said soothingly. “He just takes exception to the way you and your sort quote it and use it. It’s a little too *authorised*.”

“Would you care to explain?”

“Well, Alice,” said Truco, “you promote it as though it has authority or something. In order for me to make headway in my ‘monkey business,’ there can exist no challenging or even questioning so-called authority.”

“You see,” Sharla interjected in her unwavering attempt to smooth over her husband’s presentation, “he would like to help his public choose a Bible that they can understand or suits them better or is non-offensive. His latest promotion combines all those qualities—the Devised Stunted Millennium Version. A *masterpiece*.”

Alice was evidently unimpressed.

“Alice waves an entirely different ‘flag,’ my dear,” said Truco.

“Flag?” said Alice.

“Yes. What papers do your parents subscribe to?”

Alice thought for a few moments. “Oh, GNs, *Links*, WS pubs. They’re like magazines.”

“I’m specifically asking about newspapers.”

“Well, they get the *END* and sometimes the local newspaper. Daddy watches BBC World, and looks a lot of it up online. Why?”

“Just wanted to know which flags they are waving.”

“But what does all that have to do with flags?”

“Show her the collection, baby,” said Truco. “I’ll send for hors d’oeuvres and get acquainted with our little puppet princess.”

Taking Alice’s hand, Sharla Tann led her out to a large showroom across the road in which was draped hundreds of flags and banners, and walls papered with pages and covers from periodicals, magazines, and newspapers. Each strangely purported obviously conflicting presentation and ideologies, and bore titles such as *Free Truth*, *Model Citizen*, *Independent Voice*, *The National Institution*, *Inside Scoop*, and *The State Sentinel*. Some even appeared to expose all that Truco stood for.

“You see—*flags*,” said Sharla. “That’s what my husband calls his publications. They help us keep a finger on the ‘pulse’ of the various sectors of society.”

“Amazing,” said Alice, inspecting a red banner bearing a black imprinted portrait of a bearded man wearing a beret. “Brandon used to have a T-shirt with this face on it...”

“One of our manufactured ‘martyrs,’” said Sharla. “We financed him to destabilize and pave the way for us to pick up the pieces.”

Alice strolled over to a wall covered with a world map. “And what is this with only numbered sections? Where are the countries?”

“My husband’s—*our* vision. Eutopia one, two, three, etc. Gone will be the confines and bigotry of tradition and nationalism in religion, race, and creed. A dream, is it not?”

“A dream, Sharla? Or a *night*...?”

A bell rang in the hallway.

“Dinner is served,” said Sharla.



“So, how do I control the world en masse?” Truco was saying as candles flickered and waiters hovered silently around a long ebony table. “A good question, Alice.”

He, Sharla, and Marian were sipping shark soup, the meal’s second course, and Alice, although ravenously hungry, could only bring herself to peck on the hors d’oeuvres.

“Simple,” Truco went on. “Virtual puppetry. Five fingers to control their senses, and five to control their movements,”

“Their movements?” Alice asked.

“Of *course*,” said Marian, with an air of authority. “The middle finger controls the head, the thumb and pinkie control the legs, and the other two control the arms.”

“But what about the way we think?” said Alice. “Isn’t it true that the way we think affects what we do?”

“Not always,” Marian replied. “And neither in my case did what I was programmed to do affect what I thought. Those masters couldn’t change the way I think, and they hated me for it. Oh, they tried, and I got rid of them.”

“Puppets getting rid of their masters,” said Truco. “An interesting concept.”

“More than a concept,” said Marian. “They could control my hands and my feet and even my head, but none of them could control my mind. Being a marionette, I have a mind of my own. I think for myself.”

Truco and Sharla snickered knowingly.

“What’s so funny?” Marian asked.

“You just *think* you do, dear girl,” said Sharla. “You have become just another who unwittingly gave themselves over to *our* invisible puppetry.”

“The most insidious control,” said Truco, “that ‘puppetrated’ through the idea of so-called independent thought.”

“But their senses?” Alice asked. “How on earth do you do that?”

“You’ll see,” said Truco.

“Not hungry, Alice?” Sharla said, once the main course had arrived.

“A little.”

“Then eat up. Surely, your Joshua wouldn’t mind. Test your key power ... to the *limit*.”

The first temptation! Alice thought.

“Do you love Sharla, Mr. Truco?” she suddenly asked in response to an inward prompting. Marian looked at her in shock.

“What?” he and Sharla exclaimed in one voice. An uncomfortable silence followed.

“And do you love your *husband*, Sharla?”

The woman seemed shaken, and took some time to answer.
“Wh-what’s *love* got to do with it?”

“*What’s love got to do with it, got to do with it?*” Marian sang, bopping her tiny wooden figure.

“I inspired those lyrics,” Truco said with a smirk.

“Cool song,” Marian remarked.

“Not when you consider its inference,” said Alice.

“Wh-why do you ask, Alice?” Sharla asked, still obviously shaken.

“Oh, I merely wondered.”

“Well, for your information, Alice, Sharla and I have a strictly business arrangement,” Truco said.

“We do, darling?”

“Yes, honey. Remember? Our liaison is not based on sappy, nonsensical ideas.”

“Really? I remember no such thing.”

“What’s all this in aid of?” Marian whispered to Alice.

Alice winked. “Divide and conquer,” she whispered back while Truco and Sharla launched into a heated debate about the nature of their relationship.

“Uh, unless you young ladies desire a dessert, I think our ... umm ... evening is about to close,” Sharla stonily announced after a while.

“Yes,” said Truco. “We could reconvene in the morning when we are fresh and well rested. We could breakfast together at the Shelton Glitz?” Alice and Marian looked at each other and shrugged.

“I suppose,” said Alice.

“Very well. I’ll have a chauffeur take you there.”

“Though I make my bed in hell,” Alice whispered with a smile, as she sank into the mattress of her hotel suite’s bed and lay her head on its sumptuous purple silk pillow, “behold, Thou art there.”

As abhorrent as having to accept Truco’s and Sharla’s dubious hospitality was, Alice felt perfectly at peace as she clutched her keys turned to scissors and calmly continued to commit her concerns and questions into the surrounding eerie darkness, knowing that Joshua was, as always, listening. Presently, she closed her eyes and her smile broadened while Joshua, as always, answered.

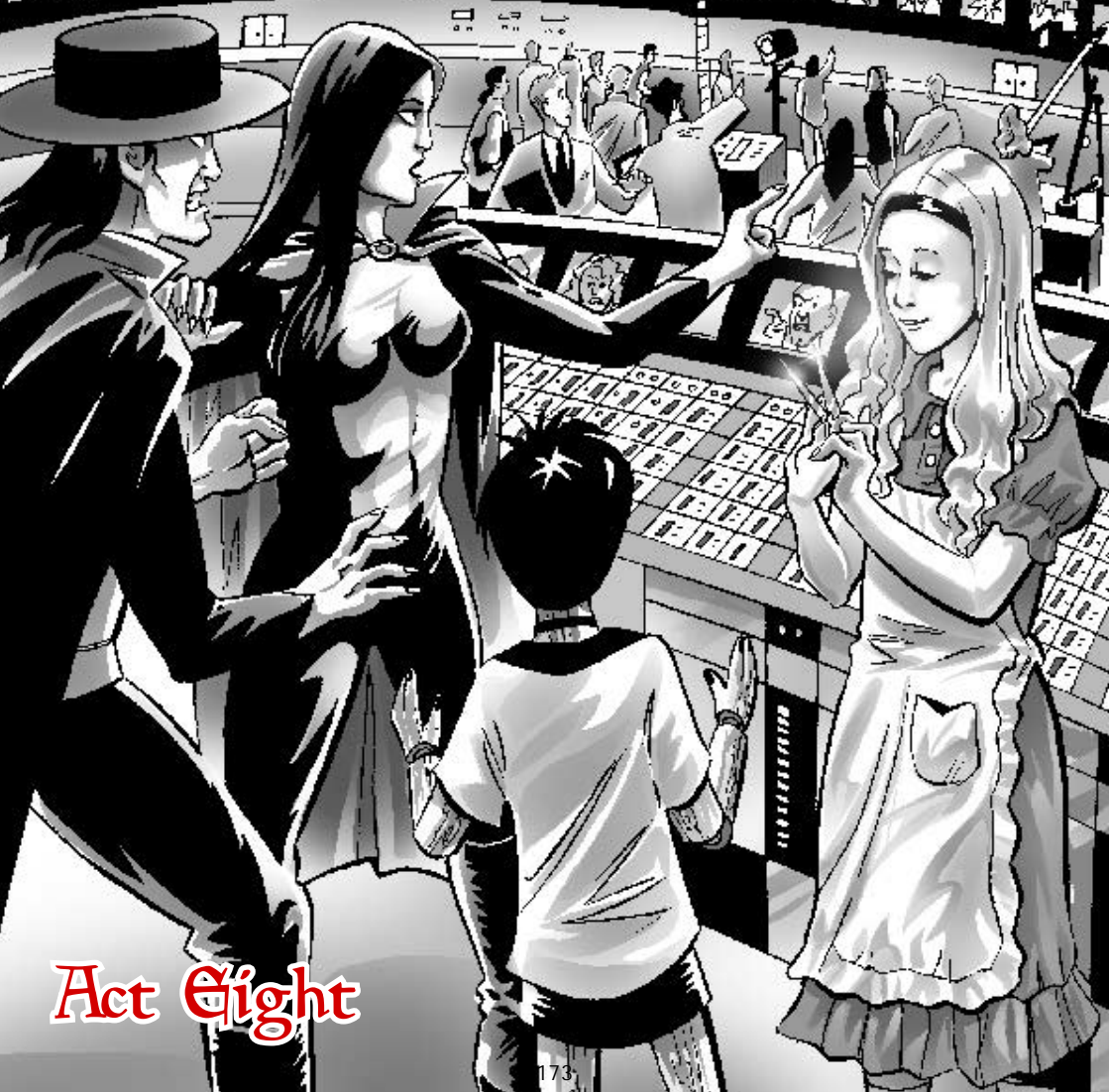
To be continued...

Alice Cuts the Strings

HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Issue 251—AM

A Tale in Eight A.C.T.S.



Act Eight

The story so far: Alice again falls into the hands of Truco, her long-time nemesis and mastermind of mayhem in Alice's out-of-time adventure, only to find that he would like to reconcile their differences ... but at what cost?

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

So, how did my charming little captives sleep?" Truco laughingly asked Alice and Marian at breakfast the next morning as he smacked on a strawberry cream-filled crepe.

Marian, sipping an espresso, mumbled an "okay." Alice, although she had slept extremely well, was mortified at having finally yielded her ravening hunger to Truco and Sharla's gastronomic hospitality and said nothing. She absentmindedly tapped an item of silverware on the tablecloth and gazed up and around at the plush luxury of the Shelton Glitz Hotel restaurant with its high ceiling and fluted silver columns.

Truco licked his lips and smirked. "Come, come, Alice. You must admit that I have every reason to gloat. Grant me at least this much."

"Darling," said Sharla, "let the poor girl enjoy her breakfast. This was supposed to be a cordial visit—a time of healing, bridging differences, and finding closure. Ever since the garden."

"The Garden of Eden?" Alice asked.

At her question, Truco and Sharla filled the restaurant's voluminous atmosphere with cackles, which continued until Sharla caught herself and apologised.

"Indirectly, I suppose," she said. "Please do bear with us, Alice. Actually, we find your naïvety novel and amusing. I'm sure your question was well intended, but my husband was referring to your experience with the seeds and the 'magic garden,' as it became known in some obscure children's fable."

Alice pushed her half-eaten plate away. "I beg to differ. I am neither the character in that parabolic* dream, nor the one portrayed in these other books that so many attribute to me. I am Alice Godley, daughter

HL: Note that this story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy

For children ages 12 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

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of Eileen and Malcolm Godley, and sister to Brandon Godley, residing in a Family International Home at number seven, Birdwood Lane, Winsley Barnes, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.”

“Then who *was* the girl I approached in that garden scenario?” Truco demanded.

“One of Grandpa’s daughters. At least that is what I have heard.”

“Then she was your mother or your aunt?”

Alice rolled her eyes. “No! I understood you were well aware ... now who is naïve?”

“Whatever is past is past, darling,” Sharla said to her husband. “Let’s get on with the ‘here and now’ and the future for God... er goodness’ sake.”

“I agree,” said Truco. “So back to the point, Alice. I trust you will grant me a while to gloat over having captured one of my most vicious enemies on the face of this Earth.”

“Of course,” said Alice. “But do you realise that you are being watched at this very moment?”

“*Watched?* By whom?”

Alice smiled, and Truco shot a bitter glance upward. “*Him?*”

“Him, of course,” Alice replied. “But also the readers.”

“Readers?”

“Yes. They’re seeing you and your sham *Stageworld* for who you really are. They will never ever again be able to watch your television shows or read your magazines and newspapers without smelling a rat.”

Truco looked all around and above himself in mock bewilderment.

“Hidden cameras, Alice?”

Alice shook her head. “It’s all being recorded, written down.”

“You’re *lying*.”

“Nay, Truco, even as we speak, it is going into a databank that will be printed and published in a series of magazines.”

“Impossible. I’ll amputate any such presumptuous arm of the media.”

“You are welcome to try,” Alice said calmly, “but so far you are merely a character in a story—a character that is becoming increasingly difficult to like.”

“Mark my words, Alice. I’ll *block* it! It’ll never reach the public’s eyes or ears.”

***parabolic**: resembling or expressed by parables

“Who is the publishing house?” Sharla inquired of Alice.

“*Heaven’s Library*.”

“Never heard of it,” said Truco. “It’s indie?”

“What is that, if I may ask?”

“Independent. Free Press ... so called.”

“I suppose you could refer to it as such,” said Alice.

“Pah,” said Truco. “There is no such thing. You saw the flag room.”

“I did. But none of our Family publications are among them, including *Heaven’s Library*.”

Truco turned to Sharla. “They’re not, darling?”

Sharla shook her head. “No ‘Heaven’s Library’ or any of the other said periodicals. Seems it’s *truly* indie.”

“You mean they have been printing and distributing outside my channels?”

“Apparently, darling. Behind our backs and under our noses.”

Marian giggled. “How on earth can one accomplish that?”

“Stay out of this,” said Truco, as he turned back to Alice. “How big is its distribution?”

“Within the Family, I would imagine around a few thousand. Not sure, really. Depends on the number of families and Homes we have.”

“A few thousand?” Truco said with a laugh. “A drop in the bucket. What on earth was I getting so worked up about?”

“You have good reason to be concerned, darling,” said Sharla, “should that few hundred consist of youngsters of Alice’s calibre. You could safely multiply that figure to the power of itself and have some idea of what we’re up against in terms of potentiality.”

“Do you mean to tell me that there could be more youngsters with her initiative running around wreaking havoc?”

“Havoc?” Alice asked.

“Yes. Do you realise what upheavals you have caused in my *Stageworld* domain?”

Alice grinned. “Some ... I am sure. A lot ... hopefully. And I pray that others of my station in the Family are doing the same.”

“Wreaking havoc?”

“To your domain, of course.”

“What?”

“Simmer down darling,” Sharla whispered. “You’re sweating.”

Truco tugged at his collar. “Finish up your breakfast—I want to show you girls something.”



Cruising for some time in Truco's air-conditioned, chauffeur-driven, purple limousine with smoked-grey windows enabled Alice and Marian to leisurely observe just what comprised their captor's realm. *Stageworld* was in fact a vast, walled-in metropolis designed on a circular basis, with high-rise apartments, mega-shopping malls, supermarkets, cinema complexes, clubs, churches, temples, and other places of worship. To Alice, its glittering display resembled a gambling playground in the Useless Status—only much larger—and evidently most of the city's domestic, recreational, and purchasing facilities had been constructed around this perimeter in order to leave its centre open for the primary purpose of *Stageworld*. As much as she tried to conceal it, Truco sensed Alice was impressed.

"Because citizens of *Stageworld* cannot leave, we have endeavoured to make it as luxurious and comfortable as we can. In fact, no one has ever desired to leave, right, baby?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Sharla.

Maybe it was due to the city's circular nature, but for Alice, the journey to their destination seemed to be taking forever. Thus she decided to silently pray and take some meditation time with her beloved Joshua. Knowing that he'd always taken care of her despite the cliffhanging, nail-biting experiences set up by the authors of these adventures, Alice nevertheless did not want to take such deliverances for granted, and so committed her following words and actions to Him.

Finally, they turned and cruised down a freeway until they pulled up in front of a colossal, black, dome-shaped structure. As soon as the limousine had come to a halt, uniformed men descended upon it to open its doors and escort its four passengers into the building.

Inside were hundreds of banks of computers, video equipment, mixers, and monitors with almost as many technicians to operate them. The roof resembled a giant planetarium, apparently dedicated to projecting three-dimensional holographic images of Truco himself.

"In preparation for my husband's grand 'entrance,'" Sharla said cryptically. "We just have to make him 'speak'—you know, sync up sound to his image. It's a work in progress."

Marian looked puzzled, but Alice knew exactly what the woman was alluding to.

"As you are well aware by now, my dears," said Truco, settling down into a large, crimson leather-upholstered swivel chair, with Sharla doing likewise beside him, "my power stretches over the whole world, not

just the Useless Status. Thanks to my Hugh and Krye news agencies staging multiple scenarios—corrupt regimes, uprisings, politics, and pestilences. Believe it or not, some things we stage for fun just to watch the public dance! It’s our kickback-and-relax entertainment!”

Marian shook her head in disbelief.

“For instance,” Truco went on, “to have a little recreational giggle, a few colleagues and I recently cooked up a bee flu pandemic scare supposedly spread through infected honey. ... Heard of it?”

Alice shook her head.

“We called it *Anthophilitis*.”

“Oh yeah,” said Marian. “It was all over the papers a couple of months ago. They say it affects the nervous system. Haven’t touched a drop of honey since.”

“Bravo! It *worked*. Even on a *literal* puppet without nerves! Unless they’re part of your wood grain?”

Marian simmered, but said nothing.

“See?” said Truco. “I can snow whole nations with a little laboratory footage woven together with micro to macrocosm simulation. No one can prove it by sight, even if they had the time to, so they take our word for it.”

“Our?”

“Global Wellness Organisation for instance. As if I care a microbe about the world’s health.”

“But why promulgate* such falsehood?” Alice asked.

“To test the market, my dear,” said Sharla. “Control the food chain by crippling agriculture even down to the teensiest bee farm. PNI is our worst enemy.”

“PNI?”

“Plebeian Nutritional Independence,” Truco dryly replied, and let out the familiar cackle that never failed to chill Alice’s blood. “Ah, but I am boring you with trifles, dear girl.”

“Not trifles, dear,” said Sharla. “Alice is well aware of the import of your discourse.”

“Oh, and by the way, we’re even toying with the possibility of promoting Specious Alice Pleasance Syndrome—SAPS.”

“I don’t think I’d take too kindly to my name being associated with another disease, flu, or anything,” said Alice. “I have already suffered much malignity with so-called AERS.”*

***promulgate**: declare something officially; especially to publicize formally that a law or decree is in effect

“Ah, it depends if you are willing to take the credit or the blame.”

“I do not quite follow,” said Alice.

“I can arrange it so that you are blamed for having it and spreading it, or for discovering it. Depends on your choices.”

“This is a most peculiar proposal, Mr. Truco.”

“Pick your scandal, your syndrome, your prize, your program. It’s all there for the taking. Tailor made.”

“Really?” said Marian.

Truco paused and looked at the wide-eyed puppet. “You’re *intrigued*.”

“Well, er ... no ... not *exactly*, *sir*. *But how does it work?*”

“Simple. The secret is to create the image first. Whatever it is—the movie, the model, the music. You see, it’s more economical to throw the image out to the public, see what gets the interest, and then create the movie, the model, or the music to match!”

“Why?”

“Ah! The hearing is the last sense that mortals pay attention to, yet it is the most insidious of powers to exploit. That’s all it took with the first woman, and I should know. The first is visual. Grab them by the sight of their eyes while working on their hearing, and you’ve got ’em.”

“But what about the *sixth* sense?” Alice asked.

Truco laughed. “Sixth sense, dear? Forget it! Once I’ve bombarded and filled all the others, it’s usually a done deal. Should it still not have worked with some, I work on that sixth *uncommon* sense. For most, sight and sound is enough.

“Here, let me show you,” he said as he clutched a control resembling a joystick. Rotating it, he pointed to the master monitor in the middle of the bank with what must have been at least a twenty-foot-wide screen. “See? This is now showing the activity on monitor number fifteen. A goose-stepping* army in some Eastern country always intrigues people. ”

“Okay, then,” Truco said, “now I play this man’s face against it. ...”

The scene changed to an Oriental-looking general dressed in a grey army uniform with red epaulets,* shaking his fist and giving what appeared to be a vitriolic tirade.

“What is he saying?” Marian asked.

***AERS:** Acute Era Reversal Syndrome. See *Alice and the Cards*. (HLs #232, 234)

***goose step:** a military parade step executed by swinging the legs sharply from the hips and keeping the knees locked

***epaulet:** decoration on shoulder of garment

“Apparently he was campaigning about the state of the roads in his country. The viewers won’t know this, of course, and our voiceovers will indicate otherwise. All we need is what appears to be a fanatical, dictatorial speech, a superimposition of his country’s flag, a couple of thousand goose-stepping uniformed extras carrying plastic machine-gun facsimiles, and *voilà*.”

“So this president doesn’t really have an army like that?”

Truco shrugged. “Frankly, it doesn’t matter. The point is to undermine his credibility on a global level and bring him and his country down. We can then walk in and pick up the pieces.”

“We?” Alice asked.

“Yes, dear. *We*. You can be a part of it.”

“Part of what?”

“I do not speak lightly when I say ... *world domination*.”

Alice chuckled. “Being but thirteen years of age, I feel far from qualified for global despotism just yet!”

Truco waved his finger in mock reproach. “Ah, you think too lowly of yourself, Alice Pleasance. In fact, rumour has it that you were coronated, am I right?”

“Oh, *that*. It was nothing, really. Merely a...”

Alice stopped and flashed on Joshua’s joyfully encouraging expression during the closing ceremony in her experience with the cards, and a pang of shame hit her heart.

“Yes, I was coronated. But right now, seeing as how I am a princess, my crown is but a tiara.”

Truco chuckled. “It’s strangely coincidental, but just the other day when my wife and I were observing you on *Stageworld Interlink*, we agreed that you do carry a distinguished air of royal deportment.”

“Wh-why ... thank you,” Alice said, squirming in the heat of flattery.

“Sharla even joked that you should give her lessons on stately carriage! Right, dear?”

Sharla nodded. “Absolutely. How *I* perceive it, Alice, it’s time to claim your rightful heritage—your full *crown*. I see you as a girl with integrity—maintaining a strong desire to right the wrongs, change the world, bring hope to the hopeless, light to those in darkness, et cetera, et cetera.”

“I suppose you could say that,” said Alice.

“You *suppose*?” said Truco. “Look, I am the first to admit I have my faults, and those more glaring than anyone. To be misunderstood

for centuries, nay aeons, is, to put into your terms, a ‘cross’ that you must admit would be difficult to bear. I know you understand the pain of being misunderstood when you mean well.”

“Granted,” said Alice. “I have been misunderstood many times. For instance, our cook gets awfully impatient with me. Like the other day regarding the burnt pan on the stove. It was Teflon, you see, and...”

“Trifles, trifles,” said Truco. “But I’m getting your point, and I trust you are getting mine.”

“Which is?”

“That regardless of differences in opinion, personality quirks and suchlike, the two of us could be a formidable team in shaping mindsets and turning this decrepit world around. As my wife brought out, you are a powerful influence, inspiring many of your age to follow their destiny despite their feelings of inadequacy. True?”

“I suppose you could say so.”

“There is no ‘suppose’ about it, Queen Alice. You are a force to be reckoned with, and I feel I can do nothing but acknowledge this, humbly tip my hat, and request that you join me in the cause.”

“Not everyone out there goes along with your program, Mr. Truco,” said Marian, who had been enduring Truco and Alice’s discourse in resentful silence. “There happens to be people who are exposing things.”

“Like who?”

“Mr. Sage for one,” said Alice.

“*The* Mr. ‘Sage,’ as in wisdom?”

“He *is* very wise,” said Alice.

Truco laughed. “*Wise?* Maybe so, but the old codger poses little threat. Still, he could be useful.”

“What do you mean?” Alice asked. “He knows ever such a lot about your tricks and he wants to expose them.”

“He’s welcome to keep trying. I may even put him on my weekly *Babble On in Babylon* TV show where he can express his views to his heart’s content among a slew of crackpots.”

“He’s not a crackpot.”

“I know he’s not. Like you, he’s one of the few who’s got it right. It’s up to my Hugh and Krye image association experts to arrange how the public perceives him. Throwing prophets and crackpots together confuses the masses, and they in turn throw the truth out with the lie. Brilliant, no?”

“Devilishly so,” said Alice.

“Well said! But you would probably be interested in what we have done to cultivate the public’s perception of *your* image.”

“Very,” said Alice. “Although I’m sure that whatever you have done will come as no surprise.”

After giving instructions to an assistant, Truco settled back into his chair. “Here is some select footage from *Malice in Wonderland*—a documentary masterpiece.”

“We’ve heard of it,” said Marian. “It deceived Anne Hastaway for awhile.”

A young man’s face came on the screen. He seemed familiar to Alice and Marian, but they were unable to place it until he spoke.

“Yes,” he was saying with frantically feigned sincerity. “We were commissioned to bring this evil one to justice, but Alice exercised her witch-like powers in an attempt to deceive us.”

“It’s Harry Hooligan!” said Alice.

“Cleaned up his image,” said Marian. “But I thought he was apprehended?”

“We have since arranged his exoneration,” said Sharla.

“Watch,” said Truco. “And listen to this. ...”

“Alice was successful with Larry who consequently thwarted the mission,” Harry was saying as they tuned back into the documentary. “He even went as far as proclaiming that Alice was a *saint*.” Harry lowered his head and shook it in pretence of disbelief.

“I think I could have rescued Marina, but she was also under Alice’s wicked spell,” he whined over slow-motion scenes of Alice on stage. “I tell you, this girl is the epitome of *evil*. I *thank God* I got away.”

Even though Alice was simmering at Harry’s closing comment, she and Marian fell into fits of giggles.

“You laugh,” said Truco, as Alice’s image drifted across the screen. “But watch *this*. ...”

So who is this Joshua? Is he some secret lover?

He’s very close to me. The proof of Joshua’s Christmas pudding, if I may say so, is in its tasting.

“Do you remember saying that?”

“I do,” said Alice. “But not in reply to that question. It’s pieced together from various answers I gave at that press conference.”

Truco cackled. “Brilliant, wouldn’t you say, Alice? And this...?”

So you did not start the fire, Miss Pleasance?

I’m a wimpy, half-arsed worker doing a wimpy, half-arsed job!

“Yes, but that’s only the second half of what I said, and it wasn’t in response to that question either!”

“And notice how we digitally removed the light from your pupils? Genius.”

“You look positively scary, Alice,” said Marian.

Alice shook her head, despairingly. “I just wish Brandon could see this.”

“All is not lost, Alice. If we come to some agreement, all this can be ‘history’ as you say. In no time I can so ‘puppetrate’ public opinion that they will in fact perceive you as a saint, and this Harry Hooligan as the whimpering little pipsqueak he is.”

“Yes, Mr. Truco, but I still think that *truly* bad stuff is being exposed,” said Marian.

“Like what?”

“Political corruption and stuff.”

“Certainly,” said Truco and laughed. “Along with local fluff and human interest stories, we’re sure to highlight some idealistic reporter that exposes so-called State secrets, political corruption, or environmental exploitation. This inculcates* the viewers with a smug illusion that they can trust the integrity of my media to keep them informed.”

“Okay, but sooner or later, people are going to find out this is all staged,” said Marian.

“Impossible,” Truco replied. “*Stageworld* has more fiercely stringent security than even the Useless Status.”

“Yah. But I still don’t think the majority swallows all this.”

Truco smirked and stepped up to one of the controls in front of the vast bank of screens. “Let me show you something.”

Suddenly each screen split into a mosaic of what must have been a thousand tiny scenes. With the use of a large jog wheel, Truco zeroed in on one that showed a middle-class American family staring at them while sitting in couches, guzzling Coca-Cola and gobbling from gigantic bags of potato crisps. He toggled onto another screen, and focused on a group of men leaning around a bar, clutching beers and wearing the same stupefied expression. Another scene showed a woman slumped in a dismal disarrayed flat, with a toddler perched on her lap and a cigarette perched on her gaping lower lip as she too, stared insensibly out at them. Alice gathered that she lived in a slum.

Cackling exultantly, Truco then quickly toggled through more flashing scenes such as living rooms, workstations, bars, airports, guerrilla

***inculcate**: to teach and impress by frequent repetitions or admonitions

gatherings in bamboo huts and other locations that Alice found difficult to place, all showing gormless people staring at them.

“Wait!” Alice exclaimed as a scene of a group of injured soldiers sitting in an infirmary flashed on the screen. “It’s *him*. ...”

“Him *who*?” Marian asked.

“It’s too late, it’s gone ... the scene. Oh alas, alas ... please, Mr. Truco, can you go back to that scene of the soldiers in the hospital?”

“Scan through a million screens, Alice? Forget it. It’ll be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Anyway, there are *billions* like this, girls! Don’t tell *me* they’re not swallowing it.”

“Are you filming them?” Marian asked.

“It’s all going into a databank, but they don’t know it! *Smile*, you idiots, you’re on candid camera!”

“But they are looking at us,” said Alice. “They *must* know they’re being filmed.”

“They’re not looking at *us*, sweetie,” said Sharla, “they’re glued to their TV sets. In fact, many of them are watching that very *Malice in Wonderland* show. Prime time in the Useless Status and your home country.”

“See?” said Truco. “Each of their television sets not only transmits to them but films and transmits back to *me*.”

“This is rather amazing, actually,” said Alice. “Because Brandon—that’s my brother—recently saw a futuristic movie called *Hidden Agenda* that showed people being filmed and controlled by their television sets. He said it was heavy but extremely farfetched.”

“I saw it, too,” said Marian. “It was *ridiculously* exaggerated, and a lot of critics said it was more like a conspiracy theory farce.”

Sharla clapped with glee. “Wonderful! I commissioned that movie *myself* to put people off the scent. See, Truco, honey? Despite your reservations, it *worked*.”

“Admirably,” said Truco. “If it can work on the elect ... electric umm...”

“*There*, Alice, my husband and I are letting you in on some *true* ‘State Secrets!’”

“But why? Why would you be so dreadfully candid?”

“To rub it in, little miss! To rub *sodium* into the wound of knowing that we control the minds of the masses and there is *nothing* that you or anybody else can do about it!”

“This is most awful,” said Alice. “I wish Daddy could see this. He’s ever so much into the British news.”

Sharla smiled patronisingly and stood up. “Anyway, dear girl, I believe it’s time to lighten the proceedings. Actually, my husband has *nutshelled*

most of his stratagem in a most delightfully entertaining song and dance routine.”

Truco abashedly lowered his head. “You know I’m not a performer, darling.”

“You’re *excellent*.”

“See? *Totally biased*,” Truco said to Alice, who remained stone-faced.

“Please?” Sharla pleaded. “After all, honey, you’ve said yourself that this is all just an act anyway. The girls will be so thrilled. It’ll show them that we have a lighter side.”

“Very well,” Truco said sheepishly and called for a stage crew.

“Let’s situate ourselves over there,” said Sharla, pointing to a curtained area above a flight of gold-fringed, red-carpeted stairs that led to a large amphitheatre. “It’s where my husband and I preview significant presentations. Count yourself privileged.”

Alice had no qualms manifesting her displeasure and saying nothing.

EVIL PUPPETRATION

L ights, cameras, *action!*”

At the cue of a drum roll, the stage curtains drew apart revealing a semicircle of scantily clad dancing girls and lithe males in sheer black nylon body suits all bathed in deep red lighting. Following a few bars of smooth rhythmical music, they sprang into motion. At a particularly auspicious moment in the musical score, Truco, wearing a Spanish hat and wielding a black and white cane resembling a magic wand, sidestepped and tap-danced into the foreground, his scarlet-lined black cape flipping and spinning in coordination with his snake-like movements.

“He actually knows how to dance pretty cool,” said Marian. “Rather sensual.”

She and Sharla Tann were mesmerised. Alice remained silent.

“Yes, what can I say?” Sharla said to Alice, noticing her disinterest. “I’m biased.”

Truco then launched into a rap that caused Alice and even Marian to roll their eyes.

Now you see me, now you don't.

Now you hear me, now you won't.

I'm over here—I'm over there.

*Behind this bugaboo and scare.
(Boo! Chant the background singers.)*

*Paranoia from my ilk
'Bout bran and Soya, meat and milk,
(Boo!)
Nuts and lactose, salt and wheat,
You're petrified of every bite you eat.
(Boo!)*

*We'll even scare you off your fish.
Until you're spurning every dish,
Unless it bears the approbations
Of my food and drug administrations.*

*It isn't by the balls I've got 'em,
It's by the stomach walls—the bottom
Line's, the chain of food's the shackle
That reels them in like fisherman's tackle.*

*'Cos I'm the Evil Puppeteer,
Masqueradin'
As one sincere.
Puppetratin'
With strings of fear,
I'm the Evil Puppeteer!*

*Paupers make the world's top ten
Of the so-called richest men.
But their billions are zilch related
To zillions I've accumulated!
So don't imagine that with this wealth
I give a damn for global health.*

*My propaganda's foggy cloud
Covers like a smoggy shroud
Those who on the treadmill trudge
Swallowing my sensational sludge.
(Boo!)*

*It's not the so-called greenhouse gases
Turning humans into asses,
(Boo!)
But widescreen gamma and printer's ink
That's crippling their means to think,
(Boo!)
And perforates with lies and fear
Their cerebral ozone layer.
These, the truly viral strains
Are eating holes into their brains.*

*'Cos I'm the Evil Puppeteer,
Masqueradin'
As one sincere.
Puppetratin'
With strings of fear,
I'm the Evil Puppeteer!*

*Behold your leaders, oh ye cattle,
Each one I'll soon destroy by tattle
Spread like dung through scandal's smear,
And leave but my men of the year.*

*Through scoundrel's galleries, halls of fame,
I can tarnish or acclaim
Presidents, pop stars, priests, and popes,
On whom you vainly pin your hopes.*

*Like bygone miracle penicillin
Has now become a toxic villain,
To your pity a rogue appeals
And turns your heroes into heels.*

*'Cos I'm the Evil Puppeteer,
Masqueradin'
As one sincere.
Puppetratin'
With strings of fear,
I'm the Evil Puppeteer!*

*By the way, I'll keep you all clued in
To your governments' shenanigans.
Supposed secrets of the state,
Withheld evidence, hidden tapes!
Whether it's the IRA
Or the evil CIA,
FBI or PLO,
At least you'll think you're in the know!*

*So go back to your sports and games,
Confident I'm the one who shames
Any culprit and reveals
Covert actions he conceals.*

*Yes, stay asleep, dormice of men,
For should you wake, you'd surely then
Cover your ears and close your eyes,
For 'tis too much to realise
That my objective's been achieved,
And you've all been utterly deceived!*

At this point, Truco cackled and with a wave of his hand, subdued the music. He dropped his voice to a whisper.

*You ask what my perverted vice is,
That makes me forecast my devices?
Well, it's like the villain of the piece
Gloating over his caprice,
Triumphantly reveals his lot
To the victim of the plot.*

*Yes, I'm the Evil Puppeteer,
Masqueradin'
As one sincere.
Puppetratin'
With strings of fear,
I'm the Evil Puppeteer!*

The music burst into a brassy finale, Truco spread his arms and at the only applause coming from Sharla Tann, he strode to the front of the stage.

“You have naught to say, dear Alice?
For I sense within your silence malice.”

“Not much,” Alice replied. “Granted, it is impressive. And you seem to have a gift of verse.”

“Then would you shun such gallantry
As to converse with me in poetry?”

“Why?”

“Is my request so untoward,
When you do so freely with your ... er ... Lord?”

“That is a special occasion.”

“I gather from your tone uncivil,
You regard not this occasion ‘special.’”

Alice giggled. “If I were to use the word as Brandon does, I would say so.”

Sharla placed a hand of caution on Alice’s arm and whispered. “What my husband is trying to say, Alice, is that it would be a mark of respect to make the effort to speak back to him in kind.”

“I cannot, and even if I could, I would not,” Alice retorted. “When I speak such with whom my soul loveth, the poetry flows without effort.”

Truco, standing at the edge of the stage, leaned forward and glared into Alice’s face.

“Have you not realised who I am?
What makes your beloved Lord so damn—”

“Save your poetic breath, dear,” said Sharla. “The child is not going for it.”

“Oh, but I do have a question, Mr. Truco,” said Alice. “I wondered, seeing you have a gift of poetry, do you write sonnets?”

“Sonnets?”

“Yes, dedicated to Sharla for instance?”

“Er ... indirectly. In umm ... honour of our mutual power.”

“What the *d-deity* are you talking about, darling?” Sharla demanded.

“And why should this little whippersnapper’s question put you so on the non-offensive?”

“Umm ... she has no...”

“But back to your ... er ... performance, Mr. Truco,” said Alice. “It most certainly does reveal your plan of world conquest.”

“*Plan of world conquest?* There is no plan—it’s already done. Bar one small detail. ...” Truco turned and looked at Marian.

“My husband just needs to make himself public,” Sharla said as the four of them, following her firm suggestion, made their way back to the giant control desk. “Don’t you think he’ll cut a dashing figure striding out onto the world stage?”

“Impressive ... I suppose,” Alice said with a grin. “Although the cape could come across a little ‘Dracularian,’ don’t you think?”

“Okay,” said Sharla. “We can drop the cape.”

Marian snickered. “And why the matador hat? Killing bulls doesn’t exactly go over nowadays.”

“Fine. We can drop that, too.”

“But back to you, Alice,” said Sharla. “We appreciate your bold, revolutionary ideals and we’ve made great use of such zeal in the past, especially in the youth. But you see, once you get your foot in the door, then your influence can change things from deep down ... *within*.”

“I’m not entirely sure it works like that,” said Alice.

“Jump into the deep end. Don’t worry, we’ll be there to support you.”

Yeah, right, Alice thought. *The second temptation.*

It all seemed strangely familiar to Alice. *Of course, the next test will be...*

Truco interrupted her thoughts. “And you will be encouraged to know that you can even retain your out-of-time, Victorian persona. Obviously, it has worked for your cause—it can work for mine. I am never one to spurn an ingenious idea, even if it wasn’t hammered on my anvil!”

“You see, we’re not expecting you to change *that* much, Alice,” said Sharla. “But I think we all would agree that for you to make more headway in your quest to ‘win the world,’ as you say, it would benefit you to *lighten up* on some issues.”

“Such as?”

“All we ... *I* ask is that you give a more balanced view of my husband’s character. Hitherto you have painted him with a rather broad, black brush.”

“I haven’t,” said Alice. “The writer has. Although I thoroughly agree with his presentation.”

“Then that will only work against you, Alice. You are a powerful influence, but I cannot stand by and see my husband’s plans exposed ... er ... *to ridicule*, thwarting his sincere intentions to build Eutopia.”

“The point is, Alice,” said Truco, “we can work together. You wish to see a better world—one free from hunger, discrimination, war, want, and pain?”

“Don’t we all?”

“Then we are agreed,” said Sharla. “Is it such a trying request that you give my husband the honour he deserves?”

“Very,” said Alice.

“But think about it, Alice. Can you not imagine yourself stepping out there together with my husband as an example to world youth of a young female crusader for peace and plenty for all?”

“I can imagine myself doing no such thing.”

“I can,” said Marian.

Alice snorted. “What, *me* strutting out there with Truco?”

“No, Alice. *Me.*”

Alice turned to Marian in shock. “*No!* You don’t know what that would mean. It would be nothing short of selling your...”

“A non-issue,” said Truco. “Puppets don’t have ‘em.”

“When do we start?” Marian said, icily addressing Truco.

“Ah. I finally see some commonsense at work. Sharla?”

“Okay, if the little mannequin means business, we can set up a couple of cameras almost immediately, and put it out as groundbreaking news on BSN.”

“Groundbreaking news?” Alice asked. “What do you mean?”

“Okay,” Sharla explained, “Marina abdicated her throne in Podunk San Romani in order to join my husband in his border-elimination and global-awareness campaign. Simple.”

“I see,” said Alice. “Hence that map on the flag room wall.”

“Exactly,” said Sharla. “Eutopia’s soon to be a *reality*. Especially with dear Marian’s aid. *And* Alice, if she comes to her senses.”

Sharla cackled, and Alice could only respond with mute insolence.

“Let’s set up the cameras,” Sharla said, reaching for her cell phone. “This should go out worldwide. The decisions of seeming, small-fry renegade countries speak *volumes* to the man ... er ... *person* in the street.”



“Does my hair look okay?” Marian asked as cameras and crew bustled around her. Only Sharla replied, assuring her that she looked like a doll.

“I am a marionette and a real *person*,” said Marian.

“Of course, y-you look *very* real, honey,” said Sharla, unnerved at the unexpected response.

Marian looked questioningly over at Alice. Alice lowered and shook her head; she wanted to cry.

“It’s going to be okay, Alice ... *really*,” said Marian.

“Five ... four ... three ... two ... *one* ...,” the director announced. “And we’re *rolling*.”

Spotlights burst to life and Marian, with evidently experienced aplomb, stared unflinchingly into the main camera. “Good evening, viewers. For the benefit of those who don’t recognise me, let me introduce myself. I am Princess Marina, abdicated heir apparent to the throne of the Kingdom of San Romani.”

With a professional public speaker’s proficiency, Marian paused to allow her perceived surprise of the viewers to abate before continuing.

“In light of my abdication, I have been most graciously asked to join the ranks of those who are ushering in the Global Kingdom of Eutopia that, as you are no doubt aware, promises power, peace, and plenty for all—a world free of poverty, pollution, greed, and war. I agree with those ideals.”

“The puppet is doin’ great,” Sharla whispered to Truco. Her husband nodded and smirked triumphantly at Alice, who countered his expression with a tearful glare and a silent prayer.

“However ... and this is a *big* ‘however’ I, Princess Marina, choose to reclaim my crown and calling as the future queen of San Romani!”

“*What?*” Truco and Sharla chorused.

“Yes,” Marian continued, “like the proverbial roaring mouse, I am claiming my God-given majesty of *choice* and I reject any and all allegiance to the purported claims of Truco’s seeming benign global rule.”

“Shut her off!” Truco bellowed at the disoriented studio crew. “*Now!*”

“Too late, *fool*,” Sharla shrieked. “You didn’t even bake in the usual ten-second delay to avoid this!”

“The puppet seemed to mean business, dear. I saw no reason to...”

“You had no idea she was going to pull such a stunt?”

“Of course not. Did *you?*”

Sharla turned and pointed to Alice who was beaming. “*She* did. They *planned* it.”

“I apologise for disappointing you,” Alice said, “but I had no idea my friend would turncoat so splendidly!”

“The cameras are off, your ladyship,” a studio technician whispered. “Transmission aborted.”

“The damage is done,” Sharla snapped, giving Truco a look of disdain.

Alice suddenly felt the scissors growing warm in her pocket and she clutched them. Then, for no reason she could think of, she stood up and pulled them out.

“What are you doing with those?” Truco asked. “And how did they pass security check?”

Alice shrugged.

“It’s just a pair of scissors, dear,” said Sharla, “nothing to become non-pacifistic over.”

“I realise that. I just wanted to know what the young lady was planning to do with them.”

“I ... er ... was merely planning to snip some split ends,” said Alice.

Sharla chuckled. “There, there, Truco, honey. Nothing more than womanly vanity.”

“But while I do so,” Alice continued. “I would so very much appreciate you re-explaining your plan, as I must admit it’s the work of a mastermind. ...”

“A ‘mistress mind,’” said Sharla, setting the record straight. “Most of the ... er ... scheme was *my* idea.”

“Of course,” Alice said with a smile. “Yes, a *mistress* mind. But I would like a more detailed explanation, even if it does rub a little more salt ... I mean, *sodium* in my wound of helplessness.”

Truco smirked, settled back into his massive swivel chair and launched into another description of his and his wife’s nefariousness.

Maintaining the impression that she was engaged in her task of split-end trimming while she listened, Alice raised a lock of her hair along with the scissors and pointed them at one of the screens, which was still in “receive” mode. Suddenly, the stupefied group—a family—began pointing back at them. They seemed to be horrified. Alice discreetly noticed that all the people on the screens were doing the same. Many of them were waving their fists and shouting, but no sound was being transmitted. Some of the screens went black, either as a result of viewers switching off their television set or, as it appeared in some cases, even putting a foot into it.

As he continued boasting, Truco was oblivious to this onscreen activity until Sharla drew attention to it. He leapt to his feet and turned on the audio.

“You’re *deceiving* us!” a voice cried amid the uproar of thousands.

“Who *are* you?”

“What do you mean by filming us?”

“You mean all this is being staged?”

Truco slammed randomly at the controls to no avail. The screens remained flickeringly alive with irate crowds, families, and individuals.

“What in heaven is going on?” he screamed at Alice, who shrugged and kept trimming her split ends. Truco grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Don’t play dumb with me!” he hissed in her face while shaking her, sending her scissors scooting across the floor. “You know *exactly* what’s happening!”

“You’re overreacting, darling,” said Sharla. “You’re displaying pitifully demeaning non-self-confidence for your viewers.”

“My viewers? Exactly! The whole world is watching. And how? *How?*”

“Someone must have reversed the transmission to receive from here,” Sharla calmly replied. “Simple, really.”

“Who in heaven is that someone?”

Sharla trotted over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure if you let go of Alice and sit down, we can all discuss this in a less non-civilised fashion.”

Shaking and gasping, Truco slumped into his chair. He glared at Alice and then at Marian and back to Alice. Sharla, maintaining a controlled composure began massaging his shoulders.

“I could have you both vilified for this,” Truco sputtered.

“What’s new?” said Marian.

“I think my husband would appreciate it if you would shed some light on who you feel is this someone that reversed the transmission,” Sharla said.

Alice smiled and rose to her feet.

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

“To pick up my scissors, of course. They seemed to have slid under the control desk.”

Alice bent down and, careful to hide her elation, stood up and returned to her seat.

“Alas and alack, they have slipped too far into all the wires. Well, no matter ... but to answer your question, Mr. Truco. The ‘who in Heaven’ you’re wondering about that is responsible for this is just *that*—there in Heaven. Joshua!”

“Shuddup! I don’t even want to hear the name *uttered* around here!”

“I understand, Truco, nevertheless He’s with me ... helping me. ...” Alice put a hand on her forehead and blinked hard. She was getting dizzy, but she was secretly snipping with the scissors in her pocket. “Rescuing souls ... cutting strings ... everyone has them ... even *you*, Truco. But I cannot cut yours.”

Truco dashed again upon Alice and shook her shoulders. “*Strings?* What do you mean I have *strings!*”

“Steady on, darling,” said Sharla. “Give the child a chance to explain herself.”

Alice opened her eyes and Truco withdrew his grip on her shoulders. “Yes, sir. You have strings attached to you. Like a puppet.”

“Preposterous! No one controls me but *me.*”

“If it were possible, I suppose that would be rather untoward in itself,” said Alice. “I believe I would feel somewhat insecure submitting myself to my own puppetry.”

“This girl’s *mad!*” Truco barked. Sharla patted her husband’s shoulder.

“I suggest you calm down, darling, and let the dear girl say her piece. Seeing this scenario is being recorded, your somewhat non-tranquil reaction to her observations is only working against you.”

“I was merely trying to tell her that I perceive no strings on me,” said Truco, attempting to temper his tone. “How can you insinuate such a thing?”

“I insinuate nothing,” Alice replied. “I *see* them. Right there. They reach high, *high* above you.”

“You are *crazy. Crazy!*”

“The viewers, darling,” said Sharla. “Remember the viewers *and* the *readers.*”

“Viewers? Readers? *Goddamn* them all!” Truco bellowed, twisting and turning and shaking his fists. “They know nothing, and will *remain* knowing nothing!”

Suddenly, Sharla Tann rose to her feet with horror on her face. The strings of which Alice spoke had become visible to all, including the studio hands. And Truco, as he ranted, had so tangled himself up in them until he was dangling in mid air.

“Away with these witches!” Sharla yelled.

“Wh-who exactly?” burbled some of the camera crew.

“These walking epitomes of evil!”

“Specify, ma’am?” the director timidly said.

“Alice and her little wooden puppet cohort! And shut it down!”

“Shut down what, ma’am?”

“Everything!”

“We cannot, ma’am. Transmission will not abort.”

Meanwhile, amid Sharla’s hysterical and unintelligible screams and Truco blithering and writhing in the tangle of his strings, Alice and Marian were making a beeline for the nearest exit in sight.

“You let her go the first time, stupid!” Sharla screamed. “Don’t let it happen again!”

“I can’t do a thing!” Truco screamed back. “These damn *strings!*”

Sharla clenched her fists and rushed after Alice and Marian.

“Guards! *Guards!*”

At the frenetic woman’s cries, an alarm went off and armed men appeared at the doors. Suddenly, Sharla’s, the guards’, and even the technicians’ strings appeared, and in their panic-stricken furore of trying to encircle the two girls, they became helplessly tangled together in those very strings. Meanwhile, Truco’s *Stageworld* media machine silently and steadily transmitted the scenario back to billions of shocked viewers.

“Use those damn scissors, Alice,” Sharla screamed. “I *command* you to cut these strings!”

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t,” said Alice as she and Marian darted for the exit. “Like, no way, *José.*”

“Know how to drive a limo?” Marian desperately asked once she and Alice were outside. Sirens were sounding in the distance; it seemed that all of *Stageworld* had been alerted.

“No idea, Marian. No ... wait. I *did* drive a huge lorry in my last adventure. Lord willing, I most certainly could remember.”

“Without car keys?”

“I could try my scissors.”

“Huh?”

“Well, they turned to scissors, so I am sure they could turn back to ... oh goodness, I mean...”

“Oh no,” said Marian, glancing up at a shuddering sound. A helicopter was hovering above them and a ladder was descending from its cockpit. “They’re onto us!”

“But it looks as though it’s from the Useless Status,” said Alice.

“A lot of comfort that is,” said Marian.

“*True*, but...”

“Grab ahold of that ladder, baby!”

Alice gasped at seeing the face of the soldier who barked the command.

“It’s him, Marian ... it’s *him!*”

“Him? Who?”

“You know! Oh, thank you, Joshua!”

“You guys gonna stand around yackin’ or are you gonna get the hell up and outta there?”

“I s-suppose we’re going to get the ... whatever you say, kind sir,” Alice shouted back over the roar of the helicopter’s rotors. She grasped the ladder and began climbing. Marian followed, doing the same. As sirens, security guards, and vehicles gathered below, the two girls barely managed to clamber into the cockpit of the hovering craft, in which sat four other armed soldiers in camouflaged khaki fatigues.

“Need to step on it before they open fire,” said the young soldier at whom Alice was gazing with grateful adoration.

“R-Rummy?” she softly inquired with a blush.

“That’s me, baby. Why?”

“I ... er ... just wanted to make sure.”

“Great. And you are...?”

Alice’s face dropped. “You mean to say you don’t *know*...?”

The soldier winked and grinned. “Course I do, princess. How could I ever forget? It’s been a long time.”

“It most certainly has,” Alice said, spellbound.

“Well, you guys make yourselves comfortable as best you can. We’ll get you safely to ... er ... San Romani, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Marian.

“So ... you recovered from your eye wound?” Alice asked. “And your memory has returned?”

“Yeah, thank God. After meeting you on the train, things slowly started makin’ sense. Bits and pieces of information, stuff like that. Of course, that was a major memory upload when I suddenly saw you on that TV screen. Wondered how I could ever have forgotten you. Freaky.”

“That entire situation with Truco was most strange indeed,” said Alice.

“Sure was.”

“So, how did you find us?” Marian asked.

“Surveillance works both ways, as that Truco dude well knows. I called security for a return trace. Simple.”

“Wow. Awesome.”

Rummy smirked. “No sweat, babe. Homeland surveillance *rules*,” he said, jutting out his chin, a trait that never failed to make Alice wince since their first meeting during her escapade with the cards.

“It was most assuredly an answer to prayer,” Alice curtly said.

“Yours, princess?”

Alice nodded.

“But you got here so *fast*,” said Marian.

“Yeah,” said Rummy. “*That* I can’t explain.”

“Silly Putty,” said Alice.

“What, princess?”

“Nothing. ...”

For the remainder of the journey, little was said. Alice was content just to bask in the romantic glow of Rummy’s enlightened presence. For her, time’s nutty putty shrank to almost nothing until the helicopter touched down on the spacious but wet tarmac of San Romani Airport.

“See you back home, sweetheart,” Rummy said, blowing Alice a kiss. “Can’t wait.”

“Me too,” said Alice. “Bye, Rummy.”

“Bye, Deidre.”

Deidre? *Deidre?*

Alice was mortified.

Of course! That was how my last adventure ended. I totally forgot. That’s who he’s meant to be with—Deidre Dudley. Oh, Joshua, why? Why? Not now ... not this time! Please!

Standing on the tarmac with the helicopter retreating into the drizzling clouds above her, Alice clenched her teeth and fought back an onslaught of tears as cameras flashed and crowds gathered.

But why her? Why Deidre?

She has her place. Remember that she is a lady-in-waiting, Rummy is a knight of the realm, but you are their queen.

Okay, Lord, but please help me not to, like, lose it right now.

At her silent plea, a calm fell over Alice, as Marian, who was now being welcomed by well-dressed puppet dignitaries, beckoned her over. She took Alice’s hand.

“Thank you, Alice,” she whispered through her teeth, as she smiled and waved at the cameras. “Keep walking, smiling, and waving.”

“Thank *you*, Marian,” said Alice.

“For what?”

“For all you taught *me*.”

The puppet withdrew her hand from Alice’s. “For all I taught *you? Me?*”

“Most assuredly. To be honest, many times I was wavering in my inner commitment to accept my crown, knowing the sacrifice it would cost.”

“For *your* crown? Even that of the Kingdom of Heaven?”

Alice nodded bashfully.

“Sorry to have to say this, sweetheart,” said Marian, “but if I had a crown as worthy as yours, I would never wish or even *dare* to throw it off. Think of the paltry, puerile puppet kingdom of ne’er-do-wells I have to rule over.”

“Actually,’ said Alice, “because you love Joshua and have accepted his invitation to his wedding banquet, your kingdom will become his as well. ‘The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ.’ Amazing, is it not?”

“As usual, I don’t quite understand everything you’re going on about,” said Marian, “but I think I’m catching your drift. Actually, I love my people of San Romani very much. Poor marionettes—like me. I feel for them now. Know what I mean?”

“Very much so,” said Alice. “Oh dear, here I go, I’m going to blubber. Please forgive me.”

“Me too,” said Marian as they fell weeping into each other’s arms. “Do you think these tears will swell my wood grain?”

“If you believe that sort of thing...,” Alice said with a giggle. As she and the puppet hugged, she heard clapping and cheering.

The hosts of Heaven? she wondered.

THE RETURN OF A NATIONAL TREASURE

Wake up, sleepy head!”

Along with the whistling, cheering, clapping, and even the stamping of feet in her outer consciousness, Alice heard Brandon’s voice.

“The play is finished, sis. A standing ovation!”

Alice slowly opened her eyes.

“Oh, alas and alack,” she said. “But I was not quite finished with...”

“So we’re back with Jane Austen,” said Brandon who was standing up and looking down at his sister sleepily slouched in her chair.

“I do beg your pardon, ever so,” said Alice.

“Oh, I’m used to it—I polished off your fish and chips and bubbly water by the way—hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all, dear brother.”

“So what happened this time? Theatre capers?”

“I suppose you could say it started with that. Was the play good, by the way?”

“A *riot*. Fantastic dialogue. Shame you missed it. And Dame Drutherford was the peaks. *Awesome*.”

The audience was dispersing, and before the Godley family could gather their belongings, a young man wearing a tuxedo approached them.

“Her Ladyship, Dame Irene Drutherford, wishes to speak with the young lady.”

“Who, Alice?” her mother inquired.

“Yes,” the man said, looking at Alice. “Miss Alice Pleasance, I presume?”

“That I am, sir,” Alice replied, still drowsy.

Her mother cast a perplexed glance at Alice and addressed the man. “Our family surname happens to be ‘Godley’—Dame Drutherford must have made a mistake.”

The man shook his head. “Her Ladyship requested to meet the young lady with the long, golden hair in the front row middle who slept for most of the play.”

“That was you, for sure, Alice,” said Brandon. “Off you go. Her Ladyship awaits you!”

“Maybe she wants to inquire why you slept through her performance,” said Eileen. “Actors can be extremely sensitive, you know. Be sure to apologise.”

“We’ll wait for you here,” said Malcolm. “At least until they move us out.”

As was to be expected, backstage at the Warren Theatre on a Saturday night was a beehive of bustle, and Alice was thankful for her host, who with flashing credentials, quickly manoeuvred her through the eager crowd, past reporters, bouncers, and security, and into Dame Drutherford’s lavish dressing room.

“Ah, Miss Pleasance,” said the elderly woman sitting beneath a hovering makeup artist who had just applied a slathering of white face cream. “Excuse me looking like a female Béla Lugosi,* but a healthy face-pack at the end of a season works wonders. Greasepaint, no matter how eco-friendly these days, has a way of burying its residue into the pores.

***Béla Lugosi** (1884–1956), Hungarian-born American film actor, best known for playing the title role in the horror film *Dracula* (1931)

“Champagne?” she asked, pointing to a bucket on a nearby table containing the said offer packed in ice. Alice shook her head.

“Er ... no thank you, ma’am.”

“Anyway, I have so longed to meet you, Alice. Believe it or not, as a young girl when first starting out in drama school, my dream was to play you.”

“But ma’am, I suppose I really should explain. ...”

“Don’t worry yourself. No explanations necessary. By the way, how do you feel adjusting to modern dress?”

“I experience little difficulty, ma’am,” Alice resignedly replied. *Lord, and this is, like, happening in real life?*

“Pass me that folder on the chair,” Dame Drutherford said, addressing the young man.

“This, my dear Alice, is a play written especially for you. I indirectly acquired it as a sixteen-year-old budding actress from the lady friend of my mentor.

“Now, this all may sound rather like something out of a spine-chilling novel, but I want to tell you something. Are you ready?”

Alice nodded hesitantly and picked nervously at her fingernails.

“Oh, I am so sorry, Alice. Do sit down.”

The young attendant whisked a chair behind Alice, on which she perched expectantly.

“As you can see,” Dame Drutherford continued, “this manuscript could be a national treasure, but I was given express instruction to hand it to the girl who falls asleep in the middle of the front row during the last performance of *No Strings Attached*. She said it would be forty-nine years to the day.”

“Who said that, ma’am?”

“A certain Miss Hastaway.”

Alice gasped. “Anne Hastaway? That was the ... umm ... *lady friend* of Lance ‘Shaker’ Williams?”

“Whom else? You are an admirer of his work?”

“I ... er ... am acquainted with him ... as a playwright. Oh dear.”

“Nothing to be discomfited about, child. Would that more youngsters of your age be even *remotely* familiar with his work!”

“Does Miss Hastaway still reside in Telford, ma’am?”

“Still? She passed on—let’s see—about *forty* years ago.”

“But that’s long before I was born!” said Alice.

Remember time over here is like Silly Putty, Alice!

That is true, Lord. But am I over here or over there right now?

“She said the girl’s name would be Alice Pleasance. Long, wavy golden hair, the face of an angel and asleep in the middle of the front row. She told me that she and Lance met you in some sort of futuristic dream. Apparently, Alice, you had been in the middle of a rather hair-raising escape from the authorities during which she was unable to get the script to you. At any rate, I tell you, I had the most difficult time remembering my lines tonight seeing you there. And you being asleep did cause me to wonder if the performance was rather lacklustre.”

“I am so sorry, but I was like, *wiped* from a long car journey,” said Alice, now having second thoughts about reverting to her normal speech. “Still, you must have done real good ... umm *awfully* well, because my brother Brandon said you especially were just awesome.”

“Your brother? Is he still here?”

“Oh yes. He and my parents are waiting for me in the theatre—that is, unless they have already been ushered out.”

“Why did you not tell me? Jeeves, please bring them in.

“After all, I shamelessly *revel* in the adoration of youth,” Dame Drutherford whispered to Alice, once the young man had scuttled out.

“So, you actually have, like, a servant named Jeeves?” Alice asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Well, Brandon says that all typical old-English mystery and detective novels have a butler, chauffeur, or servant named Jeeves.”

“Hmm. Well, there is nothing *typical* about me, my servant, nor this script, Miss Pleasance.”

“Undoubtedly ... ma’am.”

Just then, Jeeves ushered Malcolm, Eileen, and Brandon Godley into the dressing room.

“Awesome performance, Your Ladyship,” said Brandon, extending his hand. “I’m Brandon, Alice’s brother.”

“Charmed.”

“And we’re her parents. I’m Eileen, and this is my husband Malcolm.”

“Well, your daughter has a role to play in the theatre of life, Mr. and Mrs. Pleasance. A leading role to be exact.”

“Er ... I would like to clarify that our surname... .” Eileen said.

“That we well know, ma’am,” Malcolm Godley interjected. “And we are rooting for Alice to fulfil her destiny in every way.”

“She will, she will,” said Dame Drutherford, handing the folder to Mrs. Godley. “Especially once she has the lines of this script down.”

“Fascinating,” Eileen muttered as she flipped through the manuscript’s pages. “And very ... umm ... *whimsical*. Personally, I don’t quite see what this has to do with my daughter’s destiny. That’s why I’m wondering if maybe you have someone else in mind.”

“I don’t see whom else it could be, Mrs. Pleasance,” said Dame Drutherford. “Mr. Williams’s prophetic parable could not have been more precise.”

“It’s a long story, Mummy,” said Alice.

“As usual,” said Brandon.

“You mean this could be another *Heaven’s Library* story?”

“Yes, Mum,” said Brandon. “It all makes sense once you connect the dots.”

“Well, I must be getting along,” said Dame Drutherford, summoning the makeup artist to remove her face pack. “But I would *love* to stay in touch. After all, I have guarded this prized possession for forty-nine years to the day. Jeeves, would you mind handing Miss Pleasance and her parents my contact details?”

“Oh, and Alice, I would like to invite you and your family to attend a performance next month of a delightful play written by Lance Williams entitled *Alice and the Baptism of Fire*. I play the queen of diamonds.”

“Hey, I know the book!” Alice exclaimed. “Er ... ma’am.”

“You’ve read it?” Brandon asked.

“Well, like the first four or five chapters. It’s cool, but *super* convicting. Like about my ... er ... people’s destiny and the crown and stuff.”

“Anyway,” said Dame Drutherford, “the play is to be held in San Romani this summer.”

Alice gasped.

“San Romani?” her mother inquired. “Where’s that?”

“I have heard of the place,” Alice said. “It’s a little country hemmed in with mountains bordering Italy.”

“Exactly, child,” said Dame Drutherford. “I see your daughter is well versed in English literature, geography, and social studies, Mrs. Pleasance.”

“Mrs. *Godley*,” Eileen wearily, yet gently, reminded her. “But Alice does benefit from a well-rounded education. She’s tutored at home.”

“*Is that so?* So was I. Fortunately, my parents could afford it. Anyway, the event is to be held at the request of Princess Marina.”

Alice shook her head in astonishment but said nothing.

“Princess Marina?” said Brandon. “*The Princess Marina* of San Romani who abdicated her position as the country’s future queen a few months back? *Gorgeous* ba ... attractive woman.”

“That would be her,” Dame Drutherford said with a grin.

“Never heard of her,” Eileen said with an embarrassed smile.

“Mum,” said Brandon. “She’s been the latest and greatest and coolest news on *Upload Yours* for the last nine months!”

“It’s okay, Mummy,” said Alice. “It’s not as if it would have seemed all that earth-shattering, Offensive-wise. I knew nothing about her until recently.”

“Anyway,” Dame Drutherford went on, “I have heard it on confidential authority—and I would appreciate it if this information goes no further than this room—that Marina has decided to reclaim her royal right to rule. It will mean great jubilation for her people, as she was very popular. Along with her official announcement, she has requested a performance of the play *Alice and the Baptism of Fire*. Apparently, Alice, she is an avid fan of yours, and the book meant a great deal to her in making the decision to renounce her abdication. She is ever so desirous to meet you in person!”

“That’s encouraging, ma’am, but to be honest, *this* is my real life, and I am a very different type person than in those books.”

“Who says, Alice?” said Brandon. “You’re still my cute, crazy, out-of-step sister in or out of that world. You just dress and talk differently there, that’s all.”

Alice blushed. “Er ... who plays Alice, ma’am?”

“Oh, let me think ... a pretty, up-and-coming Irish actress ... Ailish Ryan. Started out as a circus performer in Italy of all places, and a lion tamer of all things.”

“And ... er ... who plays Joshua, by the way?” Alice timidly asked.

“Joshua? The king? Oh ... a very good-looking young American chap. Ronald something or other ... making big news in the acting world, having overcome a serious wound sustained during the war in Iraq. Anyway, I’ll arrange for the transportation and lodging. How would you all like a week’s all-expenses-paid holiday in San Romani this summer?”

“An all-expenses-paid week’s holiday in San Romani,” Brandon said, as he and the elated Godley family stepped out of the Warren Theatre into the cold, foggy night air of central London’s Piccadilly. “How cool is that?”

“Way cool,” said Alice with a dazed and deliriously happy grin. “But it promises to be *way* warmer than here, to be sure.”

~ The End ~