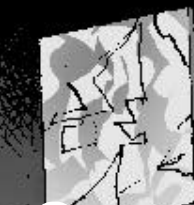


Alice in Retrospect

HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY



Part One

FROM SOUP...

Alice ... Alice!"

Alice lifted her slumping head from the dining room table and shook it. "Sorry, Mummy. I was..."

"Nodding off," said Eileen Godley. "And you spilled some of your soup on your tee-shirt."

"Oh ... *great.*"

"You can spot wash it right after lunch, Alice. Cream of mushroom is not too greasy. But I assume you were going to change into something else before going out to help with our charitable project?"

Alice nodded and blinked hard. Malcolm Godley chuckled.

"Maybe we should reassess the 'late, late Friday night movie with Brandon' institution, honey, if it means you are useless the following day."

"Useless, Daddy?"

"According to Gracie and Ivan you were dead at devotions and spacing out during project time."

"Well, it *was* an especially heavy, thought-provoking flick," said Brandon, coming to his sister's defence. "We discussed it until pretty late."

"Until half past two in the morning, to be precise," said Eileen. "Am I right?"

"As usual," she added in response to her offspring's sheepish nods. "Although granted, we did come home a bit late from visiting Mark and Nancy."

"Yes, although it would go rather late, I brought you along because Mark and Nancy had specifically asked for you to come and spend time with their twelve-year-old daughter, Adina," said Malcolm, "as she had lots of questions about faith and all."

HL: This story uses British spelling.

“Oh, yah,” said Alice. “She had me on the spot a few times.”

“But apparently, you handled it marvellously. They profusely thanked your mother and me on the phone this morning for the effect you had on Adina.”

“Must have been the Lord, Daddy, as I was, like, totally *clueless* most of the time!”

“So in light of all that pouring out,” Eileen said with gentle firmness, “it might have been better if you had gone straight to bed, got a little quiet time with Jesus, and a good night’s sleep. Your father is right, maybe you and Brandon should reassess the Friday night movie ‘institution,’ seeing as that evening is usually occupied with visiting people these days.”

“Yah, I suppose,” Alice muttered, engrossed in the soup spot.

“And coming up next Thursday evening is that exceptionally fancy do on Lady Windermere’s Super Yacht.”

“The what, Mummy?”

“The first night of the trip to San Romani,” said her father.

“Oh right, for the play there on Saturday night and stuff.”

“Do finish your soup, Alice,” Eileen said.

“Totally cool,” said Brandon. “Seafood buffets in the evening, and both nights in guest cabins, right?”

“Yes,” Malcolm replied, “but we will need to rent tuxes and whatnot again.”

“And gowns,” Eileen added.

“Actually,” said Malcolm, “the whole thing has come to pass on account of you, Alice, dear, and the impression you made on Dame Drutherford.”

“Wow, scary,” Alice said with a slurp of her soup, drawing an askance look from Brandon. “But I suppose it comes with the territory,”

“Maybe,” said Eileen. “It just shows the Lord has to do it.”

“Yah, of course, but I usually don’t have *too* much of a problem being around that kind of crowd. Right, Daddy?”

Malcolm cleared his throat. “W-well ... not usually... the Lord does seem to anoint you. ...”

“As long as a healthy fear of the Lord is present,” Eileen said with controlled testiness. “Anyway, Alice, you had better go upstairs to nap in order to be awake, aware, and on the attack at three for the rest of the day’s witnessing. Saturday goes rather late, too, as we all know. Do you want me to prepare any food ... sandwiches ... or are you going to take it by faith?”

“I thought we might drop by Mr. Won Tong’s Chinese,” said Brandon. “He’s open ’til quite late and usually lays out an incredible spread for us.”

“We haven’t visited him in *ages*, though,” said Alice. “I feel a bit *icky* just showing up when we’re hungry and stuff.”

“Do mind the ‘and stuffs,’” her mother said gently.

Alice rolled her eyes.

“Hey, sis, we’ll be there to minister. You can talk to his daughter who’s all into I-Ching.”

“Anyway, you two can pray about it,” Mrs. Godley said as she began clearing the dishes.

“I have to take care of that biz involving the car, so I can drop your team off at the spot,” said Malcolm. “So, in the vestibule at a quarter to three sharp?”

“We’re on,” said Brandon. “Right, Alice?”

Alice nodded and Brandon left the kitchen. Alice was about to do the same, when her mother softly addressed her.

“Perhaps this isn’t the best time to bring it up, but maybe there are a few points to brush up on regarding your visitation example. ...”

“Points, Mummy?”

“Well, for one, there was that rather snippy way you answered Felicity after dinner the other night in front of our visitor. ...”

“Oh, *him*. Frank.”

“Dr. Dawson, Alice.”

“Yah, I remember. Felicity was reminding me about the dishes and stuff, and it sort of bugged me. I had other things on my mind.”

Alice’s father chuckled. “Like discussing your clothes for the evening.”

Unamused, Alice’s mother continued. “So Dr. Dawson himself, who had been sitting right here at the kitchen table, offered to help Felicity with them.”

“But he seemed okay with it, Mummy,” Alice said and yawned.

“*Seemed*. But I don’t think your attitude went unnoticed.”

“It really boils down to charity beginning at home, honey,” said her father.

“Exactly,” said Eileen. “Well, we should let you go for a nap. So, a word to the wise is sufficient?”

Alice nodded glumly, washed her dish, and climbed the stairs to her room.

...TO NUTS,

Later,” Alice muttered after drowsily debating whether to spot wash the soup stain on her tee-shirt. She slumped on her bed, and before long, with her black kitten Dinah napping beside her, Alice’s eyelids succumbed to slumber and fell shut. They presently opened to the sight of a gasolier suspended from the ceiling, and a girl wearing a traditional maid’s uniform of a black dress, white laced pinafore, and bonnet leaning over her.

“Excuse the intrusion, but I was informed to inform Miss that she must prepare for the charity bazaar this afternoon,” the girl chirped, and humming cheerfully, opened the curtains. She curtseyed, wished “Miss” a good morning and left.

Goodness gracious me! Alice thought once she had regained her senses and looked around. *Here I am in a most delightful bedroom—presumably that of a rather rich mansion, and I further presume I am involved in another one of those Heaven’s Library dream trips.*

“And *wow!*” she said, examining her attire. “Joshua has, like, answered my prayers! He’s allowed me to experience one in which I can wear relatable clothes. That’s so *neat.*”

But I must needs attend to the unsightly soup stain, she mused. *I should have thrown the tee-shirt in the wash immediately, but I was far too tired and rather lazy. I shall inquire of the maid where I can acquire some fuller’s soap ... perchance she can take care of it for me.*

“Hey!” Alice exclaimed aloud. “That’s *bizarre.* Here I am *thinking* in what Brandon calls ‘Jane Austen lingo,’ yet speaking sort of modern ... weird.”

But if only I had known this nap was to turn into another Alice “spirit trip” story. (Are You certain they aren’t body trips as well? Because they most certainly feel like it.) Be that as it may, Joshua, even if I am not, You are well aware of what You are doing when these rather unanticipated circumstances befall me, so please help me to...

A tap on the door interrupted Alice’s silent prayer, she stood up and said to come in. The maid was returning with towels in hand.

“Shall I draw Miss a bath?”

“A bath? Yah, cool. Thanks.”

“Cool, Miss? Miss usually likes it piping hot.”

“The bath? Of course. I love it *scorching* at home.”

“At *home*?”

“Yeah, even though they tell me it’s bad for me and stuff, especially in winter.”

“That is true. Miss could catch the death of a chill. That’s how my uncle passed away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Aye. But Miss need not vex herself unduly about any such mishap befalling her, seeing as it is summer. So, if it be all right by Miss, I shall run it.”

“Thanks.”

The maid cleared her throat, and nervously addressed Alice. “If Miss doesn’t mind me making mention, is she planning to attend the charity bazaar so attired?”

“The what?”

“The *clothes* Miss slept in ... a little peculiar, if I may say so.”

“Oh yah, except I was planning to wear a multi-coloured, tie-dyed Indian blouse with flared sleeves for the trip out with Brandon, but it looks as though that’s not like, happening. I *was* planning to go in these jeans, though.”

“These what?”

Alice winked, saucily slapped her hip and grinned. “*Jeans*. They’re my favourite. Why, is there a problem?”

“Well, if Miss will pardon my saying so, they do look rather like men’s trousers”—the maid stopped, shook her head and excused herself to run the bath.

Sensing some inconsistency with her usual out-of-time spirit adventures (if one could term any of them as “usual”), Alice decided to explore what she assumed was her temporarily assigned bedroom. Framed miniature watercolour paintings decorated the walls, signed “A.P,” followed by a scribbled number such as “’62,” “’64,” and “’65.”

Quaintly ... er ... “cool,” she pondered, attempting to modify even her thoughts to a form relatable to her readers. *Not unlike my artistic attempts at home, although mine lack such enhancing display.*

Seeing that there were no light switches, and only an ornamental kerosene lamp gracing her bedside table, Alice then searched for electrical sockets and found none. Furthermore, to her surprise and dismay, only Victorian girls’ garments hung inside the wardrobe.

“Oh, *great,*” she muttered. “Nothing here to replace my tee. I’ll see if the maid can wash it out.”

Another knock on the door brought the maid in with an announcement that “Miss’s” bath was ready and that breakfast would be in half an hour.

“Breakfast? But I just ate lunch. ...”

“Lunch, Miss?”

“Never mind. I was just wondering if you could wash out the stain on this tee.”

“This what, Miss?”

“This tee-shirt, er ... excuse me, what’s your name?”

Mystified, the maid warily replied that her name was Molly and asked why “Miss” wished to have her shirt washed.

“This cream-of-mushroom-soup stain. It seems I have nothing else to change into.”

“But Miss has a whole wardrobe to choose from, if she doesn’t mind me saying so. Besides, I wouldn’t have the garment dried and smoothed in time for the bazaar.”

“Could you throw it in the dryer?”

“The what, Miss?”

Alice shook her head in frustration. “It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry.”

“Am I excused?”

“Oh ... yah ... hey, Molly, if you don’t think this is too weird to ask, but what exactly is this charity bazaar?”

The maid’s mystification intensified. “Well, Miss’s father describes it as “a mission to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction.’ As Miss is undoubtedly aware, she and her sisters...”

“My sisters?”

Alice put a hand to her mouth. *That’s it! I’m back ... oh, alas, as usual, the readers must consider me most awfully dim-witted.*

“Yes, Miss. They have a stall in Oxford town, where more fortunate folk donate their surplus, which is then sold right there at the stall. The proceeds go towards helping those in need, such as I mentioned.”

“I see. Sort of like a CTP—...I mean, a charitable-works-type deal. Thank you.”

“Umm ... if Miss should need anything else, please let me know.”

The maid left and Alice, suddenly feeling parched, desired a glass of bubbly water. She stepped outside of the bedroom, only to duck back in at the sight of two girls of about her own age in the downstairs hallway. One of them had waved to her; Alice had not waved back.

Alas and alack! Maybe I am supposed to accompany them for this charity bazaar, and they are dressed in Victorian apparel. Oh, Joshua, I will feel ever so out of place if what I fear will come to pass. ...

Alice stripped off her jeans and tee-shirt, opened the wardrobe and apprehensively selected a royal blue pinafore dress that at least complied with her choice of colour, if nothing else. She neither shrieked nor even gasped when, as she attempted to pull the garment over her head, it shrank to the size of her fist and remained so until she tossed it onto the bed.

“Just as I thought,” she muttered, and pulled on her jeans and rang for the maid.

“It’s come to that, Molly. This shirt needs to be spot-washed.”

“Excuse me, Miss?” the maid asked with unconcealed astonishment at Alice’s extremely low-cut jeans.

Alice impatiently pointed to the blemish. “Only this stain needs to be washed out. You needn’t wash the whole thing.”

“Very well. But Miss is still proposing to go wearing those?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Alice replied, “but it seems I have to.”

“Very well. But I venture to suggest that folks could regard Miss’ attire as indecent. Miss could look for a change while I launder this”—Molly paused and fingered the garment—“...a most unusual fabric. What is it?”

“Don’t really know. Have to check the tag. Some sort of polyester. Anyway, I shall go ahead and take my bath. Thank you, Molly.”

The maid curtsied, left, and Alice undressed.

Alas, Joshua. I am in such straits regarding this circumstance, but do resolve something with my attire.

AND SWALLOWING A STRANGE TRUTH...

Upon entering the bathroom, Alice gasped and gave a start; a beautiful woman with long, curly dark tresses was lounging in the tub.

“Just making sure the temperature and preparation—bath salts and such—were to your liking,” the woman said in a foreign accent that Alice was unable to identify. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“N-no. I assume you somehow know how I like it.”

“I do,” the woman said and stepped out of the bath. She handed Alice a golden shawl with fine silver threads woven through it and a braided hem. “And this is a gift for you.”

“Thanks so much. It’s *beautiful*. But don’t you need it?”

“No. A very special someone wants you to have it. As long as you wear it, no one will notice your outdated clothes.”

“*Outdated*? I don’t mean to be rude, but what I usually wear is the very latest according to *Skindeep* magazine.”

“‘Outdated’ can work both ways in time, Alice.”

“Of course. Sorry. I mean, considering that I’m...”

“Anyway, it is imperative that you doff it only for sleep.”

Alice buried her face in the garment’s soft folds and drew her breath. “And it has the most awesome perfume! What’s it called?”

“Megaleon.”

“Wow. Thank you ... er ...?”

“Have you not guessed?”

Alice shrugged.

“Have you not learned Greek in school?”

Alice shook her head.

“Of course you haven’t. A most awful pity. Even though like yours, she is dying. Yours from pollution and abuse, and mine from neglect.”

“But, who is dying?”

“Our *languages*, of course. Is not mine beautiful? Very pure. Even the word ‘Greek’ itself. Is it not as pure milk on the tongue?”

“Greek ... *Greek*,” Alice softly said, savouring the word’s consonants. “I suppose you’re right. It *was* what the Gospels were originally written in, after all.”

“Yes. The sincere milk of the Word. By the by, do you wish to bathe in it?”

“The Word? I suppose I do every day. At least when I get lots from it.”

“I am referring to actual *milk*. I can see to it with but a touch.”

“I don’t know about that,” Alice replied. “It seems sort of, you know ... *extravagant* and stuff. A bit yucky, actually, to tell the truth.”

“Always do, Alice—tell the truth, that is. Cleopatra always did—bathe in milk, that is. Truly, a bath fit for a queen in the making. Nevertheless, seeing you find the idea distasteful, I can turn the water into an elixir if you wish.”

“That’d be cool,” said Alice. The woman smiled, touched the water and it transformed into what resembled liquid gold.

“Wow!” said Alice, dipping her hand into it.

“And don’t be afraid to drink it.”

“Thank you, ma’am. But what is your name?”

Having received no answer, Alice turned; the woman had disappeared.

Alice shrugged, gingerly sank into the bath, and immediately felt reinvigorated by its soothing, scintillating power. She cupped her hands, drank a few drafts, and felt even more so, as the energy coursed through her being. To her surprise, she also sensed that she was shrinking, and continued to do so until she construed that she was about the size of a forefinger. Although she remained unperturbed, as she had come to expect such weird and wonderful turns of events in her adventures, Alice did start swimming, however, thankful that she had received first-class training at her local swimming baths. Fortunately, as she swam deeper, she found that she had no difficulty breathing and, heaving a sigh of relief, she relaxed and languidly enjoyed the exhilarating weightlessness.

It is as though I am a ... what on earth was that word we learned in biology class once? Amphibian! That’s it. Oh, this is most awfully ... awesome.

Suddenly, Alice felt something wrap around her tiny ankle; it was the plug’s chain. In the successful struggle to loosen her foot, she accidentally pulled the plug from its hole and she frantically tried to put it back. The rubber disc proved too heavy however, and the resultant vortex sucked her down the plughole.

Goodness gracious! What a most awful waste of elixir, should it be emptying out into a sewer. Please help me, Joshua.

The descent through the pipe was brief, and Alice found herself floating in an underground lake of the same golden liquid, surrounded

by tiny creatures resembling those that lived under the sea. One of them, a seahorse, shimmied by her.

“Hi,” it said.

“Hello.”

“You’re that li’l Alice dame, right?”

Brandon would have most certainly remarked that he sounds like a Disney cartoon sidekick, Alice thought with a smile, reflecting upon the creature’s Brooklyn accent.

“R-right. And you?”

“I’m a stranger than fiction.”

Alice looked askance at the creature and her brow wrinkled. “Hmm?”

“A strange *truth*, kiddo.”

“Oh, like in the MO Letter? I love that one, especially the comic.”

“I guess—whatever that is. But I’m available for food. You’ll need it for the future. Arise, Alice, kill and eat!”

“No way. I wouldn’t *dream* of killing and eating you.”

“Ah, but unless you do, you’ll die.”

“Die?”

“You’ll have no *life* in you.”

“I see. Now you put it *that way*.”

“Same thing isn’t it?”

“I suppose.” *Joshua, please! This is most awfully bizarre.*

“Actually, Alice. You only have to *swallow* me. No chomping or chewing. It’s guilt free.”

“That’s good to know. But...”

“Have you ever had a major problem swallowing a strange truth?”

“Some things in the Word can be a bit hard to ... umm ... understand at first,” Alice replied. “But usually, no.”

“See, kiddo? That’s ’cos you’re young enough to take it.”

Alice smiled. As puzzling as this exchange was, her heart was warming.

“So, how about it?” The creature asked and started to croon.

Imagine that you’re Jonah’s whale,

Imagine that you’re Jonah’s whale.

I’ll make my home in

Your li’l abdomen.

Imagine that you’re Jonah’s whale.

“I suppose it’ll be cool,” said Alice, “as long as you’re unharmed.”

“I’ll be harmed if you *don’t*. If you swallow me, I’ll be safe inside you until the time is right and you spew me out!”

“When will that be?”

“When it’s time to give the warnin’, of course. Think about it.”

As Alice did so, the creature continued to croon.

*When the time comes and you spew me out,
When the time comes and you spew me out,
I’ll give the warnin’
To the mockin’ and mournin’,
When the time comes and you spew me out.*

My grandfather would enjoy this adventure ever so much, Alice thought as she drifted in her newfound underwater wonderland. He was quite fascinated with that hippy, trippy fare. Still is, it seems.

Alice loved her grandfather on her mother’s side and although he was almost fifty years her senior, she felt he understood her. Some years ago, she had given him a copy of her adventures with the cards, and to this day, the book lay at his bedside, dog-eared and cracked at the spine from repeated readings.

I must send him a copy of this one, if and when it is published.

She also loved hearing tales of his “flower power,” nineteen-sixties’ hippy heyday hi-jinx. Maybe that was why she felt such a multi-coloured, tie-dyed kinship with what some considered as her “Indian craze” and trippy meandering music.

Such as that performed by “Kremlin,” Alice thought, pondering on a Family band living in Russia who was reaching the youth with that genre. And the lead guitarist is ever so comely ... sort of like Rummy.

“So, how about it, kiddo?”

The seahorse’s question having interrupted her flight of fancy, Alice shrugged, smiled, and opened her mouth. The creature swam into it, she swallowed and immediately found herself back in the bath, full-sized and hearing the bell ringing for breakfast.

I have betimes fallen asleep in the bath, she mused dazedly and stepped out of the bath. She dried off, dressed and wrapped the shawl around her.

Yes, Alice felt “warm and fuzzy,” as Brandon would have said, yet at the same time, she considered that the garment did look rather cool. It

hung gracefully down over her knees, drawing attention away from her possibly questionable jeans.

But who was that woman? she wondered.

- 4 -

TO MEETING THE FAMILY...

And as Alice entered what was obviously the mansion's dining room, she also wondered just who were the people gathered around the bulky oak table: a greying, bewhiskered man and a stern, taut-faced elderly woman sitting at opposite ends, the two girls she had seen in the hallway, and a teenage youth who seemed a little older than Brandon. The two girls were welcoming her with radiant smiles.

Ever so sweet, she thought. And the shawl must be working, as it doesn't seem that anyone notices my modern clothes. But the boy ... although he is remarkably handsome, I am most awfully discomfited with the manner in which he beholds me.

"We meet again, Alice," he said with a chilling snigger. "And that shawl is exceptionally becoming on you. Pashmina?"

Alice drew the garment tighter about her shoulders. "I umm ... don't know. But thanks ... thank you."

"Would you care to say grace, Alice?" the woman asked, pointing to the remaining unoccupied chair next to the youth.

"Grace? Like, prayer?"

The woman nodded as the rest bowed their heads. Alice sat down, closed her eyes, and began.

"We thank You for this yummy breakfast that You have set before us, and we thank You for the cooks that prepared it. Bless our fellowship around the table and help it to be edifying and fun. Do bless our day and whatever we put our hand to. Please keep us safe and especially be with the souls that we will meet today as we help them find You. In Your name, Joshua, and in the power of the keys we claim it."

Baffled as to why she would have prayed such a Family in-house prayer, Alice opened her eyes to the circle of astounded strangers—strangers to her, but she apparently not to them. Breaking the ensuing uncomfortable silence, the man cleared his throat and smiled sheepishly at her.

"A very sincere—albeit unusual—prayer of grace, Alice, indicative of a personal relationship with our Lord. Being much occupied with

church events, as you know, especially those involving the youth, I would that more young persons demonstrate such devotion in the saying of prayers.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Alice. “But that’s just how I normally pray.”

“Not as we have ever noticed,” said the woman, and began pouring the tea. “You are usually rather timid when it comes to such matters. Milk and sugar?”

“Just a little of each, m-ma’am.”

“And I noticed that you referred to Christ as Joshua,” the man said, “the Old Testament translation of his name. Any particular reason?”

“Er ... no, not really. It seems in certain situations that that is how he refers to himself. At least to me.”

“He does?” asked the younger girl. “Christ talks to you?”

Alice nodded, and was about to explain when the front doorbell rang. She stood up, grateful for the distraction.

“Molly will get it, dear,” said the woman. “Do sit down and enjoy your hardboiled egg.”

The doorbell rang again and Molly opened the door to what sounded to all as an unfamiliar visitor.

“Her *Lord*? Lord *who*, may I ask?”

Alice’s heart skipped as she overheard the reply.

“I-I see. I’ll let Miss know you are here. She is having breakfast at the moment.”

The dining room door opened and the blushing maid informed “Miss” that a Lord Joshua Kristos wished to speak to her.

“I hope he has not come to torment me before my time!” the youth said with the same uncanny snigger, which caused the others present to look at him with mystified apprehension.

“Anyway, a strange coincidence regarding the name, Alice,” the elderly man said. “Is he Greek?”

Alice shrugged, took a last sip of her tea, and stood up again.

“But a *lord*?” the woman said. “What sort of acquaintances have you been making these days?”

“He’s an old friend,” Alice replied.

“And we have never met him?”

“I have not seen a more comely young man in all my born years, if ye don’t mind me sayin’ so,” the maid remarked with a titter.

“S-so do I show him in, m-ma’am?” she added in response to the woman’s glare.

“Of course, but not in here. We need to be a little more prepared before meeting a lord. You can show him into the library, and inform him that Alice will join him there shortly.”

“Will do, ma’am.”

“Seeing as you are apparently not hungry for breakfast, Alice,” the woman said, “you are excused.”

“Thank you,” Alice said and picked up her plate, cup, and silverware.

“And just where are you taking those?”

“To wash them, ma’am.”

The woman batted her hand. “There really is no need. Molly and the kitchen staff always see to that.”

“But ... wh-where is it?” Alice asked.

“Where is what?”

“The library, ma’am.”

“*Ma’am*? Alice dear, is something amiss?”

“No, I just...”

“Down the hall, past the lavatory, and it’s the first door on your left.”

Alice entered the library to see Lord Joshua standing by the window wearing a crimson velvet coat over a wing-collared shirt, cravat, and dark grey trousers. He had tied his long, glossy black hair back in a black ribbon and his unusually underdeveloped beard was neatly trimmed.

My goodness gracious me! Now he seems even younger than Brandon and shorter in stature! How am I ever going to maintain the meanest measure of decorum?

The youth smiled and kissed Alice’s burning cheek. “Lovely to see thee. Beautiful as ever. And the goddess’ shawl is most becoming.”

“Th-thank you. So ... would you like some t-tea?”

“I would.”

Alice stammered her request to the maid who had been hovering in the hallway.

“I am most sorry, Miss,” Molly replied. “I was unsure under the umm ... *circumstances* if I was to intrude. But most certainly. Milk and sugar, sir?”

Joshua nodded and once Molly had gone, Alice turned to him mystified.

“How come you look so *young* all of a sudden? It’s a bit bizarre ... well, not *bizarre*. It’s just sort of shocking my frame of reference and stuff. And on top of that, it feels weird to call you ‘Lord.’”

Joshua laughed. "Thou troubleth thyself needlessly, Alice. Remember dancing together at the Christmas Eve Ball?"

"In the puppet adventure?"

"Nay, with the cards."

"Oh, yah. You were suddenly much younger. ..."

"Once upon a time I was thy age too. I can become *all* things to all men, and even to maidens such as thee. It is much like the nutty putty we spoke of."

"We did? Oh right, but that was about stretching and shrinking time and stuff, right?"

"And *bouncing* it," Joshua said smiling. "So I have 'bounced' back to being sixteen years old! Didst thou not know that I have even appeared as the Christ child to many a devoted little Catholic saint? Limit me not, Alice!"

"I'm sorry ... umm ... *Lord*."

"I became as a little child for St. Christopher, if thou rememberest."

"Well, I don't know that I exactly *remember*. But I've heard tons about the story and stuff. My great-grandfather even gave me a St. Christopher necklace a long time ago. Sadly I lost it."

The maid returned bearing a tray with a pot of tea, milk, sugar and a plate of fig roll biscuits. Joshua kissed her hand, thanked her for her solicitude, and she blushing excused herself. Then, after meticulously preparing his brew in silence, Joshua continued.

"Nevertheless, Alice, I can be *whatever, whomever, whenever, and wherever* I desire! So, here and now I choose to communicate with thee as a sixteen-year-old boy. I can change that if thou wishest, but seeing as there will be no dalliance in this episode..."

"Dalliance?"

"Romantic interest ... such as Rummy."

"Actually, I *was* wondering," Alice timidly said, "you know, like if he was going to show up and stuff."

"Is that well with thee should he not?"

"I suppose."

"But fret not thyself."

Alice smiled and declared that she would try. Nevertheless, she was still unnerved to be speaking frankly and behaving with her Lord as one of her peers, especially as his speech carried the sturdy authority of King James and hers the frail servility of the 21st century.

“Howbeit, Alice, I have purposed to temporarily fill the role, even if but to satisfy the interest of our maiden readers!”

“I’m okay with it, Lord. I really like it actually. It’ll just take a bit of getting used to—I do hope you understand.”

“Verily. Wouldst thou care to walk with me?”

Alice nodded bashfully. “Actually, I have been *dying* to get some get-out ... I mean, *exercise*.”

- 5 -

AND A WALK ON LOVERS' LANE

As Alice and Joshua stepped into the hallway, a short, slim young brunette strode up to them.

“And just where are you going, Alice?”

“Taking a walk.”

“With this young man?”

Alice nodded.

“I don’t believe we have been introduced,” the woman said.

“Oh, sorry. This is my ... er ... friend, Lord Joshua Kristos, and this is...” *Goodness gracious, I have absolutely no idea!*

The woman curtsied. “A lord? I’m Martha ... *Miss* Martha Thorne, *unwed*, and Alice and her sisters’ governess.”

“My pleasure, Miss Thorne,” Joshua said, and kissed the lady’s hand.

Miss Thorne stammered something to Alice about how charming the youth was.

“D-do your parents know you are stepping out, Miss Alice?” she said, adjusting her starched lace collar.

“No. But please do inform them.”

Just then, the two girls who had been present at breakfast walked out of the dining room and unsuccessfully disguised their similar reactions at laying eyes upon Joshua.

“A ... f-friend of y-yours, Alice?” the older one stammered.

“Yes, Charlotte,” said Miss Thorne. “Charlotte, Mary, meet Lord Joshua.”

“Alice’s sisters,” she added as the girls blushed, giggled, and curtsied.

“Verily, I am most delighted,” said Joshua, and kissed the hands of the girls, who appeared as though they were about to swoon, especially Charlotte. As Alice and Joshua approached the front door, she grasped Alice’s arm and pulled her aside.

“Alice, how on *earth*...?” she whispered.

“It has little to do with earth,” Alice said with a smile.

“But is he your ... I mean, is he *courting* you?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking. He’s a childhood friend.”

“Then he is eligible?”

“I think so.”

“He is *most* handsome.”

“Absolutely.”

“And he has ever such gallant speech!”

“Very cool,” Alice agreed.

“Is he coming back?”

Alice shrugged.

“Nevertheless, you should invite him for supper.”

“I must go,” Alice said, and hurried through the front door to join Joshua who had been waiting outside on the driveway. His countenance was wisely pensive, which Alice considered endearing, but incongruous with his present age.

“I must needs tell thee that besides substituting for Rummy in this circumstance,” he said as he and Alice strolled out of the gate, “there is yet a more important reason I have so visited thee.”

“O-oh yes?”

“Verily. But I do want to begin by commending thee on being a truly important key in thy Home’s Winning Offensive strategy plans.”

“Thank you, Lord.”

“Thou hast a winsome way with people. Thou art charming, and of course ... *very* beautiful.”

Alice blushed and wrung her hands. Joshua took one of them in his and continued.

“Consequently, thy earthly father desires to take thee to the uppermost occasions of outreach—banquets, feasts of merriment, and suchlike sumptuous fare. Which thou enjoyest, am I right?”

“I d-do, Lord. Very much, I’m sorry to say.”

“Be not ashamed, Alice. I enjoy them too! Nevertheless, thou oft sleepest late as many such functions tarry long past thy normal bedtime.”

Alice nodded.

“While thou art learning to take counsel and even reproof from thy peers and not just thy shepherds or parents?”

Alice nodded again, albeit glumly. She sensed what was coming, and butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

“However...”

Dearie me, here it comes, Alice thought. The “dreaded ‘however,’” as Brandon calls it, which frequently precedes a most awfully trying remonstrance.

“I wish for this to be not a ‘trying remonstrance,’ Alice. I shall merely let these circumstances speak for themselves. That is why we ... Lewis, George, Charles, and I have caused thee to be transported into this situation. I need say little else, except that thine attitude and comportment in thine Home of late will negatively affect thy witness if thou shouldst so continue.”

Alice burst into tears. Joshua handed her a monogrammed silk handkerchief, and put his arm around her. As they slowly walked, she reflected on her recent attitude in the Winsley Barnes Home, her snippiness with her parents and peers, and her reluctance to perform menial tasks.

“I am so sorry,” Alice finally said with more tears, as Joshua helped her over a turnstile that overlooked a meadow. “But is this experience supposed to be like a punishment?”

Joshua gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “Nay, darling. It is but a new lesson in the school of love.”

After pondering that lesson a while longer, Alice asked her beloved companion how she was supposed to introduce him.

“As thy very best friend.”

“Okay, but the maid and Miss Thorne and the girls ... my ‘sisters’ already think you’re my boyfriend.”

Joshua chuckled. “Very well. Thou hast a problem with that?”

Alice remained silent.

“Come, Alice. Out ye with it!”

“Well, it’s a bit bizarre, like ... ‘okay, *hello* everyone. This is Joshua. If you think he’s my boyfriend, that’s cool, but he can be your boyfriend too—I can deal with that. Anyway, he knows your innermost thoughts and fears, he can save you, heal you, and stuff. Oh, and by the way, if you want to go to Heaven, you can ask him into your heart.’ I mean ... isn’t that like, most awfully whacko? Alas, I’m sorry, Lord, I must be sounding ever so irreverent and stuff, but I’m not faced with this sort of thing in real life.”

As Alice had been speaking, Joshua’s chuckles had been turning into laughter, which was emboldening Alice’s bluntness, and by the time she had finished he was holding his sides with mirth. Joshua wiped his eyes and cupped her cheeks in his hands.

“Be not afraid of their faces, Alice.”

“I’m not, Lord. But I mean, I tell them that you ... you know, are appearing as ... what you just told me?”

“Verily. Like I said unto thee, thou tellest them that I am thy very best friend!”

“Yah, but ‘very best friend’ and you’re a boy ... I mean, a man. What more could it mean than...?”

“What thinkest thou?” Joshua said with a grin, and pointed to a footpath they were approaching flanked with trees. “A *perfect* lovers’ lane.”

Alice rolled her eyes, exhaled, and giggled. “I wouldn’t know, but I’m sure it’s perfect. Okay, but do I like, just come right out and tell people that you are ... you know, the Son of *God* after all?”

“Nay. Suffer them to find out for themselves and believe me for my very works’ sake.”

“Works?”

Joshua winked. “Wait and see,” he said, and kissed her.

- 6 -

ALICE JUMPS THE GUN

With eyes dazed and glazed, and heart a-flutter, Alice sat down to the lunch table. George had requested her to say grace in the manner of that morning’s breakfast, but she had not heard him.

“Alice? Would you please make an effort to stay sentient of your surroundings?”

“I am sorry, ma’am ... Mummy.”

“I think I would be in a similar state of bemusement after a hike with Little Lord Joshua,” said Charlotte, sipping her soup and grinning.

“It was but a brief stroll,” said Alice.

“Three and a half hours is but a brief stroll?”

“Let Alice enjoy her meal,” said George.

Something brushed against Alice’s legs and she gave a start. It was a black kitten.

“I think Dinah’s expecting her usual bowl of milk,” said Mary. “You neglected to feed her this morning.”

“So you have a cat called Dinah, too?”

“She’s *your* cat, Alice,” said Hannah. “Goodness gracious, dear, what is wrong with you?”

Charlotte giggled. “Like I said, Mummy, I would probably be in a similar state of...”

“*Stop*,” Alice said, and slowly put down her fork. She dropped the shawl from her shoulders, soliciting gasps and gapes, especially from Doyle who remarked on her developing loveliness.

“Look,” she announced, “this is the thing ... I’m from the *future*.”

“What?”

“I regret having to say this, but the Alice you see sitting here is not the Alice Pleasance you know from this time right now, and I have no idea where she is. You are all very sweet, wonderful people, but, to be perfectly honest—and at the risk of being rude—I have to say that I have never met any of you here in my *life*.”

Alice paused from her declaration to assess the faces staring back at her. They registered horrified bewilderment. Nevertheless, she continued.

“Listen, my name is actually Alice Godley from number seven Birdwood Lane, Winsley Barnes. And in my world right now it is 2010 AD.”

“Oh dear,” said Charlotte. “This is ever so disturbing.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s unfair to you or me if I continue this masquerade. Otherwise this whole bizarre ordeal will be majorly impossible to handle, and I’d make it *hell* on everyone, including myself.”

“Mind your language, Alice,” said Hannah.

“Well ... whatever, I’ve got nothing to lose. We will all just have to find a way to deal with it.”

George cleared his throat. “You are excused, Alice.”

“What?”

“*I beg your pardon, Father*,” Hannah reminded her.

“I’m sorry. I beg your pardon, er ... Father. But for like, what?”

“Unless this is some sort of prank, you are excused to go to your room, and you may return when you have thought better of your indecent attire, impertinent behaviour, and atrocious language.”

“Okay. Thing is, I can’t do anything about it.”

“I said you are excused, Alice.”

“B-but ... you don’t understand. ...”

“Get up there and *change*, Alice. That’s an order!”

“But I cannot change my clothes! It’s *impossible*.”

“What do you mean?”

Alice wrapped the golden shawl around her shoulders and stood up. “Let me show you.”

“Very well, let’s get to the bottom of this,” said George, and he and his wife followed Alice up the stairs to her bedroom.



“It’s sorcery,” Hannah shrieked as Alice tossed a shrunken garment onto her bed where it returned to normal size. “Plain and simple.”

“No it’s not, ma’am.”

“So what is it, then?” George softly inquired.

Alice shrugged. “No idea. It just happens in these sorts of out-of-time circumstances.”

“Hmm. Then for some providential reason, it seems you are confined to your odd attire, Alice. Anyway, best to keep it to yourself for now, or at least until...”

George Pleasance stopped at the ringing of the doorbell.

“Mr. Lutwidge!” they heard the maid exclaim from the vestibule. “It has been a while. ... Do come in.”

“Unannounced,” Hannah said under her breath. “As usual.”

“Most likely he wishes to talk to you, Alice,” said George. “Get dressed and put on your shawl.”

“And *do* make it brief,” said Hannah.

“But be sure to extend Mr. Lutwidge our congratulations on the publishing of his book,” said George. “Chances are, he will want you to sign the first copies. It’s been four years in the making.”

“I’m sorry. Book?”

“Alice, *really*,” said Hannah. “I do believe your mental lapses could be a result of dallying with this Lord Joshua, and possibly a result of Mr. Lutwidge’s nonsense addling your pretty little head.”

“Be that as it may, darling,” said George, “we don’t have time right now to discuss it further. And you really must attend to your guest. And then we must get along to the charity bazaar.”

Alice descended the stairs and stepped into the living room where stood a thin, pale-faced young man with side-parted dark, wavy hair, and clad in a grey Victorian suit.

The cottage in my adventure with the cards ... Dublin Airport with Marian the puppet...

Alice took the man’s shyly extended hand, and he, with a slight bow, kissed hers.

“A-Alice.”

“Mr. ... umm ... Charles? Lewis Charles?”

“Y-yes. Although, except for you, in this p-particular adventure, we are all being addressed on a m-middle name basis. I f-for one should b-be addressed as Charles Lutwidge. Lewis Charles is a p-pen n-name. Forgive my s-stammer and my d-dallying. I was s-supposed to b-be here sooner and could have s-saved you quite a b-bit of t-trouble. Though I will not take the b-blame entirely. The poor channel was a little t-tardy in getting our ... er ... *s-signals*.”

Alice looked puzzled. Lewis continued.

“At any rate, I s-suppose by now you have realised that you have arrived at the P-Pleasance household. I was supposed to b-brief you earlier on the m-members, but like I said—the *channel*...”

“I’ve got the gist and stuff,” said Alice. “I’m back here in the eighteen hundreds, and it’s like ... well...”

“D-difficult. I realise that.”

“Talk about it, Mr. Charles ... I mean, Mr. *Lutwidge*. It’s super embarrassing when sitting at a meal or socialising in the drawing room. I can’t even speak my best ‘posh’ in real life.”

“Yes, Alice. But think of the g-g-giggle the readers are g-g-getting right now reading this.”

“Hmmp. So instead of nail biting, cliffhanging, death-dealing circumstances, this adventure is to entertain and give the readers a laugh at my humiliating expense.

“At least I haven’t been rattling on about Brandon,” Alice added under her breath.

“Actually, the v-very idea of this s-situation came from one of your most devoted d-devotees. She practically *m-memorises* every adventure you are in.”

“That’s sweet, I suppose,” Alice despondently muttered. Lewis slammed a fist into his other hand and looked intently at her.

“Enough is *enough*!”

Alice was startled and she apologised.

“No, I am in no way upset with you, sweetheart, not at all. It’s just that my partners in crime—I m-mean, the other authors—took the l-liberty to portray me in this episode with such a s-stammer as I was afflicted with while on earth, but enough is *enough*. The readers will be most dreadfully irritated. Historical, literary, or whichever authenticity aside, I shall now speak plainly.”

“That’s g-good,” said Alice.

“God forbid you don’t catch onto it,” said Lewis. “Well, we—George, Charles, and myself—were in a bit of a strait as to whether we should leave you absolutely in the dark—thereby furnishing the readers with more suspense and a good giggle—or provide you with a little more information.”

“A little more info would be kind of nice right now. I thought ‘to *whatever* with it all’ and stuff, ‘I should just tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.’ And I did.”

“I see. Mind if I sit down, by the way?”

“I’m sorry,” said Alice. “Please go ahead.”

Lewis smiled. “You were saying ... about telling the truth?”

“I told them that I am from the future ... 2010, to be exact. That I am not Alice Pleasance *whatever* and stuff, and I live in Winsley Barnes, et cetera, et cetera.”

“I am well aware,” Lewis said, stroking his chin. “Although it wasn’t the best plan of action according to the script, you sort of jumped the gun.”

“Why not? It’s only a spirit story, and I’ll be back home in no time. What have I got to like, *lose*?”

“The respect of your readers and the people in this story, Alice.”

Alice exhaled, pulled at her hair and dithered, ashamed of her outburst. “Okay. Well ... they’re not *real*. The people in this experience, that is. It’s just a *story*. It isn’t really happening, right?”

“Not really happening?”

“No. This didn’t all really happen, did it?”

“It has now.”

“But back *then*?”

“No. It’s happening *now* back *then*.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lutwidge. But this is like majorly confusing?”!

“You’re asking me?”

“No, I’m saying it *is*.”

“Sorry,” said Lewis. “It sounded as though you were asking me a question.”

“Well, that’s just the way the tone goes nowadays ... I mean, those days ... *future* days.”

“So you believe these souls are not real, Alice?”

Alice nodded, stared at her boots, and said nothing.

“You mean to say that Mr. Sage is not real? The Queen of Hearts ... Marian, Betty Trucker?”

“I guess so. I dunno.”

“Rummy?”

Alice sat down and sighed.

“Look, Alice, I would suggest—to put it in your *dreadful* modern vernacular—that you ‘cool it’ on declaring that you are from the future.”

“Why?”

“Because they would then have to see to it that you are ... *committed*.”

“Committed, Mr. Lutwidge? I *am*. I’m totally committed to getting this whole thing over with and telling them the truth.”

“The truth could land you in a mental asylum. *Committed*.”

Alice pulled at her hair and exhaled again.

“Big deal,” she said at last. “I was committed to the same deal in the cards thingy and the scene with the truckers and stuff. What’s another nuthouse?”

“Not quite the same, Alice—if you have ever read or heard about a Victorian mental institution, you will see that it is far from the sort of experience that would pass for *Heaven’s Library* material without being *extremely* light on the descriptive passages.”

“Scary?”

Lewis nodded. “You might even be put on display. Not to mention having to suffer dreadful treatment and appalling living conditions. You have landed in what has been termed the ‘asylum era’ of history!”

“So that means I’m in this for the long haul and stuff?”

“Whatever that means, which I assume is that you are willing to see this *experience* through—then, yes. As you know, you don’t really have a choice regarding what time you ... how do I put it? ... *wake up*.”

“That’s true,” said Alice. “Sometimes it happens right when I don’t *want* to wake up.”

“Well, I suppose I should be getting along,” said Lewis.

“B-but the *book* ... you don’t want me to sign it?”

“Book?”

“You know. The one that has just been published?”

“Ah ... yes, pardon me, here is a first edition. Do sign it. There’s a quill and ink right there on the desk. Ah, good ... and do blot the wet ink.”

“I suppose I should finally read it,” said Alice as she did so. “It’s kind of weird that I haven’t taken the time to do so after all the fuss about it in my adventures.”

“Of course. And I have a first draft of the sequel, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* for your comment, perusal, and of course, *approval*.”

“But that’s already been printed for well over a century according to my time, right, and I had nothing to do with it.”

“You have now,” said Lewis. “When I wrote it, I was inspired. Who knows but what you did so from the other side?”

“Did what?”

“Inspire me.”

Alice shook her head. “This is like, majorly difficult to wrap my brain around. Please forgive me.”

“Stop demeaning yourself, Alice. Look, curl up on your couch tonight with Dinah, read *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*, and listen, commit it all to L-Lord Joshua.”

Alice sighed. “I will.”

“Good. But right now, you should prepare for the charity bazaar. Do enjoy yourself. It is a heart-warming occasion, and it bears fond memories for me.”

“Then why don’t you come along?”

“I think it wiser at this point to be personally uninvolved with the Pleasance family. Just say hello to Charlotte for me.”

Lewis sounded mysteriously strained to Alice. He bowed, bid her adieu, and left the library. She heard the maid ask him if he was staying for tea, and Alice was relieved to detect a chuckle in his voice as he declined, saying that urgent writing duties awaited him.

A BIZARRE BAZAAR

The Pleasance family had been tarrying long by the carriage at the bottom of the driveway for Alice who had been tarrying long at her bedroom mirror, when Lewis reappeared at the front gates looking much distraught.

“And what do you want now?” Hannah asked.

“I m-must speak with Alice again,” he breathlessly replied.

“This is rather inconvenient, Mr. Lutwidge.”

“I am sorry, b-but it is most urgent.”

“Hmmp. Here she comes now. But do make it brief.”

Lewis approached Alice and drew her aside. “L-look, you are obviously in a hurry, b-but I totally forgot to get you clued in on the members of the family, and this time it was not the f-fault of the channel.”

“I know,” said Alice. “It was mine. I could have asked Joshua, but I was too preoccupied.”

“M-maybe,” Lewis said, painfully aware of Hannah’s grim and watchful eye. “But as I have said, the channel was a little t-tardy receiving the ‘signals’ for that aspect, that’s why we have to make last-minute adjustments—even while the action is in m-motion, as you well know.”

“I am sort of getting used to that,” said Alice.

“Very well. Take n-note. The father is George, dean of the university and a reverend much engaged in church activities. A p-praying man of God, I would say. Victorian in the best sense of the word. He was even domestic chaplain to Prince Albert. Hannah, his w-wife, however, is a harder nut to crack. Victorian in the w-worst sense of the word. She never approved of my f-friendship with Charlotte, and curbed it by insisting on chaperoning our engagements, and f-for no apparent reason, finally forbade any contact.”

“Sad,” said Alice. “But should you be telling me all this?”

“For the s-sake of setting the record straight, yes.”

“But will it get printed?”

“That’s not for me to d-decide. Anyway, the rest of the P-Pleasance household consists of your sisters Mary, two years younger than you, and Charlotte, two years older.”

“I like Mary,” said Alice. “We kind of click and stuff.”

“I know. Although it m-may appear so, her time is not yet...”

“Her time?”

“M-maybe it is best for you not to know right now—keeps the suspense.”

Alice’s curiosity was aroused, but she said nothing. Lewis went on.

“The youth is Doyle Crevan. Eighteen years of age.”

Alice grimaced. “He’s a bit...”

“Granted. He’s your cousin and so they naively let him hang around ... Well, I p-probably shouldn’t give too much away. Anyway, he can be easily d-distracted by a game of chess.”

“Alice!” Hannah called from the carriage. “We absolutely *must* go.”

“I am sorry, Alice. Do have a splendid time at the b-bazaar. It shall p-prove to be an eventful evening.”

“You of all people should know!” Alice said with a laugh and dashed off to join her waiting “family.”



The charity bazaar usually began late on Saturday afternoon following teatime, when most of Oxford’s families were together, including many of the husbands, who had returned from work and would soon be about their Saturday evening drinking. Because Alice associated the Pleasance’s charity bazaar endeavour with her family’s Winsley Barnes’ charitable projects, which incorporated the clothing and feeding of bodies with that of souls, she participated with her usual fervency.

A few hours later, Mary and Charlotte were stopping to gush over an evening gown in a shop window, and George and Hannah, linked arm in arm, were ascending the high street from the town square. Alice was straggling behind, shivering and spent, but warmly elated at having seen hearts and lives changed with a gift of provision and a word of solace and prayer. Now the evening was falling, fog was settling in, and she wanted to get “home,” even if that was presently the Pleasance household.

Suddenly a hunched, hooded figure with an outstretched hand stepped out of a darkened shop doorway. Picking up her pace, Alice shivered and hurried on.

“A token, please?”

Alice stopped and looked back. The voice was that of an older woman, which she found familiar. “A token? I-I am sorry, but...”

“It’s the best gift you could give us after all you’ve done today.”

“Us?” Alice said with a start, as a looming figure of a man also dressed in a hooded cloak stepped out of the doorway.

“Yes, us,” he said.

Watching the members of her “family” disappearing over the brow of the hill, Alice was tempted to bolt after them. Nevertheless, she felt compelled to stay.

“So what’s the, like, *gift*? I don’t have any money on me. ‘Silver and gold have I none!’”

“We don’t want your silver or gold,” said the woman.

“What we need is more valuable than that,” said the man.

The lighting was so dim that Alice was unable to see their faces, but she liked the comforting sound of their voices. She nibbled on a fingernail and pondered.

“I gather you want me to pray for you?”

The two hooded figures nodded.

“Specifically for my wife here,” said the man. “She has been lame in her left foot for awhile, it makes it difficult for her to get around of course, but also to do what she loves, and that is ... well, if you pray for her, you will see.”

“Okay,” said Alice and closed her eyes. She took their hands. “Nothing is impossible for You, dear Joshua, so we claim Your healing for this lady so she can do what she loves ... whatever that is. In the power of the keys, and Your Name we ask.”

Suddenly a floodlight engulfed them, and orchestral music started playing from no particular source. Alice recognised it as the Commission Rhapsody. After praying aloud, she had been expecting Joshua to appear and wondered if, under these circumstances, he was even going to appear in the sky.

But it does seem awfully soon for the Rapture, Lord, she thought. *Seeing as it is but 1865.*

Suddenly, the woman doffed her cloak and pirouetted into the town square with the beam following her. A small crowd soon gathered around her.

“Margot!” Alice shrieked, as she watched the elegant, silver-haired lady dressed in a crimson, ermine-trimmed tutu performing a graceful ballet to the music. “The Queen of Hearts!”

She turned to the man who was watching enrapt and smiling. He had doffed his cloak also. “And you are, like ... King Pedro!”

The man laughed and patted her shoulder. “Not *like* him, sweet Alice!”

“Wow, it’s so obvious. Why didn’t I guess right off? The readers must think me so dumb. Well, they already do.”

“It was a test,” said Pedro, “and you passed. Margot was praying about whether we should use the cloak disguise thing all over again, and she got the go-ahead from Joshua, even though she was convinced that you would be wise to it!”

“This is so *awesome*,” said Alice. “I mean, I haven’t met her ... your *wife*—I mean *Her Majesty*—since my experience in the Useless Status with Betty Trucker and stuff, and I haven’t met you since that whole thingy with the cards!”

“That is true, Alice,” Pedro softly answered as they watched Margot perform. “I was in the caravan writing sonnets to *her*, and Walter the Pigeon brought you to me. You shared your heart ... is that situation resolved, by the way?”

“You mean the Rummy situation?”

“Yes.”

Alice shook her head sadly. “Joshua said I won’t be meeting him on this umm ... trip. By the way, he’s been appearing as a sixteen-year-old boy ... Joshua that is, which is okay even if a bit bottle-breaking.”

“Interesting.”

“But I would *love* to meet him in real life ... Rummy, that is. Joshua too, but that is a totally different deal. I mean, I already have him in my heart. Gosh, this is all sounding ever so bizarre. ...”

“Not at all, Alice. Margot and I will be sure to pray for you.”

At that point, Margot had finished her display and was standing with her arms and face lifted upwards.

Alice and King Pedro clapped along with the onlookers and it seemed to startle Margot. She took a bow anyway.

“She doesn’t do it for this,” Pedro whispered.

“This what?”

“Applause. When someone like you makes a good decision and has an amazing testimony, she goes into raptures, and praises Joshua like this. In that sense it’s more than a mere performance, but I do love to watch it.”

“It *is* awesome,” said Alice. “And she does get excited about the Family testimonies on her blog. But I wonder if mine is a bit bizarre to be on there.”

“Not at all, Alice. It’s about being ‘out of the box’ these days!”

After distributing to the crowd tiny, heart-shaped, ruby lockets, which contained a message inside, Margot walked over and greeted Alice with a hug. As much as Alice would have liked to have curtsied with the customary composure demonstrated in her previous adventures, her clumsy attempt resembled an unrehearsed dance step. She blushed, but Margot was afire with compliments on Alice’s contributions towards the “great commission.”

I do suppose she is alluding to the Offensive, Alice thought, although she felt like bursting into tears.

“Thank you, but ... I’ve blown it super bad, your Majesty,” she said and let those tears burst forth. “At least at home and stuff.”

Pedro handed Alice a monogrammed cream silk handkerchief, and Margot took her in her arms.

“We all make mistakes, Alice,” she said. “And that’s good. It keeps us humble. But thank you for praying for me, it means a lot to me. And the shawl is very becoming on you, by the way.”

“Thank you, your Majesty. But isn’t it yours?”

Margot smiled knowingly. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, the spirit helper who gave it to me said it was from ... and I have a feeling ... anyway, you’re supposed to show appreciation to the giver by using it, reading it, or sometimes even *wearing* whatever it is, right? Oh, what am I saying?”

Margot was still smiling. “Very true, Alice. Such it is with the Word and *all* the gifts of the Spirit.”

“Anyway, it’s beautiful, Your Majesty, and it has saved me from some major embarrassing situations during this ‘experience.’ But weren’t you the one who gave it to me?”

“Indirectly. Have ye not read...?”

“Umm ... I do need to like, brush up on all the spirit helpers and stuff. ...”

“Don’t we all?” Pedro said and grinned.

Alice’s face lit up. “Aphrodite?”

Pedro nodded and snapped his fingers in the air. “You have answered the million-dollar question, Alice.”

Then, to Alice’s and the lingering bystanders’ astonishment, out of a foggy nowhere rumbled a white, gild-edged carriage drawn by four elaborately harnessed white horses. The liveried coachman stepped down, and with a smile and a bow, opened the door.

“Step in, Cinderella,” he said, and Alice almost fell into a swoon. It was Joshua.

“I assume you need a ride home,” said Margot.

“W-well, my umm ... ‘family’ does seem to have g-gone ahead without me. I did wonder if they had even noticed.”

By midnight, they arrived at the front of the Pleasance Estate where the members of Alice’s “family” were gathered outside fretting. Concerns dissolved into astonishment, however, as Alice stepped out of such transport that made theirs appear comparatively dowdy, and which, instead of turning into a pumpkin pulled by four white mice, disappeared at the crack of Joshua’s horsewhip.

And neither had Alice turned into a scullery maid, but into the centre of such awed attention (especially that of her sisters) appropriate for one who could command such exclusive fairytale chauffeuring.

To be continued...



**Alice in
Retrospect
Part Two**

The story so far: Alice Godley of Winsley Barnes has once again embarked on an out-of-time, nutty-putty adventure in which she changes places with Alice Pleasance of Wonderland fame. Happily, Alice finds herself able to retain her modern clothing. Unhappily, she is no longer in the modern world, and her attempts at fitting in have not been entirely successful. ...

- 8 -

KID GLOVES

Although the evening had been invigorating and she was much commended for her winsome presence at the charity bazaar, Alice was still preoccupied over her dilemma. “Get well soon” cards from her newfound “family” graced the dressing table. Even one from Hannah bore a sweet prayer of hope that her daughter would soon be “back to normal.”

Following Molly’s patient, humouring instruction, Alice lit the kerosene lamp, and with her requested cup of hot cocoa in hand, stared pensively into its flickering light.

Alas, Joshua, I am in a strait betwixt courses of action. I do so need Your help. Should I apply myself to study the genealogy and details of the family in which I have found myself ... (well, not found myself—You have placed me here), and thereby lead them to believe that I am actually their daughter? If I do so, You know I would not be telling the truth, and I will be caught in many a discomfiting deception.

Alice waited awhile in the silence, and then continued.

Or should I let their assumption of my being rather mentally unwell take its course?

She waited again.

HL: This story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy.

For children ages 9 on up. May be read to younger children at parents' or teachers' discretion.

Copyright © 2010 by The Family

Or do I declare the truth, which would of course compound the latter dilemma.

“Joshua, please,” she whispered, having received neither leading nor answer in her mind, heart, or otherwise, “this is a major *trial*.”

Tempted to despair but deciding to trust, peace fell upon Alice and she disrobed, then wrapped the shawl around her, and curled up in the couch next to the fire flickering in the grate. There, clutching her cup of cocoa, she began reading of her historical namesake’s underground adventures. Although she was unfamiliar with much of the book’s literary allusions to the Victorian culture, she found herself enjoying it.

“Hi, Dinah,” she said to the black kitten that shortly slunk up next to her, and purring, ran its head against her leg.

“Hello, Alice.”

It was almost one o’clock in the morning, but in keeping with her night-owl body clock, Alice was far from feeling drowsy. Nevertheless, the kitten’s unexpected reply jerked her out of her literary flight of fancy.

“Of course, I shouldn’t be surprised and stuff, should I?” Alice said and drained her last cooled drop of cocoa.

“Of course not.”

“Maybe it’s ’cos I was just reading about the Cheshire cat, and suddenly having one talk to me doesn’t strike me as odd.”

“I am not a Cheshire cat, Alice. They’re ugly in my opinion. Especially when they grin like that.”

“I meant having a cat talk to me. And you are far from ugly, Dinah. It just goes to show that anything can happen on these adventures, right?”

“Right. *Anything*.”

“I mean, I recently had an experience with a talking, flying lion.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yah. It was scary, right?”

“At first,” Alice replied. “Then it turned out to be Papa MO Lion. Never mind, you wouldn’t know who he is.”

“Of course I do. ...” The kitten’s eyelids were closing and her voice was fading. “You guys...”

“You guys ... *what?*”

Curiouser and curiouser that she is conversing with me in contemporary speech, Alice thought.

“Dinah?”

The kitten had curled up in front of the fire and was purring in satisfied sleep. Alice returned to her book, and within a few minutes was doing the same, except she wasn't purring. She was unsure how long she had been sleeping when a tapping on the windowpane awoke her.

She groggily arose from her chair, and cautiously drew the curtain aside.

“I believe I forgot my kid gloves,” a shadowy form outside declared in a raised whisper. Alice's heart skipped with recognition.

“You did?”

“Yea,” said Joshua. “I need them in order to handle your situation.”

“I see. Th-they're probably in the l-library. I'll get them.”

“Nay, in thy chamber.”

“*Here?* How come?”

“I was concerned about thy quarters and thy comfort, so I looked in. While there, I had to wash my hands. Perchance they lie by the wash basin.”

“O-okay, I'll fetch them.”

“Trouble not thyself. I shall come and get them.”

Glad that the whole house seemed to be asleep (or at least its occupants), Alice hurried to open the front door, and scurried back to her bedroom. Joshua followed her, shut the door behind him, and sat on the edge of the bed. Dinah awoke and slunk up onto his lap.

“I have heard thy prayer and seen thy tears, Alice,” Joshua said, while stroking the purring creature's neck. “It pleaseth me greatly that thou takest these adventures and the people involved therewith to heart.”

“Thank you ... er, Lord. I suppose it shouldn't be so weird calling you that, when I believe I addressed Little Lord Fauntleroy as ‘sir,’ right?”

Joshua took Alice's hand. “Verily this is a sweet family, think ye not?”

“Yes, Lord. Always looking out for one another, especially the sisters. They do little things for each other without the other knowing and stuff. It's like they enjoy playing angel!”

Joshua nodded. Alice frowned.

“Except for Doyle, though. ... I know he's my ‘cousin’ and stuff, and he's always hanging around, but I mean, he's, like, a bit *weird?*”

“Verily. But he *is* a necessary element of the whole scenario, as thou shalt see.”

“Hmm. So, in light of the Offensive, what have I got to teach this family?”

“Thou art not here to teach them, Alice. This is mainly an experience to teach *you*. Thou art here to learn from them.”

“Learn from *them*?”

“Verily. Learn from them, and in so doing thou shalt teach *them*.”

Alice’s brow wrinkled. “Teach them what? About love?”

“Nay. Except for Hannah and Doyle, they need to learn a little of that, as thou hast observed. Thou art here to learn humility and preach the good news.”

“The good news?”

“Yea. The gospel of the Kingdom. My Kingdom, *thy* Kingdom.”

“My *Kingdom*? But the Family wasn’t even, like, around back then. ... I mean, now. And these people were ... *are* here at least a century before the Endtime.”

“Family, Endtime, and suchlike aside, my dearest. The Kingdom of Heaven is *the* Kingdom from past to present and future, and these dear ones need but guidance on tapping into its power, and thou canst lead them into that.”

“But how?”

“By example. Thou shalt see.”

“So, what do I do? I really want to be a good sample and stuff. And I wish I was talking, like, my *HL* normal right now. Especially with you. Why is that?”

“Fear not, Alice. I have a good reason. As long as thou speakest without guile, I am well pleased. Nevertheless, I have somewhat to say unto thee.”

Alice trembled and Joshua took her in his arms. He stroked her hair and softly spoke to her.

“As far as declaring thy part in this scenario, thou didst act in haste and in disobedience to one of thy principal spirit helpers. Doffing the shawl was in opposition to Aphrodite’s specific charge—in truth, an act against love.”

Alice burst into tears, and Joshua handed her a monogrammed handkerchief.

“Keep it,” he said after she had wiped her eyes and nose.

It seems I’m collecting these, Alice thought.

“Dearest Lord,” she said, “it seems I have *miles* to go in the love department. But what can I do?”

“Beseech the Pleasance family to forget all that thou didst say about the future and thy part in it.”

“But isn’t that *lying*?”

“Nay. I know thou dost not wish to lie, and most of the time thou must declare plainly. Howbeit, in this case thou must employ wisdom. Merely ask them to *forget* about it, and say that thou art willing to learn all that is necessary to be a good upstanding member of the household here and now. Deportment, etiquette, elocution, and suchlike.”

“I see, but Lord—”

A rapping on the door stopped her.

“What’s going on in there, Alice? Who are you talking to?”

Alice stood up and before she could open the door, or even answer, Hannah Pleasance stormed in with eyes darting and flashing. Alice glanced back at the bed; Dinah was crouching apprehensively with her green eyes blazing, but their visitor was gone.

“I heard a young man’s voice!” said Hannah. “Who was it?”

“Lord Joshua.”

“Lord *Joshua*? And where is he?”

“He was here, but it looks like he disappeared. He can do that, you know.”

Hannah snorted and proceeded to look under the bed, behind the curtains, out of the window and inside the wardrobe. She even checked the laundry hamper in the bathroom.

“So, where is the scoundrel?”

Alice shrugged.

“And what was he doing in your chamber at this time of night with you being so indecently attired?”

“He said he left his kid gloves in the bathroom and was just coming by to collect them.”

“A likely story. So he’s been here before?”

“Umm ... *apparently*. He came to check if my place was comfortable and stuff. ...”

“Enough, Alice. I am fetching your father right now. He will be *appalled!* A daughter of his ... *chambering*.”

“I am sorry, ma’am ... er, Mother, but what does that mean?”

“Engaging in immoral activity.”

“But I assure you, nothing has happened.”

“I said *enough*, Alice. Mental instability leaves no excuse for *this*.”

Hannah stormed out, slamming the door behind her and leaving Alice praying and puzzled at being left in such a bad-sample predicament despite Joshua’s remonstrance. A few minutes later, Hannah returned with her bewildered, bleary-eyed husband.

“Your mother says you’ve been ... as she put it, *chambering*.”

“As I told her, sir, nothing untoward has occurred.”

“Well, I understand the young Lord Joshua was just in here.”

Alice nodded. “He had returned to pick up his kid gloves that he had left in the bathroom yesterday. He said he needed them to be able to handle me ... my situation.”

George raised an eyebrow. “At one o’clock in the morning?”

“Y-yes.”

“As I told her, George, dear,” said Hannah. “A likely story.”

“But it’s *true*,” Alice pleaded. “Apparently, Joshua had peeked in here when he visited the other day to check if my dwelling was up to par ... something like that.”

“*Apparently*,” said Hannah. “Let’s bear that elucidation in mind, George, dear.”

Alice stifled a yawn and Hannah excused herself, saying that she was tired too and that she was leaving the affair in her husband’s capable hands.

“Goodnight, child,” she said.

“Goodnight, M-mother,” said Alice.

The door clicked shut and George took Alice’s hand. He spoke in confidential tones. “Seeing you are rather tired—and I too—I shall make this brief. Your Joshua and all that aside, I’ll get to the point and say that I *believe* you.”

“Believe me? Regarding what?”

“Well, I watched you at the charity bazaar this evening, and I was exceedingly impressed.”

“Why, thank you, sir.”

“But tell me, what is it that drives you to not only distribute material goods with what I can only describe as conscience-soothing charity on most of our part, but in your case to draw these poor, unfortunate souls into a deeper understanding of the riches of our Lord?”

Alice shrugged. “Dunno, sir. It’s just what I have been brought up to do.”

“Thank you. But why do you insist on calling me, sir, when I am your...?” George paused, chuckled, and slapped his head. “Of *course!* I know. Christ commanded that we call no man ‘father’ upon the earth! If your religious conviction leads you thither, then you have my support and prayers. It is comfort enough to know I have fathered a saint!”

“Thank you...,” said Alice, a little puzzled but relieved, “but...”

“Stop! ...There’s no need to explain. The odd thing is, although we have been concerned about your strange lapses and whatnot, when you testified to people of your faith today, your speech suddenly sounded normal and entirely relatable. Even Reverend Drake’s son remarked on it.”

“That is most encouraging. Such endeavour is my life, really.”

“Evidently. We as a family have always encouraged loving acceptance as the primary rule, regardless of life’s stations. But more to the point, I find something about you that is ‘other-worldly,’ if I may say so.”

“That is one way to put it,” Alice said with a giggle.

“Look, to put it bluntly, I believe that you are who you say you are.”

“And that is ...?”

“Listen, I would refrain from mentioning this to Hannah or any of the others, but as strange as it may seem that although I have no idea where the spirit of my true darling daughter is at this moment, I believe you *are* from the future.”

Alice’s mouth fell open.

“Yes, dear Alice. Am I correct in assuming that is still your name?”

Alice nodded, speechless but exhilarated.

“Good. Now tell me, do you believe in ghosts, spirits ... *angels?*”

“I do, sir. Very much so, but it seems in this scenario I am encountering...”

“I understand. I won’t go into the details right now, as I promised to make this brief, but I have had a few experiences, and I know that I have met them. That is why I loathe discounting your fanciful declarations as flights of fancy!”

“I appreciate that ever so much, sir.”

“You see, I find your presence refreshing, and I do believe I have glimpsed your unusual destiny.”

“Destiny?”

“Yes, that is to go forward so you can come back. I’m sorry—it must be most awfully confusing. ...”

“It’s not, sir. In fact it is, like, very right-on.”

George laughed. “Whatever that means! Anyway, I have never talked to you like this before, and most likely never will again should you return to your place in space and time. But if what you are saying is true, which I know it is, will you put in a good word for me—that I at least considered and thereby trusted your veracity?”

“Of course ... er ... Father. ...”

“George.”

“I will, George. But you are already, like, putting in a good word for yourself right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You and I are in a story as we speak.”

George smiled and winked. “Of course. Life itself is a story written by our own hand, my dear.”

“Yes, but as I have explained to so many people before, I am actually in one that is being recorded—written down.”

“I know that, too, dear. The world may very well see it in print someday, and I most likely will not live to even tell, let alone *read*, the tale.”

Alice had become weary with repeating herself on these adventures when having to explain her peculiar presence, so in her “real” life she had rehearsed a simple explanation that she nevertheless knew in her heart would satisfy few people. George had surprised her.

“Goodnight, Alice,” he said, and kissed her cheek.

“Goodnight, Father.”

“Goodnight, sir,” Dinah said as the man approached the door. George turned and gaped at the kitten.

“Dinah?”

“Yes?”

“What is this, Alice? Ventriloquism?”

Alice shook her head. “Sometimes she talks. I can’t explain it.”

“But I can,” said Dinah. “I am permitted to speak only at certain times.”

“Then why didn’t you speak when Hannah accused me of inappropriate behaviour?” said Alice. “You were my only witness that nothing had happened!”

“True. But I can only speak when I am around those who believe you. Hannah doesn’t. George does.”

“Well, *great*, but...”

“Look, Alice. George can go tell his wife that ... well, I’m not so sure...”

“Exactly,” said Alice. “George walks into their bedroom and it’s like, ‘Hey, sweetheart, umm ... by the way, I have it on good authority from Dinah the cat that Alice is telling the truth.’ Yeah, right. That’ll make *two* of us in line for the nuthouse. Unless you are willing to testify to both of them.”

“I see your point,” Dinah said with a wide yawn. “But I cannot because Hannah doesn’t believe. I’m sorry, if you will excuse me, my power catnaps have been severely interrupted these past couple of days, and I would like to go to sleep. Goodnight to both of you.”

“Goodnight,” said Alice.

“G-goodnight, Dinah,” George muttered and turned to Alice, who responded with a weary shrug and a shake of her head.

“It’s late,” she said.

“Indeed,” said George, who bowed and left.

- 9 -

ALICE GOES OVER THE TOP

The following morning, Hannah Pleasance’s tone and manner was as frosty and lofty as the grey stone walls of Christchurch Cathedral, where she and her family stiffly assembled for the Sunday morning service. Nevertheless, at the vicar’s urging of the congregation to praise God from whom all blessings flow, Alice did just that. During the hymn, she loudly declared her thankfulness to Joshua and his Father, surprising even herself by engaging in what she would have done but timidly back home in Winsley Barnes.

“And very inappropriately too,” Hannah responded to her husband’s remarking on Alice’s evident devotion as they filed out of the cathedral. “I would have thought that church was the *last* place on earth to be proclaiming her amorousness toward a libertine.”

“I believe she was proclaiming her thankfulness to God, dear,” George softly said.

“Then, on top of being a delusional amnesiac, our daughter must be turning into a religious fanatic.”

“Hmm... ,” George said, stroking his chin, “that... might not be so untoward in itself, darling, considering the public opinion afforded our Lord.”

“Hmmp,” said Hannah. By now, the Pleasance entourage had reached their carriage. They climbed aboard, and Alice, striving to check her chagrin, remained silent in prayer for the journey back to the Pleasance

manor, during which time Hannah fumed, George pondered, Doyle leered, and her sisters prattled.

“So, I assume you will be joining us for lunch, Alice?” Hannah asked as they entered their mansion. “It shall be ready in half an hour.”

Alice shook her head and said she was tired and not hungry. She was making her way to her bedchamber when Doyle sidled up to her from the hallway shadows.

“Taking a nap, little ‘cousin’?”

Alice winced. She had difficulty tempering her reactions to Doyle, and especially the ever-present glint in his eye.

“Yes. As I told my ... er ... mother, I’m quite tired. Though inspiring, it was a late, eventful night, and what with getting up early for church and stuff.”

“Speaking of church, Alice, that was an impressive little show you put on back there. Most adorable.”

“Show?”

“At the church. Quite the little prima donna—all that eulogizing. Did your Joshua put you up to it?”

“My Joshua put me up for nothing. I suddenly wanted to, like, thank him. ...”

“For the life of me I cannot understand why. Anyway, I am assuming you would be game for a little recreation?”

“But aren’t you hungry? It’ll soon be lunch.”

“Ah! I, like your Joshua, have meat to eat that ye know not of!”

Alice opened her bedroom door and stopped, hesitant at entering with the leering youth hovering behind her. “Like I said—I’m tired. And just what do you mean by ‘recreation’?”

Doyle let out a shrill giggle. “Guess!”

“Er ... *chess*?” said Alice, remembering Lewis’ advice. “Do you play it?”

“O-of course. Do you?”

“A little. I’ve sometimes played it with Brandon, that’s my br—”

“I know, Alice.”

“Anyway, he’s ever so good at it and beats me every time ... *almost*. But ... I *challenge* you.”

“What? For a game?”

“Of *course*.”

“When?”

“Right now.”

“But aren’t you tired?”

“All of a s-sudden I feel wide awake.”

“Very well. But where would you want to play?” The youth glanced at Alice’s bed.

“I s-suppose right in the drawing room would be just fine,” she replied with a shiver. Suddenly, Dinah darted out of Alice’s room and stood before Doyle hissing and screeching with her back arched, and her fur standing on end.

“Dinah? What’s got into you?”

“Nothing, Alice. The question is what has got into *him*?”

Doyle tittered nervously and pulled at his collar.

“Stupid cat,” he said.

“Not stupid,” said Dinah. “Just *psychic*.”

“Oh,” said Alice. “Like the one Grandpa talked about?”

“You could say that,” said Dinah. “But this guy is *bad news*.”

“Now wait a minute, Di?...,” Doyle began.

“Hey, you’re talking right in front of him!” Alice said to the cat. “I thought you only—”

“Talk to people who believe you? Yes, I do. This guy believes you, and more certainly than any. The devils also believe and tremble, remember?”

“I know the verse,” said Alice. “But—”

“Hey! We play chess,” Doyle said, and, letting out another shrill titter, edged back down the hallway.

“What should I do, Dinah?” Alice whispered. “This is, like, majorly creepy.”

“Follow him. Play him. You’ll win.”

Upon entering the drawing room, Doyle called for Molly to close the curtains and light a fire in the hearth. Then he produced an elaborately embossed marble chessboard from the sideboard along with a crimson velvet-covered box containing ivory and ebony chessmen.

“Hand carved,” he said, emptying the pieces onto the living room table. “Exquisite, don’t you think?”

“Very.”

“There. ... I presume you know how to set them up, Alice. ...”

“I do. But which side am I to...?”

“*White*, of course. I’m on the *black* side!”

Doyle cackled. Alice drew her shawl tighter about her shoulders and looked warily around her; the flickering fire and kerosene lamps casting looming shadows on the walls were doing little to dispel the eeriness.

“Why did you draw the curtains, Doyle?”

“It adds to what you would call the ‘*vibe*,’” he replied, and Alice silently asked Joshua for peace and protection as the two of them set up the pieces.

“And white goes first, dear ‘cousin!’ That is how it was in the beginning!”

“In the beginning?”

“You know precisely what I mean. In the beginning was the Word, the light of men. But it is yet to be seen how it will be in the *ending*, and who laughs *last!*”

So saying, Doyle cackled again, but Alice refused to be fearful, having decided to endure this spine-chilling scenario, if only for the sake of the readers.

“If I may ask,” she said, “like, it’s one thing for me to suffer your rather girlish giggle, but please do me a favour and at least cut back on the ‘Dracula cackle’? It’s majorly unsettling and if it continues, I shall have no other choice but to leave the game.”

“You mean you’ll just give up? That would mean a shamefully empty victory for me.”

“No. I just want to establish a bit of, you know, *protocol*, and stuff, at the onset. Quite frankly, Doyle, your laughter in general carries a bad spirit.”

“Hmm. So if I win ... nay, *when* I win, it will offend you to hear that said triumphant ‘Dracula cackle’ ringing loudest and longest throughout the very universe?”

“The saying is that ‘he who laughs *last*, laughs longest,’” Alice said, astonished at the authority of her reply. “You will have your temporary cackle time, Doyle ... or whomever you are inside, but the Bible says that He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh—the *Lord* shall have them in derision. That includes *you*.”

“The Lord? Are you talking about your little Lord Joshua Kristos lover boy?”

“Yes. And his Father.”

“We shall see about that, Alice. Let’s start playing.”

Many moves went by, and although Alice found herself rapidly losing her pawns, Doyle controlled his tones of mirth with stifled titters. Nevertheless, Alice asked him what was so funny.

“Your tactic, dear. Defensive play.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are putting out your measly little pawns in order to protect your big wigs that are huddling in their corners! Look at your bishops, knights, and rooks—the very ones that can do serious damage—cowering while protecting your king and queen! Notice that I am putting my best ‘feet’ forward.”

Of course! Alice reflected. *Silly me. The very thing that Brandon taught me when we first played chess together. One must play offensive!*

“Thank you for your advice, Doyle,” she said, and confidently advanced over the next few plays to pick off some of her opponent’s pawns and even a bishop. “I am now on the offensive!”

“So I see,” Doyle said with attempted indifference.

“And I believe this is checkmate?” Alice asked after a few more moves.

Doyle glowered and scooped the remaining pieces off the board. “You could call it beginner’s luck,” he mumbled.

“Not that much of a beginner, actually, having played against my brother, who is the best I know, and won at least a *few* games.”

“You’re talking about Brandon, I assume.”

“Y-yes. He’d beat you hands down, and not just at chess. He gets scarily militant when rebuking the Devil.”

“Of course. I know exactly where you are coming from.”

“I *am* beginning to figure that,” Alice said. “Likewise, I was wondering when I was going to bump into you on this adventure. Not that I was exactly looking forward to it. It’s often been like a sort of necessary evil and stuff for the plot’s sake.”

“Understandably, dear. Every good story needs a good baddie.”

“True. And I was beginning to believe that poor Madam Hannah Pleasance was to fit the bill. But a *good* baddie? Is there such a thing?”

“As a character in fiction, yes. Admit it, Alice, the world loves a well-played baddie even more than the hero ... or *heroine*, right?”

Alice sighed. “Depends on the heroine. However, you’re talking about the world’s taste. But I do hope that the readers don’t feel that way about me.”

“Maybe they do. Think about it. Maybe you *do* come across sometimes as a naïve, goody two-shoes.”

“I do?” Alice said, regretting her question even as she spoke.

Doyle nodded solemnly with such feigned apologetic concern that fortunately made Alice laugh, throw back her shoulders, and adamantly address him.

“But I’m *not*. I just do what I think is right—with Joshua’s help, of course.”

Doyle tittered, still controlling any unwelcome expression of mirth. “Very well. Now, let’s talk about my character in *reality*, Alice.”

“In reality?”

“Yes. As opposed to fiction. Until recently, the world has erroneously considered me and my representatives as bad. Consequently, I have suffered unjust harassment at worst and misunderstanding at best, but the tables have turned. Many nowadays—speaking in terms of *your* timeframe of reference—consider me the noble but threatened lone wolf, the endangered but harmless serpent, and (while cursing St. George) the extinct, misunderstood dragon.”

“That’s a little exaggerated,” Alice said calmly. “And if some do consider you such, then they must be deceived. So, we play again?”

“Y-yes, dear Alice. Twice more and winner takes all?”

“Takes *all*? What are the stakes?”

“Obeisance and respect,” Doyle said, and began setting up his pieces.

“*Hmmph*,” Alice said, and set up hers. “For your ... f ... FYI, I’ll *never* respect you.”

“If I win, you *must*,” Doyle said, and, took the first move. “You won’t be able to help yourself.”

“I am *destined* to win,” said Alice, pensively studying her pieces. “And when I do, I don’t need or *want* your obeisance and respect.”

“Oh no? So, what is in this for you to beat me?”

“As if you didn’t know?” Alice replied, and moved a bishop.

“I see. And what have you got to lose if *you* don’t?” Doyle asked, and made a similar move.

“I could ask you the same question,” Alice said, and deftly moved a knight. “What do you stand to lose if I win?”

“Like you, ...” Doyle replied, pausing to counter her with a knowing smile and a move of a bishop, “souls. *Many* souls. Almost the whole world.”

Alice made a similar move. “Rather silly that the future of the universe depends on a stupid chess game—sounds contrary to the God-given majesty of free will and choice. But it’s comforting to know that the authors will avoid writing anything into the scenario that leaves the readers in despair.”

“*What*, despair at my benign rule? If you want to talk about free will, Alice, if *I* were in charge, there would be no rules for *anything*. Everyone would be free to follow their own.”

“I see,” Alice said with a smile.

Suddenly Doyle stood up, straightened his bowtie, and snapped his fingers. Strains of an orchestra filled the air; he took a bow and with swelling chest, began to sing in a pompous, operatic tone.

*If I were in charge
Of this Kingdom so large...*

Alice gasped, stifled a giggle, and Doyle stopped. "You didn't know I could sing, did you, Alice?"

"No, and I'm still rather unsure."

"Then let me demonstrate."

*If I were in charge
Of this Kingdom so large,
I would release
You to do as you please
Without retribution
Under my constitution!
There'd be no constraints,
Rules or restraints.
You'd follow your whim,
Fear no judgment grim,
Beholden to no one,
Especially Him...*

At this point, Doyle raised his fist, and continued.

*You'd throw up the guilt long stuck in your craw,
When 'Do what thou wilt' is the whole of the law.
If I were in charge
Of this Kingdom so large.
If I were in charge
Of this Kingdom so large.*

"So, will the principle of your song even apply to no rules for this chess game?" Alice asked, as Doyle took another bow and sat down.

"We're discussing greater issues than that, Alice," he replied, and moved another pawn.

“Hmm. Seems not, as this game portends to be rather important. Ah ... I think this should take care of that. Thank you, Doyle ... a *rook*.”

“Don’t gloat too soon, my smug little prissy princess. I believe this is checkmate?”

Alice stared at the board. “*What!* So soon?”

“Yes. Ready for round three?”

Alice agreed, silently praying for forgiveness should she have been too smug, and that she would avoid being so during the following game. She and Doyle spoke little as they moved their pieces. In fact, it seemed to Alice that Doyle was now behaving exceptionally conceited until she called “checkmate.”

The youth’s mouth dropped open; there was no denying it. Alice had cornered his king with a rook and a bishop.

“I win,” she said.

“L-look, Alice. One more game and it’s confirmed. It’s either you win with no question—three to one—or it’s yin-yang, even-Steven spiel, and we agree to disagree in the eternal conflict of good and so-called evil.”

Alice yawned. “I am not sure what you’re burbling on about, Doyle, but a deciding game would certainly be in order. And then, you must excuse me to get my much needed nap.”

“Absolutely,” Doyle said, and began setting up his pieces. “Having a sleepy opponent, this shall be quick. Furthermore, I know your strategy.”

Unable to stop yawning, Alice set up hers, but she had difficulty keeping her eyes open and loathed to apologise for her fatigue. Alice advanced the first move and after several plays, Alice took one of his knights with a pawn.

“How stupid of me to not see that,” Doyle remarked, studying the board with his chin in his hands. “However, it is merely a case of...”

Alice had been striving to stay awake, but as she heard the youth’s voice fading away, she found herself standing on a flat, gold-and-brown chequered meadow, with a battle raging about her involving an army dressed in white opposing another dressed in black. The shouts, screams, and clashing of swords were deafening. She herself was wearing a crown and a white robe, and with some difficulty, was wielding a heavy, bloodstained sword.

All of a sudden, the hordes fell silent, and they gathered to watch a white-robed Bishop standing by a Knight wearing a white cloak who was holding his sword at the neck of a black-robed king. The king's crown had fallen off, and he was screaming at Alice who was approaching the scene.

"What shall we do with the impostor?" the bishop asked.

"Do we kill him, Your Majesty?" the knight asked.

"Nay. Bind him and cast him into the dungeon."

"*What?*" the black king screamed. "Let me die a glorious martyrdom!"

Alice shook her head. "That would only promote your cause."

"You can't do this! Your so-called *Majesty!*"

"Nay, but I am qualified," said Alice. "I am a queen, after all."

"Aye ... and you can just come and go as you please in your own sweet way. Back and forth, side to side, and even diagonally ... as many squares as you please."

"Not as *I* please, but as my player moves me."

"Your player! *Pah!* But what about me? The same as you in some respects. Back and forth, side-to-side, diagonally ... but only one square at a time. Grossly unfair."

"Pay the miserable wretch no heed, Queen Alice," a female voice screeched, and out from among the throng strode a black-robed queen. Alice thought she sounded like Sharla Tann. "He berates me for the same thing in his egotistical, macho, male chauvinistic pride."

"And quite rightly so!" the black king yelled. "Who decided the rules of this stupid game anyway? A feminist?"

Alice shrugged. "I don't know. It is actually quite an anointed game, in my opinion, and far from stupid. It contains many analogies after all."

"Away with your analogies."

"I am sorry. Well ... not sorry under the circumstances, seeing you are taking your defeat so unbecomingly. Far from being what one would call a good loser."

"*Pah!* How can a young girl, subject to gross vanity, pride, lack of love, and serious speech impediments, claim to hold this weight of authority? You know what I'm talking about, 'Queen' Alice! Give it up! Give it *up!* ..."

Suddenly, Alice was startled out of her fantastical dream by chess pieces tumbling into her lap. Doyle had overturned the chessboard and its

contents, and was screaming verbiage at her, continuing his fantastical tirade as the black king.

“You have no business taking charge like this, Alice! A vain, hateful, ne’er do well!”

“I assume I have won?” Alice said as she came to her senses.

“Your Joshua is a *fool* to bestow such responsibility into such incapable hands. I’ll tell him to his face!”

To Alice’s horror, Doyle lunged for her and grabbed her by the throat, making her unable to vocalise a call for help. Suddenly, the drawing room door flew open, and Molly accompanied by George and a hefty man burst in.

The man seized Doyle by the shoulders and the livid youth released his grip on Alice. He was spasmodically jerking and still berating Alice through gnashing teeth and foaming mouth as the man hauled him shrieking out of the room.

“You are *unworthy*, Alice! Vain, proud, disrespectful, and unloving! You’re *unfit* to engage in Joshua’s Offensive. Mark my words, I deserve another chance! I will *have* another chance!”

“I was much vexed upon hearing Doyle’s screaming, Miss,” said Molly. “It seemed as though Miss could have been in danger, so I called for Mr. Pleasance and Mellors, the gamekeeper, to intervene. We darn near saved Miss’ very life, it seems.”

“Thankyou. I’ve never actually been strangled before,” Alice said, choking and trembling. “But I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

“Well, Doyle *has* been behaving rather peculiarly these last couple of days,” said George. “Never imagined it would go to this extreme, though. Anyway, you should administer some salve to those bruises on your neck, Alice.”

“I’ll see to it, sir,” Molly said, and accompanied Alice to her bedchamber.

A SAINTLY NAMESAKE

Alice yawned, stretched out her arms, and sat up in bed.
“Come, Dinah. Let’s go for a walk.”

Although she had been extremely tired, Alice had napped long but fitfully, as the bout with cousin Doyle had taken its toll on her spirit. Granted, she had won the victory over the sneering scoundrel in a chess tournament, but his parting words were still weighing on her heart. Therefore, anguished over failing a few lessons of love and decorum, Alice despondently sauntered out of the Pleasance residence and its grounds to roam the nearby heather-clothed meadow and let the afternoon breeze clear her mind.

Having no physical surroundings to indicate the historical period in which she had found herself, she preferred to imagine she was taking one of her favoured solitary strolls on the downs behind her home in Winsley Barnes. At the same time, however, in an attempt to push the burden of condemnation out of her mind, Alice fantasised herself as a protagonist in her much-loved novels of bygone days: Emma, Jane Eyre, and even Scarlett O’Hara and Tess.

Oh me, oh my, the readers must deem me most awfully fanciful. But You understand me, Joshua—that I know—and You cast a merciful veil over my daydreaming. And forgive me should I refrain from addressing You aloud, as I fear that in my present frame of mind, You showing up as a sixteen-year-old youth at this moment would be most disconcerting. ...

The sun was already setting when Alice and Dinah found themselves wandering into a dense forest at the foot of a wheat field. Within but an hour, the light had so dimmed that Alice, although having been engaged in verbal communication with Dinah, and silent communion with Joshua, became alarmed at being unable to find her way out. Finally, after calling aloud for Joshua’s help, it came as no surprise to Alice to stumble across him sitting at the foot of a tree and holding a lamp. He arose, greeted her with a kiss and took her hand.

“Follow me,” he said, and led Alice through the forest until they came upon a clearing where stood a log cabin resembling a Swiss chalet.

“Here is thy lodging for the night.”

“But won’t my ... the Pleasance family be concerned if I don’t return home?”

“Verily. But that is not *thy* concern. I worketh a work in their hearts.”

Joshua rapped on the cabin’s door. Hearing a guttural response and

a clearing of the throat from within, he kissed Alice and disappeared. An elderly man with a long white beard opened the door. He was wearing a purple velvet robe bedecked with silver stars and planets.

“Ah! We have been expecting you,” he said as he took a bow. “Do come in.”

Alice recognised the old man’s voice, but not his doddering demeanour.

“We, sir?”

“You’ll see. But what do you think of this beautiful lamp?” he said, pointing to a lighted golden cone standing on a plinth. It had cut-outs shaped like the stars and planets on his robe.

“Merlin’s hat!” Alice exclaimed.

The old man nodded. “Do you like it?”

“Super cool, sir. I read a *MLK* about it to the children in our Home a few weeks ago.”

Dinah’s ears pricked up. “Milk?” she said.

“Of *course*,” said the old man. “I am sorry. My dear psychic cat, welcome. And if you desire milk, I shall fetch you even better. How would you like a big bowl of fresh cream?”

“Awesome,” said Dinah, slinking against his leg.

“But, sir, she only has that on special occasions,” Alice whispered. “Like your story of the butter on the sweet potato, I don’t want her to get used to it. Plain old ordinary milk will do just fine.”

“Ah, but this *is* a special occasion.”

“Yes, of course, I’m sorry,” she said, as the old man prepared a bowl and set it before the delighted cat. “But you’re not really Merlin, right? I mean, you’re...”

“*Grandpa* to you, of course. Dad to some, MO to others, and just dear old doddering David to my kith and kin.”

Alice giggled. “But you’ve also been Papa Lion to many, including my father when he was a child and even *me* on my last adventure!”

“Ah, yes. Wonderful, wasn’t it?”

“Very, sir.”

“Good. Anyway ... watch *this*.”

The old man lifted the golden cone to reveal—pirouetting on a revolving plinth, a lifelike miniature model of a woman with her arms outstretched and wearing a tutu.

“Margot, the queen of hearts!” said Alice.

“The queen of mine,” the old man wistfully said. “And I love to watch her.”

“Me, too,” said Alice.

“Ah, but for me it’s from behind the veil right now. Yet it is entrancing, don’t you think?”

Alice nodded and remarked on the tinkling tones that were now filling the air. “And the music is from the Commission Rhapsody, right?”

“You are quite correct. We had considered renaming it the *Offensive Rhapsody*, but that hasn’t quite the same ring.”

“I suppose not, sir,” Alice said with a giggle.

Just then, a side room door opened and a sleepy-eyed, but outstandingly attractive girl a little younger than Alice stepped out. She was wearing a purple silk nightgown bedecked with the same symbols as those on the old man’s robe and Alice mused that the chalet’s occupants were “ever so into the cosmos.”

“I heard the beautiful music, David,” the girl said in what Alice detected was a faintly French accent. “The Commission Rhapsody?”

“Yes. And *she* is here. Just as I told you she would be.”

The girl smiled at Alice, extended her hand, and curtseyed. “*Bon soir*. I am Aleydis.”

“*Saint Aleydis*, to be precise,” said Grandpa.

Alice curtseyed; this time quite adroitly. “Nice to meet you. I’m Alice.”

“I know.”

“*Saint Aleydis* so wanted to meet you ‘in the flesh,’ as it were,” said Grandpa. “Seeing you were named after her.”

“I was? It doesn’t sound like my name.”

“She was also known as ‘St. Alice the Leper.’”

“Hmm. ... I thought my parents named me after ... well, I don’t know. I am unsure if it was after your daughter in that ... you know.”

Grandpa laughed. “Of course not. Alice was the name your parents received in prophecy, but did not know why. Here is your true namesake, dear *Saint Aleydis*, Alicia, or ... *Alice*.”

“Please, David,” said the girl, “I am no more a saint than Alice is. I mean to say that she is also a saint.”

“True. But there are saints, and there are Saints with a capital ‘S!’”

“Just because I was canonised,” the girl said with a sigh and a bow of her head.

“Away with sham humility, ma’am,” Grandpa said with a chiding chuckle. “You have to hand it to anyone who, having passed through the Vatican’s evaluating fire, comes out pure in their eyes. Thankfully, God Himself is more lenient!”

The girl rolled her large, deep blue eyes and laughed. Alice, however, who had been standing transfixed, remarked on her exceptional beauty.

“It was not always so,” said Aleydis. “As an adolescent I was afflicted by leprosy, so that by the time of my passing, I was most hideous to behold. They said my flesh was as the blackened bark of a withered tree. As the prophet Isaiah said, ‘They hid as it were their faces from me.’”

“How dreadful,” said Alice.

“*Oui*. But Joshua granted me back what I gave to him a hundredfold.”

“Evidently,” said Alice. “As much as I love and trust him, I don’t know if I would have the same faith as you did to cast my beauty into his hands, though. I *am* kind of hung up on my looks and stuff.”

Aleydis nodded. “I know, and I can see why. You are indeed beautiful.”

“Thank you. But nowhere near...”

Grandpa cleared his throat and spoke. “This little cabin, cottage, chalet—what have you, is here but a while for your sake, Alice, so we need to redeem the time.”

“I am most honoured ... but for what, may I ask?”

“Besides my helping you to further Joshua’s miracles and to keep you from condemnation...”

“I must admit I have been hit with quite a bit of that the last couple of days,” Alice said morosely.

“You have no reason to be. Take my word for it, Alice, Joshua is most pleased with you.”

“That is so encouraging.”

“Good. And Aleydis is here to help you too.”

“She is my spirit helper?”

“One of them, ... specifically to help keep your vanity in check.”

“Oh, dear. One of my heavy-duty ongoing er ... problems.”

“*Oui*,” said Aleydis. “Beauty can be a burden heavier than uncomeliness.”

“Why?”

“Because, like having riches, fame, and popularity, one possessing any and especially all of those things can become increasingly uncertain of people’s motives for liking one—even loving one. It breeds scepticism and suspicion in one.”

“That is ever so sad,” said Alice.

“Tell me,” Aleydis went on, “have you ever noticed that while most couples are somewhat balanced on the beauty scale, a number of exceedingly happy couples can appear mismatched in looks?”

“Umm...,” Alice wrinkled her brow and scratched her chin.

“Well, for instance, one is extremely handsome or beautiful to behold, and the other rather plain?”

“Come to think of it, yes. Brandon has pointed that out regarding some of the pitifully few lasting movie-star marriages. We even had a similar thing happen with a couple in our area. The guy is a real looker, and after quite a few relationships he got together with a girl ... well, she’s pretty, but not at all one of the prettiest, at least in my way of thinking. A lot of my friends also had wondered about it. But the couple has been super happily married for quite a few years.”

“Why must we discuss such vanities?” Grandpa asked with a tone of impatience.

“That subject is my very commission, David,” said Aleydis. “Like you said, I am here to keep Alice’s vanity in check. It is most important nowadays—more than ever.”

“Of course,” said Grandpa. “But more importantly, as I said, I am here to relieve her of condemnation.”

“*Oui*, David, but vanity and condemnation work together to bring about a mortal’s downfall. It is important to vanquish both.”

“You could be right, Aleydis. In fact, you *are* right. Listen, Alice, there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Joshua Kristos.”

“That’s a comfort to know, sir,” said Alice. “Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome. That pipsqueak Doyle may have had a point or two, but as you saw in that chess game, he is already beaten. Somewhat like what I did to Lady Luck. You know, when I beat her and folded up the game on her.”

“I don’t believe I know that one,” said Alice.

“MO Letter number 602.”

“Hmm... that’s probably in the beige one. I’ve been kind of hung up on the red one, Volume Two ... at least in one of my adventures ... well, not hung up, just ever so involved.”

“Good for you!”

“Treasures new and old,” said Aleydis.

“Anyway, a drink Alice?” Grandpa said, handing her a golden chalice brimming with a deep purple brew.

“Er, is it, you know...?”

“Oh *yes*,” he said, handing another to Aleydis. “It will send you floating into the wild, dark-blue cosmic yonder!”

“Then I suppose if you are giving it to me, it must be like, kosher and stuff.”

“And stuff, and stuff, and stuff, Alice,” he said with a wink. “It seems you have a lot of ‘stuff’ in your life.”

“We all have some baggage,” said Aleydis.

“I do need to work on that speech habit,” said Alice, and took a sip from her goblet. “This is delicious.”

“It’s from the stream out back. I will show you in the morning.”

Alice took another sip, and within a few moments, she sensed a warm glow bathing the chalet’s environment and the presence of many unseen, but caring beings. To her surprise, she could also read Dinah’s thoughts and flashed her own mental communication back to her as the grinning cat lapped the bowl of cream.

You do understand that you won’t be getting this every day at home, Dinah.

Absolutely, Alice. We’ve all gotta learn to abase and abound. But this whole thing here is not about me, but you. The vanity deal, right?

“Right,” Alice said aloud.

“Right, what?” said Aleydis.

“Dinah. Umm ... the cat said that the whole thing of this visit with you is about my vanity deal.”

“Your vanity ‘deal.’ True. Then I suppose we should begin at the beginning. ...”

And so, Alice and Aleydis conversed about the blessings and burdens of beauty, along with Aleydis relating fascinating, fantastical, historical and mythological examples ranging from Absalom, Cleopatra, and Narcissus, to Beauty, the Beast, and Snow White, while Grandpa puttered with a collection of purple crystals, admiring them and arranging them in different orders on the shelves.

“Did you make them, sir?” Alice asked at length.

“I moulded them,” said Grandpa, “from the very elixir we have been drinking.”

“Awesome.”

“You can do it too.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Tomorrow I will show you. It’s simple really.”

“That would be super,” said Alice.

“Yes. But seeing as it is way past midnight, I do believe it is time for you maidens to get the kind of sleep, which these dreary diatribes have been deferring.”

Aleydis gasped in mock horror. “David! As you know, this has been an important lesson for dear Alice. Do not scorn.”

Grandpa bowed his head. “I am sorry. As you wish, ma’am.”

“But you are right, David. And now, to bed.”

“You have a foldaway cot in Aleydis’s room, Alice,” said Grandpa.

“Thank you, sir.”

“And be sure you don’t keep our young guest up talking, Aleydis.”

“I most certainly shan’t,” Aleydis said, and planted a kiss on his beard. “Just don’t stay up too much longer yourself either. I know you enjoy admiring those crystals, but there’s a time and place for everything.”



“Can I ask you something?” Alice timidly inquired, as she and Aleydis clambered into their cots.

“Why should you need to ask to ask?” Aleydis replied. “It makes no sense, unless I know what you are going to ask me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alice. “But I’m like, clueless?”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Look, you could instead say ‘can I ask you a personal question?’ or some such thing. Then, of course, one should wisely reply ‘it depends upon what it concerns.’ And should the person posing the question say ‘well, it’s about your intimate love life’ or some such thing, it gives the one being asked an opportunity to decline.”

“I see,” said Alice. A period of silence ensued during which Alice pondered and Aleydis filed her nails.

“So?”

“So, what?” Alice asked.

“What was your question?”

“It was a bit personal.”

“Very well. About what?”

“Your umm ... relationship with Grandpa.”

“Ah! And...?”

“Well, is it like you are his grandchild sort of thing?”

“In a way.”

“But you call him David, and almost treat him like it’s the other way around.”

Aleydis smiled and paused from her nail filing. “I know. He’s like a little boy to me most of the time.”

“That’s like, a bit *weird*?” said Alice.

“Not really, and you should know. I have lived over seven hundred years, he but close to a century. Joshua sent me here to accompany him as a twelve-year-old girl. Is that so strange to you of all people?”

“Actually, no,” said Alice. “Nutty putty.”

“Exactly.”

“But to what intent?”

“Just that. Besides fulfilling David’s need for a chirpy, wise little granddaughter—like a Grandpa and Heidi scenario—this story’s providential intent is to help the readers understand the timelessness of nutty putty.”

Alice’s brow furrowed. “Will we *ever* get to understand it?”

“Never completely. But it’s ever so much fun finding out, don’t you think?”

Alice had to agree, and after obliviously expounding on time’s nutty-putty complications and her experiences, she realised that Aleydis and Dinah had long fallen asleep. Following some meditation on the evening’s events to the stirring yet soothing tones of the Commission Rhapsody, Alice eventually did the same.



Alice awoke to Grandpa’s cheerful whistling of the very same theme, and the smell of hot pancakes drifting from the kitchen. The sun was barely up, but Aleydis was already up helping and instructing him. Alice threw on her shawl and stepped out of the bedroom. She was curious about the stream.

“Here,” said Grandpa, handing her a long ladle. “Go and scoop up some of the liquid from it. There on the shelf are some fancy little cut-glass moulds, take some and fill them up with it.”

Alice ran outside, and there behind the chalet flowed a sparkling purple stream of what she had drunk the night before. She leaned over a rail, filled the ladle, and poured the liquid into the glass moulds, which she lined up on the kitchen windowsill to catch the sunlight.

“See there you have it,” said Grandpa. “The liquid hardens when you pour it into a mould.”

“Ooh, so pretty,” said Alice.

“*Oui*, at least these jewels have more worth than being ‘good for nothing save the beholding of them with the eyes,’” Aleydis said wryly.

“True, true,” said Grandpa. “And these are much more satisfying to drink than to merely gaze at, no matter how pretty.”

“I see,” said Alice. “I think I’m beginning to understand.”

“That’s because I’m helping you to understand,” said Aleydis. “I am the patron saint of the blind and paralyzed, you know.”

“Blind? But I’m not blind, or is that...?”

Aleydis nodded. “The blind in spirit, *oui*, but the world fails to acknowledge that. The blind in the flesh often see more clearly than those who think they can see. Oh, I must be muddling you. I’m sorry.”

“No, no,” said Alice. “I’m getting your point. I know a blind musician in the Family who is ever so attuned to the spirit. But it makes me wonder if I have been blind ... you know, in spirit and stuff.”

“You were once ... a little. Let us just say your eyes were dim. But I have been helping you to see more clearly through all your adventures. Isn’t that so?”

“I suppose so. The experiences have helped me to refrain from making surface judgments of people and stuff. I was most awfully bad at that once upon a time.”

“Oh, thank You, Jesus, for this food and for our home so fair,” Grandpa sang, setting a plate of pancakes and a brimming chalice of the purple crystal liquid before Alice’s eager eyes.

“Hear, hear,” said Aleydis, who had favoured a cup of coffee.

“And a bowl of cream for our psychic cat.”

“Ta, Grandpa,” said Dinah.

To be continued...

Alice in Retrospect

HEAVEN'S
LIBRARY

Issue 259-AM



Part Three

The story so far: Alice Godley has time travelled into the life of her namesake, Alice Pleasance. And after a successful yet disturbing chess tournament against an equally disturbing cousin, and a tête à tête with another namesake, Alice is left to wonder what this adventure is really about. ...

- 11 -

DOORS OF DECEPTION AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Although exhilarated, Alice arrived at the house shortly before ten o'clock in the morning to face an onslaught of understandable fretting and fuming.

“Where on earth were you?” George asked. “Your mother and I sought for you sorrowing.”

“About her Father’s business, I presume,” Doyle said with his habitual chilling expression of mirth.

“So you are okay, Doyle?” Alice asked, puzzled. “I mean, after all that...”

“Slight nervous strain, apparently,” said Hannah. “Attributed to his studies having been rather mentally taxing of late.”

“Excuse me, but did Miss have breakfast?”

“Miss’ did, thank you, Molly. I’m sorry if it’s inconvenient, but if you all would be gracious enough to gather in the parlour, I can explain.”

“Actually, Alice,” Hannah whispered, drawing her aside, “I had arranged an appointment in five minutes with a most learned, caring counsellor.”

“Counsellor? For what?”

HL: This story uses British spelling.

Art by Jeremy.

For children ages 9 on up. May be read to younger children at parents’ or teachers’ discretion.

Copyright © 2010 by The Family

“To *help* you,” Hannah replied, and led Alice into the library. “You probably don’t remember him, but this is Dr. Aldous Drake, Reverend Drake’s son.”

A sallow, sandy-haired young man wearing a chalk-striped grey suit rose from his seat, bowed, and sat back down. Alice attempted a curtsy, failed, and blushed.

“Dr. Drake. I see.”

“Yes,” said Hannah. “He’s the one that diagnosed dear Doyle’s ... irregularity, and, after administering a sedative, gave him a clean bill of health. Dr. Drake is studying this modern form of mental research called psychiatry, and he finds your case extremely interesting.”

“My case?”

“Possible amnesia,” Aldous said gravely. “Loss of memory along with what appears to be strains of delusional psychosis.”

Alice smiled. “I understand your perceiving my dilemma as amnesia, but I have good reasons for it. In fact, I have a super good memory. My so-called problem begs the question, how can I have a memory of things that never happened to me?”

Aldous grunted, sniffed, and after scratching more notes on his memo pad, addressed Hannah. “If you will excuse us, madam, I would prefer to counsel with the patient alone. It may be more conducive to her expounding more freely.”

“By all means, Dr. Drake. I shall be just down the hall.”

Hannah bowed, nodded, and scuttled out of the room, and Aldous continued. “So, in reply to your question, Alice, if you were to be afflicted with delusional psychosis, you would most certainly be in diametric opposition and even repulsive repugnance towards any thought of your true identity. You would be, to put it rather bluntly, living a false lie.”

“Can an opposition be anything but diametric, can something repugnant be anything but repulsive, and can a lie be anything else but false?” Alice said, giggling.

“Extraordinarily grammatically astute, Alice. Impressive.”

“Thank you. But all credit must go to my English grammar teacher. A dear old soul. But I am not like, living a lie, Dr. Drake. ...”

“Call me Aldous.”

“Okay, Aldous. Maybe I am at present living *in* what could be termed a ‘lie,’ in that the authors are sticking me in make-believe situations that stretch the boundaries of reality. I mean, it still remains to be seen whether this whole scenario will have any bearing on the real world.”

Alice exhaled, overwhelmed at what had escaped her lips.

“Go on, Alice.”

“Go on what?”

“Expounding. It makes for interesting interaction and stimulating food for thought in the final novel, story, narrative ... whatever.”

Alice puffed and stared at her feet. “What has all that got to do with you? You are merely a character in this adventure.”

Aldous chuckled. “Ah. More than that, Alice. One thing you must remember while journeying through these ‘adventures,’ as you call them, is that you never know whom of those you encounter will be the one to portray your words and actions in a positive light. Who knows? You may be entertaining angels unawares!”

“That is entirely up to the authors, sir.”

Aldous raised an eyebrow and snickered. “True. The thing is—I believe you too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. I believe you are from the future, 2010 to be precise. Am I right?”

Alice nodded, albeit warily.

“You see, Alice, I am extremely fascinated by the ‘paranormal.’ Isn’t that how you say it in your world?”

“I suppose. ...”

“You know. Inter-dimensional astral travel, and all that sort of thing. Even time travel.”

“I see. I never consciously got into all of that, even though I’ve undoubtedly experienced it. But aren’t you the son of a reverend?”

Aldous nodded. “And just what does that have to do with it?”

“Well, from what I have gathered through reading and stuff, is that the religious element of this period took—I mean, *takes*—a rather dim view of such things.”

“True, Alice. That is why I take a rather dim view of the religious element of this period, including my father.”

“That’s typical.”

“Typical?”

“Well,” said Alice, “somewhat like how my grandfather turned against his parents’ stuffy old Church of England stuff and stuff. He’s told me tons about his hippy psychedelic experiences, much to my parents’ concern. Oops, sorry, I didn’t realise that of course, you wouldn’t be familiar with...”

“Tsk, tsk, Alice. I am well aware. More than you know.”

“More than I know?”

“Joshua is also a friend of mine,” Aldous whispered.

“Really?”

“Yes. I must confess I don’t talk about it much. Open friendship with him can be a little controversial. Although admittedly nowhere near as eyebrow raising as the manner of *your* relationship with him.”

“Talk about it,” said Alice.

“I am, and I want to make it clear that it’s not that I am ashamed of my association with Joshua.”

“It sounds as though you are, Aldous. Why?”

Aldous grinned and handed Alice his memo book and pencil. “Who’s counselling *who* now? Here, you counsel *me* and take notes.”

“And why?”

“I am mentally unstable. You are not. I stupidly gave Doyle a clean bill of health.”

“You mean you are saying you are *nuts*?”

“Umm ... you have found your path, whereas I, with all my mind expansion and whatnot, have been unable to do so, even though all roads eventually lead to the same truth, right?”

“You are asking me because you are unsure?” Alice asked.

“Of course not. I am merely seeking your confirmation.”

“Well, that’s a bit silly, if you don’t mind me saying so,” said Alice. “It’s like saying all roads lead to Rome. Maybe once upon a simpler time it was so, but not today. To get *anywhere*, we all need an *A to Zed*.”

“A what?”

“Oh, like a ... er, road map.”

Aldous sunk his chin into his hands and stared at the floor. “Never looked at it that way. But,” he added with a bashful grin and stood up, “I must confess that Joshua did tell me that he was *the* Gazetteer.”

Aldous opened the door and called down the hallway for Mrs. Pleasance.

“I think we have everything in order, ma’am,” he said as Hannah entered. “No reason to commit her.”

“Commit me, ma’am?” said Alice. “Was that the idea?”

Ignoring Alice’s question, Hannah cleared her throat and said nothing.

“*What*, ma’am?” Alice persisted. “To a nuthouse?”

“It’s merely a mere case of temporary time and personality exchange, Mrs. Pleasance,” Aldous said.

“What do you mean, ‘time and personality exchange’?”

“Just that. The dear girl has neither lost mind nor memory. Hers are both intact. Just be sure to explain things to her here that she finds unfamiliar.”

Mrs. Pleasance looked puzzled, but nodded anyway. “I will most certainly try, Doctor. But how long are we to expect this er ... abnormality to continue?”

“This—let’s call it paranormality—depends entirely on the plot ... plan, ma’am. How long do these experiences usually last, Alice?”

Alice shrugged. “In ‘real life’ time, but a few hours at the most. I can’t say exactly for the time over ‘here,’ though. Joshua has a way of stretching and bouncing it, you know.”

Aldous nodded. “Exactly. Joshua has the last word on timing, I notice.”

“If you don’t mind, Doctor,” said Hannah, “I would prefer no mention of that name in my daughter’s presence.”

“As you wish, madam. But do see to it that Alice gets much rest and time to reflect, along with hearty bowls of my magically prepared cream of mushroom soup.”

“Thank you,” said Alice.

“And be sure to avoid spilling it on your shawl,” said Hannah.

“Well,” said Aldous, “a good day to you both.”

After she and Hannah returned the farewell, Alice turned to Hannah. “I presume we can shortly convene as a family in order for me to explain my circumstances?”

“That we shall, Alice. In the parlour in fifteen minutes?”



And so Molly set a pot of tea and a tray of fig roll biscuits on the parlour table as George, Hannah, Mary, and Charlotte Pleasance gathered to hear Alice’s declaration. To Alice’s relief, Doyle was absent as he had to attend a university function. After acquiring everyone’s attention as they sipped and munched, George invited Alice to sit down, but she said that she preferred to stand.

“Lord, please bless all that I am about to share,” she began with her eyes closed. “In your name, Joshua, I pray.”

“Joshua again?” said Charlotte. “Your beau?”

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” said Hannah.

“What on earth have you against him, Mother?” asked Mary. “He’s the most charming young—”

“It is far too shameful for young ears. But suffice it to say I will hear no more mention of him in this house. And in future when saying grace, Alice, maybe you should start referring to our Lord as just *that*—our *Lord*. It will save us any uncertainty.”

“I don’t think you understand,” said Alice.

“I have two eyes and two ears that furnish me with sufficient understanding of what you and he have been up to. You will do as I say.”

“Yes, M-Mother,” said Alice, as the front doorbell rang.

A few minutes later, Molly appeared a-flushed and a-flutter at the parlour door with an announcement that Lord Joshua Kristos had just happened by with a message for “Miss” that he was “much pleased” with her obedience.

“But he didn’t want to stay?”

“No, Miss.”

“Thank God,” said Hannah.

“Anyway,” said Molly, “he said he had to spend some time with his father in preparation for something involving us. Very mysterious. ...”

“There is no ‘involving us,’ as far as I’m concerned,” said Hannah. “Thank you, Molly.”

The maid bowed and left, and Alice continued. “Anyway, I would just like to say that before you all pronounce me nuts and stuff...”

“Nuts?” George said with a chuckle. “Is that a remotely colloquial way of saying ‘bats in the belfry?’”

“Beside yourself?” said Hannah.

“Lunatic?” said Charlotte.

“Insane?” said Mary.

“I suppose all of the above,” said Alice. “But I am *none* of the above, not even *one* of them. I just want to say that I’m sorry for my behaviour of late and wish to retract everything that I have alluded to, and maybe spoken too lightly of, regarding the future and my part in it. If you want to take it as a sort of April Fool’s spoof that’s up to you. ...”

“Spoof?”

“It’s not even April, child.”

“I meant to say *joke*,” Alice retorted. “But all that to say, I would appreciate avoiding any further archaic psychiatric scrutiny and stuff.”

“The recently introduced respected psychiatric profession is far from archaic, Alice,” said Hannah.

“Whatever. ... I would prefer not to be subject to it any longer. Is that okay?”

“Okay?” George said with a wink. “If it is agreeable to all, Alice, it will be so as far as I am concerned, although I do still have some question about your insistence on employing what appears to be American English usage.”

“American English? Sir, I admit my speech *has* been like, a bit how do I say it ... *un*Victorian and stuff, but I would hate for it to be thought of like *that!* Some of us at home ... I mean my friends back home, do like, *pride* ourselves a tad on being a step above the Useless Status norm when it comes to our language.”

George chuckled. “Useless Status! I must admit I find that amusing.”

“But the present state of affairs is far from amusing, George dear. Alice’s speech leaves a lot to be desired,” said Hannah.

“Quite so. Look, Alice, my wife—your mother—and I are a little concerned that should your present vocabulary be habitual...”

“Absolutely,” said Hannah. “That’s why I have requested for Miss Thorne to engage you in some elocution classes and deportment instruction starting today. In half an hour to be exact. For some inexplicable reason, Alice, your comportment recently has caused your father, and especially me, great distress.”

“I very much agree,” Alice said distantly. “My bad. But the deeper question at this point is what’s going on with *time*?”

“Time? What on earth do you mean by that?” Charlotte asked.

“Never mind,” said Alice. “Excuse me.”

“I understand completely,” said George. “I’m sorry.”

Charlotte looked puzzled. “You do, Father?”

George nodded and passed the plate. “Do have some more, Alice.”

Alice shook her head; her stomach was in knots. There were no fig rolls left anyway as Mary had devoured them all.

“Some tea?”

Alice shook her head again.

- 12 -

A FORTUNE RECOVERED

Although the providential golden shawl had long since resolved her clothing dilemma, Alice found the preliminary two-hour elocution and deportment class with Miss Thorne gruelling at first—elocution in particular, which entailed eliminating the “tics” in Alice’s speech, such as “like,” “you know,” “and stuff,” and more stuff, such as “random,” “wow,” and “sort of”-type “thingies.”

Among other exercises, deportment consisted of Alice performing curtsies while balancing a book on her head, which served to maintain good posture even while sitting at the dining table. Oddly enough, within a few minutes, she began to enjoy the challenge of such an exercise, and attributed that to the aid of her Victorian spirit helpers.

“Native women in Africa do the same thing while carrying pots of water on their heads,” she remarked to Miss Thorne as she was practising walking up and down the stairs with a volume of George Pleasance’s

History of Rome on her head. “I suppose that is why they always carry themselves so well and stuff—straight backs and all that. Actually, we see a lot of them in Winsley Barnes. On-fire Christians, too... they do a lot of witnessing and stuff. ...”

Alice giggled. “God knows the heathen British need it! Oh, but that hasn’t happened yet, sorry.”

Miss Thorne appeared mystified and curtly reminded her pupil to avoid the “and stuff” impediment, saying that Alice’s former habitual employment of the phrase “and suchlike” was infinitely preferable. Nevertheless, she conceded that while Alice had some way to go in the elocution department, she was showing noteworthy aptitude in regaining, and even surpassing her previous standard in deportment.

“Less slovenly and lolling in your seating posture,” she added. “Very good. However, remember that in the more formal variants of the curtsy, the woman bends the knees outward rather than straight ahead, often sweeping one foot behind her. She may also use her hands to hold her skirt out from her body. ...”



After finishing her initial elocution and deportment lesson, Alice awoke from her suggested and welcome Monday-afternoon snooze to the sounds of fretful sighs and pacing footsteps outside her room. Then she heard Hannah calling down to the maid and George welcoming in Reverend Drake. Tearful moans were emitting from the hubbub, which Alice perceived came from one of her “sisters.”

In order to avoid the maid or a member of the family having to rouse her, Alice scrambled into her clothes and shawl, and stepped into the hallway.

“Oh, Alice,” Charlotte said as she blubbered into her handkerchief. “I was just about to inform you. It’s Mary ... she’s *dead*.”

“Dead? What on earth do you mean?”

“Nothing more than that. The physician is here and has pronounced her so.”

“But how ... *why*?”

“She took a little poorly and began vomiting. W-we suspected that it had something to do with the inordinate amount of fig rolls she wolfed down, but the doctor said that was highly unlikely, she’d always been a bit sickly you know. Anyway, up until about an hour ago, it seemed but a trifle—a slight temperature. Alas, Alice. This is most sorrowing.”

“Absolutely,” said Alice, and taking the poor girl in her arms prayed silently to Joshua. “Is she ... her body in her bedroom?”

Charlotte nodded, and they made her way up the stairs to Mary's room where George and Hannah, Martha Thorne, Reverend Drake, and Dr. Waffleton, the family physician, were standing with heads bowed. Hannah was sitting on the bed, weeping and clutching the pallid girl's limp wrist.

"No pulse," she was saying. "No pulse. ..."

"She passed on so suddenly," George said. "If only we had known."

"It's not her time to go!" Alice blurted out. "It won't be until..."

"Until what?" George asked. "When?"

"Nothing. But I know someone who can heal ... help," said Alice.

"Let us have a word of prayer while we tarry for the coroner," said Reverend Drake, and before the cleric even opened his mouth, Alice confidently proceeded to do just that: calling on Lord Joshua to do a miracle despite Hannah's surreptitious glares.

"In Your Name we pray," she concluded, and the doorbell rang. They heard Molly explaining to the caller about the inconvenient time of such a visit, but it seemed he had disregarded her, and the maid scurried up the stairs ahead of him to the bedroom door.

"Excuse me, but Lord Joshua Kristos is here again," she announced in hushed tones. "Says it is urgent. I tried to explain, but..."

"Show him in," said George.

"What?" said Hannah.

With an incongruous manner of good-humoured sobriety, Joshua entered the room, looked at the corpse and smiled at George.

"Why, sir, the maid is not dead but sleeping."

At the youth's declaration, the sombre air turned to scorn and even a little mirth, except from Hannah, who stood up and waved a forefinger at him.

"You insolent little wretch!" she screeched. "How can you add insult to the injury of chambering with one of my daughters, by making light of such a dreadful circumstance?"

"But ma'am ... *Mother*," said Alice, "Joshua has come to raise your daughter up!"

"My daughter? Mary's *your* sister too!"

"Of course. ..."

"And what do you mean by 'raise her up'?"

"I mean, he will—"

"I will not have you party to this scoundrel's impudence, Alice. I am at a loss as to why we even allowed him to set foot on the premises, especially at such a grave moment."

"You will see, ma'am ... Mama. *Please*, Joshua?"

Joshua stepped towards the bed and took the girl's lifeless hand. "Damsel, I say unto thee, arise," he said.

A few seconds passed and Mary opened her eyes. She looked around. "You're all still here?" she asked.

"What do you mean, 'still here'?" Hannah asked as she sat shaking on the bed.

"I assumed that as soon as you saw I was sleeping, you would have left me in peace."

"You were not merely sleeping," said Dr. Waffleton. "I had officially pronounced you as being deceased."

"You mean I was actually *dead*, sir?"

"In so many words."

"Actually, I do recall seeing angels," said Mary. "Ever so lovely. Then I do suppose I was. Thank you, Joshua!"

"This is absolutely unethical," Dr. Waffleton squeaked. "Bringing people back to life through such corrupt medical practise."

"Sir, I practised no medicine," said Joshua. "Seest thou pills or potions?"

Dr. Waffleton shook his head.

"Not to point the finger, mind you," said Reverend Drake, "but this could be nothing short of plain old *witchcraft*. What do you think, Mrs. Pleasance?"

Hannah shook her head. "I-I ... d-don't know," she feebly replied.

"But it is most apparent, ma'am. And Alice no doubt seems to be an accomplice."

"I have little or nothing to do with it," said Alice. "All I did was pray."

"That is *all*?" Joshua said with a flicker of censure in his eyes. "That is the *most* thou couldst have done."

"And I *did*..." Alice blurted, "lord."

Joshua turned to the parents. "See ye to it that the maiden has fresh air and meat."

"Meat?" said Hannah.

"I believe we have a little sirloin roast left from last night," said Martha. "We should ask Molly."

"Joshua means *food*," said George. "King James English, you know."

"Verily," said Joshua. "And a boat ride will benefit her greatly."

"A boat ride?" George asked. "In her condition?"

"In *what* condition, sir? See there, her cheeks are fulsome and she is quick." So saying, Joshua smiled, bowed, bid everyone present Godspeed, and left the room.

"I am absolutely well, Father," Mary said. "I do so wish to go."

“Very well, my dear.”

“However, should a boat ride be in order, I believe I should be present,” said Reverend Drake, to the consternation of the three girls, “should evil forces be at play. And besides, the young ladies will need someone to ply the oars.”

“And I,” Dr. Waffleton gravely said, “should there be any relapse.”

“But I feel absolutely *fine*,” Mary insisted.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Charlotte said as she darted for the door, “but I am going to thank Alice’s young man for the miracle.”

“*Young man?*” said Hannah. “What do you...?”

“*Miracle?*” said Reverend Drake. “How can you refer to such...?”

The slam of the door cut their words short.

“Do you have a Bible?” Alice suddenly asked.

“Of course we do, child,” said Hannah. “We purchased one for your confirmation. A beautiful white leather one with gilt edges.”

“I have one right here in my night stand,” said Mary, and opened the drawer. She handed a large, worn black Bible to Alice, who read aloud from Mark 5:38 to 43. She had barely finished the chapter’s closing verse when Charlotte returned with the declaration that Joshua was nowhere around.

“And Molly had not seen him leave,” she said. “She has been feather dusting the ornaments right out there in the hallway.”

“This is all rather puzzling,” said Hannah, and sat on the bed. “One would think that this fellow is *divine* or something.”

“He *did* heal me, mother,” said Mary. “According to your own eyes and Dr. Waffleton’s pronouncement, Joshua brought me back to life.”

“That is debateable,” said Dr. Waffleton. “And you were in no fit state to be conscious of anything.”

Withdrawing unnoticed from the deliberation, Alice stepped out into the grounds of the Pleasance manor. There she wandered through its manicured lawns, privet hedgerows, rockeries, and a tennis court until she sat down at the edge of a swan-graced lake, and stared at her reflection, wondering how much longer this rippling image of Alice Pleasance was to be her alter ego.

As she pondered, she despairingly presumed that those who knew her as Alice Godley—the sometimes sassy, many times moody yet seemingly indispensable appendage of their Home’s outreach to the rich and influential—misunderstood her impasse of existing in two parallel dimensions. Even her beloved brother would occasionally take her otherworldly lapses with what she perceived as a grain of sceptical salt. Yes, Alice *had* “blown it” in the “real” world, and the

distressed girl supposed that this humility lesson was to be published for that world.

Still staring at her reflection, Alice was concluding that despite its tedious domestic nature, this was the most traumatic of all her adventures; living with a family of strangers who seemed to know her, while she found herself so alienated. Considering even her past most unpleasant out-of-time episodes, this was the first time Alice had ever wished herself delivered from one. Such release had never happened so far, however, and it seemed unlikely to happen now.

Besides that, even though Mary is ever so sweet, alas, I have no friends. Even in the adventure with the cards, I had the most wonderful friendships with Celia Spade, the Queen of Clubs and Mr. Sage. Then there was Betty Trucker, Deidre Dudley ... awfully nice people, and then even Marian the puppet.

So, who *did* truly understand her when it boiled down to it?

Joshua.

Of course. But at that point, Alice was again reluctant to call on him verbally, knowing that if she did so, he would most likely materialise as a sixteen-year-old boy. Not that the occurrence was undesirable in itself; in fact, she cherished it. But his presence as a peer when she was feeling so vulnerable was more than she could handle at that moment. Consequently, Alice sank her head in her hands, burst into tears, and mutely vented a voluble and inexplicable petition that sometimes occurred when called to “silent prayer.”

I know it sounds awfully like a dreadful murmur, Lord, she thought finally. And I am ever so sorry. But alas, I feel most terribly discouraged and condemned.

Prompted by an unseen presence, Alice opened her eyes and raised her bowed head. As she did so, she saw a slender white hand rising from the waters clutching a large golden ring bearing a wraithlike shine.

Having been in a state of importunate transcendence, Alice was unable to discern if she was seeing a vision or not. She wiped her eyes on her shawl, hugged her knees, and watched. Presently, a beautiful woman, clad in a diaphanous gown rose out of the lake and, holding the ring, waded towards Alice. The peculiar thing was that the water had not soaked the woman’s long white-golden tresses, and the droplets that clung to her gown and limbs dispelled like globules of light.

“Greetings, Alice,” she said in a voice that seemed to come from a surrounding unseen world. “I am one of the daughters.”

“The daughters?” Alice winced at hearing her own voice. It sounded dry and flat.

“Yes. I am one of the four daughters of the Sea Goddess.”

“That’s kind of weird. A sea goddess in a lake?”

“Why not? Water is water, whether salt or fresh. So *here*, I am returning your wheel of fortune.”

“My *wheel of fortune*?” Alice asked, and clasped the ring that throbbed hot in her hands like a circular neon bulb.

“That’s right. You threw it off into the lake.”

Alice trembled. “I-I d-did?”

The woman’s flame-like eyes bore into her and she continued speaking.

“It’s one thing to have a bad hair day, but you have had so much encouragement and commendation from David, Pedro, and Margot, the venerable Saint Aleydis, and even Joshua himself, yet you have been giving more place to self-pity, grumbling, and condemnation. If you give up now, you will cause many to be discouraged. You cannot relinquish it to him.”

“Relinquish what?”

“Your wheel of fortune.”

“T-to whom?”

“Guess...”

“My *God*.”

“No. Much, much worse.”

“That’s what I was going to say ... Doyle, right?”

The sea goddess nodded. “Never do that again. Hold onto it *tightly*.”

“I-I’m so sorry,” said Alice, and burst into tears again. *Joshua, please help me!*

“You are forgiven, Alice.”

“But I still don’t understand the purpose of this adventure, when I’ve blown it so bad. ...”

The sea goddesses’ voice softened. “You see, Alice, in your past spirit trips the Lord gave you an *anointing* to minister to your friends, as was manifested in what your brother refers to as your Jane Austen-like speech. But in this experience, the Lord purposefully has taken away this *anointing* so that further principles of deportment, good speech, and etiquette can become even more ingrained into your everyday character. Now move on, knowing you have every right to your fortune.”

Alice shook her head in wonderment and shut her eyes. Opening them, she saw that the woman had gone, and she felt nothing in her hands. She did, however, feel a renewed zest to carry on, and even enthusiasm at hearing a call from the house that those involved were ready for their boat ride to Godstow.

“Yes,” Alice said to herself, “I have every right to my fortune.”

“ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT...”

I hope it is well with you, Alice, but Doyle won't be accompanying us," Charlotte said, as she, Mary, and Alice boarded the carriage that would take them to the River Thames where they would row a boat from Oxford to Godstow. Alice shrugged, but was inwardly relieved.

"You see," Charlotte continued, "in accordance with Dr. Drake's recommendations to engage in such activities that would present no undue nervous pressure, he went to play chess against himself. Dr. Drake considered a Sunday boat ride on a river with a doctor, a reverend, three whimsical girls, and fish-paste sandwiches liable to present overly excitable circumstances."

Perchance, not for me, Alice thought and absentmindedly began singing.

*Picture yourself on a boat on a river,
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies,
Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly;
The girl with kaleidoscope eyes. ...*

"What on earth are you singing?" Mary asked, even though Alice had stopped herself. "It sounds like one of those fantastical poems that Mr. Lutwidge makes up."

"O-oh, it's just a song that my grandfather plays on an old vinyl. It's s-sort of cute and old hippy."

"He plays it on a *what*?"

"It's sort of *what* and old *what*?"

"N-nothing. But you're right. It *is* a bit like something Mr. Charles would write."

"Mr. Charles?"

"I mean, Mr. Lutwidge."

Charlotte smiled dreamily. "Do you remember that delightful summer's day much like this, when he, Reverend Drake, and we took this same boating trip down the river?"

"Vaguely," said Alice.

"And he told us that story which is now dedicated to you?"

"*Alice's Adventures Under Ground*," Alice replied, grateful that she had taken some time the other night to read it.

“And now it’s published in a most sought-after book,” said Mary. “You must be so pleased.”

“Yes. But it *was* quite a few years ago when he told the tale, right?”

“To be sure,” Charlotte said. “And did you know that it was exactly three years to the day? July the fourth, 1862.”

“Wow! Amazing,” said Alice. “Joshua must have...”

“And it must be ever so thrilling to know you are the ‘heroine’ of such a popular tale,” said Mary.

“Oh, I think I’m used to it by now,” said Alice.

“He’s writing another one, you know,” said Charlotte.

“Even as we speak,” Alice responded with a knowing smile, and they shortly arrived at the river’s edge where Reverend Drake and Dr. Waffleton, who had secured the boat, greeted the three girls.



“The question is,” Dr. Waffleton said through a curled upper lip, “whether or not Christianity has any validity in today’s developing world. What do you think, girls? Does it?”

Twenty minutes had passed from the commencement of their boat ride, and while Reverend Drake plied the oars, he and the doctor had been engaged in a dispute regarding Christianity’s existing merit, sparked by the contents of a book in which Dr. Waffleton had been absorbed, entitled *Man and His Ascendant Descent*, by Dr. Clarence Fossus.

In response to the doctor’s question, Charlotte and Mary shrugged. Mary in particular seemed more concerned about avoiding sunburn, and kept adjusting her parasol. Alice, who had remained prayerfully silent up until then, answered.

“I think Christ’s tenets apply very much to today’s society. More so than ever.”

“Really? So you see some relevance of the Church and Christianity to matters facing modern man?”

“The ‘Church’ is one thing, sir,” said Alice. “And I know little about that. So-called Christianity is another and Christ Himself is yet another. It seems in this day and age they are all incredibly diverse.”

“So you feel that the Church and Christianity are two different entities?” Reverend Drake asked.

“Pardon me, sir, but I haven’t hardly been to church, and from what I have seen of so-called Christianity, much of it has little to do with a turned-on life for the Lord.”

“A what?”

“Nothing. But forgive me as I am not fully getting your point, Dr. Waffleton.”

“For instance, dear girl, take the Church’s archaic premise that some sort of nebulous, unseen almighty power created man and the world.”

“Very well, sir, but are we talking about the Church or the *Bible* here? The Bible itself states very clearly that God created all this in six days.”

“Well, child, whatever the source of the premise, it’s irredeemably inconsistent with the recent winds of doctrine and dictates of science.”

“May I ask what those might be?”

“For one, that we are no longer, as the venerable ancient astronomers, astrologers, wise men, seers, sages, prophets, Solomon, Jesus Christ, and even the Church previously believed, to conceitedly consider man and the Earth to be the centre of the universe, as though we were of some primary importance to a so-called God.”

“But we *are*,” said Alice. “We are our Heavenly Father’s primary concern—the absolute *centre* of His loving attention! And you listed quite an endorsement for that very fact.”

“Hear, hear,” said Charlotte. Reverend Drake seconded her, albeit timidly.

“Humph. You can cling to your archaic principles if you wish, Alice. Anyway, to further knock your egocentric worldview off its axis, we now know that we have descended from apes and monkeys.”

Dr. Waffleton sat back with a smirk, and Alice giggled.

“You find that amusing, young lady?”

“Pardon me, sir. But it reminds of a cool, funny song I heard as a child written from a monkey’s perspective.”

Alice cleared her throat and, rocking her haunches on the boat’s wooden seat, began singing.

*Three monkeys sat in a coconut tree,
Discussing things propounded to be;
Said one to the other, “Now listen you two,
“There’s a dreadful rumour that could never be true:
“That man descended from our noble race,
“The very idea is a total disgrace.”*

“Man descended, it’s true. ...”

“I think this is the chorus,” Alice interjected.

*“Man descended, it’s obvious,
“Man descended, it’s true.
“But, brother, he didn’t descend from us.”*

*“No monkey ever deserted his wife,
“Starved her babies, and ruined her life;
“And here’s another thing a monkey won’t do:
“Go out at night and get in a stew,
“Or grab a gun, a club, or a knife,
“To take some other monkey’s life.*

*“Man descended, it’s true,
“Man descended—it’s obvious.
“Man descended, it’s true.
“But, brother, he didn’t descend from us.”*

Although the preceding conversation had been sailing over Mary’s blissfully ignorant head, Alice was happy to see that she laughed at the song’s content.

“Despite your flippant naivety, Alice,” Dr. Waffleton went on, “man is ascending to greater heights. Our very industrial revolution itself has proved that we have evolved in our thinking, confirming the simple truth that Mr. Charles Darwin himself theorised from the in-depth digging up of fossils that we, the human race are the great, great, great—ad infinitum, grandchildren of apes. It does make one think, doesn’t it?”

“For those who are not used to doing so, I suppose,” Alice said reflectively.

“This is no time to be facetious,” the doctor retorted, seeing that Alice’s remark had made the other two girls giggle.

“I beg your pardon, sir, as that was not my intention. I don’t know if it’s true, but I read somewhere that Charles Darwin ended up dying nuts while retracting his rubbish.”

“*Dying*, Miss Alice?” said Reverend Drake. “He is very much alive and presumably well.”

“Oh yah, that’s right. It hasn’t happened yet. Sorry.”

Although mystified, the reverend continued. “There is even a proposal to have him knighted.”

“Which the Queen herself is being persuaded against by the Church and closed-minded religious bigots such as Wilberforce,” said Dr. Waffleton.

“Then count me in with them, sir,” Alice said with a disarming smile. “I do not wish to knight the grandson of an ape.”

At Alice's retort, Charlotte and Mary clapped and giggled.

"Ooh, ooh. *Charlie's made a monkey out of you!*" Alice began singing.

"And what song is this?" the reverend asked as Alice repeated the chorus.

"A cool one on the subject," she replied and kept singing and again rocking her haunches, inspiring the other two girls to do the same.

*Charlie Darwin with his evil lies,
Has pulled that funky monkey wool all over your eyes.
Now isn't it about time that we all got leery
About that evolutionary theory?*

"A *provocative* commentary on the dispute at hand," the reverend said, raising his voice as Charlotte and Mary joined Alice on the chorus. "But, I-I do believe you all should temper those selfsame bodily movements."

"Could rock the boat with rather unsavoury consequences," Dr. Waffleton quickly added.

"So sorry, we wouldn't wish to rock any boats, would we, sisters?" said Alice, and slowed her movements to a reserved sway. Charlotte and Mary did the same, and Alice continued singing.

*He gotcha believin' that your daddy was a monkey
And that your mama was a chimpanzee.
Now can you just imagine your great, great, great gran'daddy
Climbin' up a coconut tree?*

Charlotte and Mary clapped. Reverend Drake cleared his throat and addressed the doctor. "I n-notice you refer to the 'church' and 'religion' in a rather derogatory fashion."

"I did? Well, that was not my intention, but should my tone have imparted such, it's not without reason. I mean, if you look at history, haven't God, religion, and the Church been responsible for all its major wars?"

Reverend Drake looked sheepish. "M-maybe there is some evidence that suggests such, but..."

"Apparently not *that* much evidence," said Alice. "At least from what I have formulated from studying history, even though I admit it is one of my weaker subjects. For instance, it seems that World War One and Two began under no such premise."

"World War One?" said Dr. Waffleton.

"Two?" said Reverend Drake.

“Oh yes, they haven’t happened yet, sorry,” said Alice. “But the 17th-century war of Spain on Portugal for instance, was over trade and ... suchlike. And certainly, Napoleon fought none of his wars under the flag of religion. Then you had the Useless Status fighting for territory from the Mexicans. Even the Spanish conquering the Incas was for gold, right? ... At least that is what I understand from the history books, and Brandon says it’s all economics.”

Dr. Waffleton sniffed and snorted. “Interesting, Alice. So you have joined the puerile ranks of Christian apologists?”

“The what?”

“Christian apologists.”

“I have nothing to apologise for,” said Alice. “I am merely stating a fact.”

“In this case, dear girl, and for the benefit of any plebeians here, the word ‘apologist’ is more correctly translated from a Greek term meaning a person who is ‘in defence of.’”

“I see. But why would we Christians describe ourselves as such? These days I am not in defence of anything, but on the *offense*.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

Alice sighed. “I suppose it would be rather difficult to understand. But it would be interesting to know if other religions have their ‘apologists.’”

Dr. Waffleton and Reverend Drake shrugged at her rumination.

“But maybe the public doesn’t feel they need to apologise for anything,” Alice added with a giggle. The two men looked rather stern, however.

“Please help me, Joshua...,” she muttered, and turned to her two distracted “sisters” in order to enjoy lighter conversational topics.

-14 -

“...NOT SO GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM”

The boat had been drifting downstream for about fifteen minutes, during which time Alice had been conversing with Charlotte and Mary about what was considered “fair” in a girl’s complexion, Dr. Waffleton had been absorbed in his treatise on the ascending descent of man, and Reverend Drake, as he rowed, had been humming what Charlotte whisperingly referred to as “canticles,” when a call came from the bank.

“Children!”

Alice’s heart skipped. Charlotte’s and Mary’s did also.

“Have ye there any room?”

It was Joshua.

“A boat ride?” Mary whispered to Alice. “Is that what he wants?”

“I would imagine so.”

“And have ye any meat?”

“I do love that gallant speech,” Charlotte whispered.

“Entirely put on,” said Dr. Waffleton, and raised his voice to address Joshua. “Yes, young man. We do have *food*. Fish-paste sandwiches.”

“Do welcome him aboard,” Charlotte said dreamily.

Alice looked questioningly at the two gentlemen.

“I suppose that our barque can bear the extra load,” said Reverend Drake. “Considering we were going to take Doyle after all.”

Denoting consent, Alice waved back; the youth scrambled down the bank, stepped quickly across the water...

“Did I really see that?” Mary whispered to Alice.

“I think you did,” Alice replied with a smile.

...and clambered into the boat.

“I am surprised that thou, being a priest of the church, comprehendest not these things,” Joshua said as he sat down next to Alice.

“What things?” said Reverend Drake.

“Those things which thou and the learned doctor didst dispute earlier.”

“What? You mean to tell us you heard us and the nature of our conversation?”

“Of course he did,” said Alice. “He’s—”

“Every idle word,” said Joshua.

“You refer to such stimulating discourse as idle words?” said Dr. Waffleton.

“Weighing *yours* in the balances,” Joshua replied, “I would say so.”

“It’s not that I don’t comprehend, young man,” said the reverend. “There is no doubt that—and in keeping with dear Alice’s view, let’s not even say Christianity—*Christ* is more than exceedingly valid for today’s society.”

“Thou sayest well,” said Joshua, and reclining, laid his head on Alice’s lap.

“The same yesterday, today, and forever,” Alice said smiling down at him. “You must be born again of the wild wind of God’s Spirit.”

“Verily,” Joshua said, and closed his eyes.

“Born again?” said Dr. Waffleton, curling his upper lip. “What on earth do you mean, Alice, child?”

“Well, it ‘bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell from whence it’s cometh or whither it goeth.”

“John, chapter three, verse eight. You quote scripture with much authority, Alice,” said Reverend Drake. “Surprising.”

“I suppose. But like the wind, so are all of us who are born of the Spirit. For instance, I had long been *clueless* as to where I was going in this particular situation.”

“In case you have forgotten, Alice,” Dr. Waffleton said with his upper lip still curled. “We are taking the Thames River to Godstow, aptly named under the circumstances. Surely you remember?”

“I meant in the long term, sir. This experience and how it plays into my life.”

“I d-do wish Mr. Lutwidge was accompanying us on this trip, even if only for sentimentality’s sake,” Charlotte said, disconcerted that Joshua had nodded off in Alice’s lap. “It was ever so much fun when he would tell us those stories.”

“I suppose,” said Alice. “By the way, I forgot to tell you, but when I last talked with Mr. Lutwidge, he did tell me to say hello from him to you.”

Charlotte blushed and Reverend Drake cleared his throat. “Well, if I may tender some compensation. I shall be more than pleased to tell some stories of my own, which I am sure you girls would appreciate.”

Mary and Charlotte looked blank, and Alice attempted to generate some enthusiasm by saying it would be a cool idea. Dr. Waffleton responded with a grunt of contempt and returned to reading his book.

“Very well,” the reverend began. “This one is about a sad, empty house. ... Oh, are you all sitting comfortably?”

The girls nodded.

“Then I shall begin. Once upon a time, there stood a sad, empty house, which was very sad because it was empty and had no one to live in it. ‘I wish someone would come and live in me,’ it sadly said to itself. ‘I am so sad because I am empty. ...’”

Alice noticed that the two girls were losing their concentration, and so, out of courtesy, she strove to tune in. Nevertheless, the reverend’s voice was soon fading even from her own consciousness as she lovingly gazed at Joshua’s serene countenance and gathered that he was evidently sleeping the sleep of the just.

“And so”—she presently heard Reverend Drake voice saying as it returned to her consciousness—“the house was no longer sad, but very happy because happily, it now had a lovely little happy family to live in it, and they all lived happily ever after.”

Thankful that her attention had returned just in time, Alice applauded. "Very sweet," she said.

"Glad you think so. In that case, I shall tell another one, if you girls don't mind."

Charlotte and Mary looked blank again. Alice wearily mentioned something about it being "cool," and the reverend mentioned something about Alice being insufficiently attired for what promised to be a shower. Then he continued.

"Well, speaking of showers, this one is about a lonely little cloud that was sad because it carried insufficient water to refresh the forest. Are you still sitting comfortably?"

The girls nodded.

"Then I shall begin. Once upon a time, there lived a lonely little cloud that was so sad. 'I am so sad,' the lonely little cloud sadly said to itself as it floated sad and alone high in the sky, 'because I wish I had enough water to refresh that dry forest below. ...'"

"It seems the clouds looming in the distance are far from lonely," Dr. Waffleton remarked, having lifted his eyes from his book. "And their capacity for water appears far from meagre."

"Alas," Charlotte said as lightning crackled and distant thunder rumbled, "we shall be most awfully soaked."

"And I don't think we can make it to any of these banks anytime soon," said the reverend. "They're too high and the rushes are well-nigh impenetrable."

"Then we are just going to have to see if your so-called *God* will deliver us from such peril," Dr. Waffleton said with a snicker.

The scoff had no sooner escaped his lips, than lightning flashed again, thunder cracked in unison and a cloud burst open above them, emptying sheets of water onto the tiny, bobbing craft and drenching its occupants.

"Darn it, my book is ruined. A first edition at that."

"Well, it serves you right that the Almighty would take exception to your blasphemy, Dr. Waffleton," said Charlotte.

"And consequently soaked your meaningless little tome," said Mary, as she as she huddled under her parasol. "What do you think, Alice?"

"The timing is rather awesome," Alice replied, although she was more concerned about staying dry now that her shawl was soaked. "But I really do think we should pray, seeing as water is filling our boat."

"And that we shall do," said Reverend Drake, and bowed his head. "Lord, we beseech thee in our time of peril..."

Alice tapped Joshua's cheek, and then shook his shoulder.

"Let him sleep," said Dr. Waffleton. "The boy was obviously tired, and besides, what can *he* do?"

"You've *seen* what he can do!" said Alice. "Oh, Joshua, *please* wake up. Don't you care that we're in danger?"

Joshua opened and rubbed his eyes, he looked perturbed. "I was sleeping, my darling."

"My darling..." Mary tittered to Charlotte.

"I know," said Alice. "But..."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Joshua said, and sat up. "Thou offending storm, I rebuke thee and all the evil that thou bearest. Still thou from thy angry tempest!"

No sooner had Joshua spoken and the billows ceased, the rain withdrew, and the river became placid. Except for Alice, who sat with a demure smile, the boat's occupants sat speechless, gazing at him.

"W-well, I do suppose this would be an opportune time to partake of the picnic hamper," Dr. Waffleton nervously said, following a period of uncomfortable silence.

"Of course," said Reverend Drake. "Admittedly, I do feel rather peckish."

"Me too," said Mary.

"Oh dear," said Charlotte as she opened the basket. "The fish-paste sandwiches are in such a sad and soggy state as a result of the storm, and dear Molly had gone to such great lengths to prepare them."

Alice looked expectantly at Joshua. He smiled in response.

Alice returned his smile and addressed her "sisters." "Whatever he says, *do*. Okay?"

Affected by the reverential atmosphere, the two girls soberly nodded. Joshua took one of the soggy sandwiches and closed his eyes.

"Father, bless this bread," he said and tore it apart. He handed one part to Mary and the other to Charlotte. "Now share it."

"*Share* it?"

"Yes, you with the reverend, and Mary with the doctor of learning."

Charlotte tentatively tore hers apart and handed a morsel to Reverend Drake. As he took it, it swelled into a full-sized sandwich containing a substantial portion of hot battered fish. Mary followed suit, leaving her and Dr. Waffleton staring incredulously at the same delicious result. The four of them turned to look at Joshua and saw only Alice smiling with satisfaction, also clutching a fried fish sandwich.

"Where is he, Alice?" Charlotte asked, breaking the awed silence, during which time she and the others had munched on and stared at their sandwiches.

“He? Who?”

“Joshua ... your *beau*.”

Alice shrugged.

“I must say you seem to be taking these rather curious occurrences in your stride, dear Alice,” said Reverend Drake.

“While we mere mortals do but watch and wonder,” Dr. Waffleton said dryly.

“In my life of faith and *fantasy*, I have come to expect anything,” Alice replied with a giggle and a shiver followed by a sneeze.

“My goodness,” said Mary. “I do hope you haven’t caught your death of a cold.”

“That *was* quite the downpour,” said Charlotte.

“I’ll be fine,” said Alice. “But as far as Lord Joshua Kristos goes, I suppose he has left to attend to more urgent business. The sandwiches are delicious, are they not?”

The others nodded as they munched.

“Most delicious,” said the reverend.

“And *look*, there’s heaps more in the basket,” Mary exclaimed.

“This has been a most unusual boat ride,” Dr. Waffleton said presently in a musing tone. “Almost, dare I say ... *miraculous*.”

“You may dare to say, sir,” Alice said and sneezed again. She drew her soaked shawl tighter.

“Here,” the doctor said, throwing his coat about Alice’s shivering shoulders with a chivalric air. “A little more substantial than that flimsy article,”

“Thank you, sir,” said Alice sweeping her hand across her perspiring forehead. “Oh dearie me. I do feel rather poorly. Perchance...”

So saying, she fell into a swoon.

“MERRILY, MERRILY ... LIFE IS BUT A DREAM”

We really should get her to bed with the appropriate medicaments,” said Dr. Waffleton. “The fever is abnormally high. Another degree or so and, well...”

That really wouldn't be so unsavoury in itself should I wake up in Joshua's manor, Alice thought, but as the fever took stronger hold, she became perturbed to find herself babbling inanities at dreamlike images. Although the images were neither bad nor unwelcome, a diffused light shrouding them made them almost indiscernible. What Alice could make out, however, was a white rabbit running by clutching a vest pocket watch, a grinning cat in a tree, a caterpillar smoking a hookah, and a walrus walking along a beach accompanied by a weeping man holding a carpenter's saw.

“The time has come,” he was saying, “to talk of many things. Of ships and shoes and sealing wax, and cabbages and kings. ...”

Alice chuckled having remembered the quote from an old Grandpa letter, but she recognised most of the characters as being from the book she had been reading about her namesake's adventures underground. However, she also recognised a man in a top hat as being Mr. Hatter from her “Apparently Alice” experiences in the Useless Status.

“I am sorry to say, the dear child is slipping away,” Alice heard Dr. Waffleton say. Then she heard Hannah Pleasance's voice.

“I fear we are being judged, George,” she wailed. “We didn't recognise her.”

“We, dear? But recognise her as what?”

“As the angel unawares that she was ... *is* ... even in a mentally altered state. I pray to God, He doesn't take our Alice from us!”

“He won't, if it is not His perfect will,” George said calmly. “And if we repent.”

“Repent, George?”

“Yes, take back any evil purposed in mind and heart against His son...”

“His *son*? You mean...?”

“You have heard the accounts of what happened on the river, not to mention the raising of dear Mary.”

Only Hannah's sobbing broke the following silence.

"Dear Joshua, *please...*," she finally whimpered. No sooner had she spoken, and the doorbell rang.

"Who on earth can that be at a moment like this?" Dr. Waffleton muttered.

"I know," Hannah softly said. "Answer the door, Molly, and welcome him in with utmost deference."

"Will do, ma'am."

Alice smiled, knowing who had graced the Pleasance residence, yet as she suddenly found herself drifting through a tunnel towards a circle of light, she even wondered if she actually *was* going to die under these curious circumstances.

But that would be ever so bizarre and most awfully trying for the readers, should that be my destiny, she thought, and brushed off her hands. She had touched a side of the tunnel and found it composed of soil. Then she saw the silhouette of a girl approaching her.

"Hello," said the silhouette as it floated nearer into view. Alice gasped; the girl did also.

"Hello," said Alice. "Wow. Except for the clothes, it's like looking in a mirror!"

"Truly," said the girl as she floated by. "Most astonishing."

"Hey, *wait*," Alice said, and grasped a root protruding from the tunnel's wall. The girl did the same, and the two of them dangled suspended and staring at each other.

"So you are...?" Alice asked.

"Alice Pleasance. And you must be Alice Godley."

"Uh-huh. How did you know?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, the last few days have been most awfully unsettling and suchlike."

"Talk about it."

"I shall do so. It seems as though I have been you and you have been me during this time. ..."

Feeling a wave of silly giddiness, Alice giggled and started singing.

I am you and you are me, and we are we, and we are both together...

"I think that's how it went," she said, "but I have forgotten the rest. ... Oh yes, the chorus. ..."

*I am the egg man, whoo. I am the egg man, whoo.
I am the walrus! Goo-goo goo joob, goo-goo goo joob!*

“Curiouser and curiouser,” the other girl merrily remarked. “That sounds like something Mr. Lutwidge would have written.”

“Yah. Actually, it was one of my grandfather’s favourite songs. He said it was ‘mind-blowing,’ and he just loved the band that did it. I like the concept, but it’s a bit far-out, though, and I don’t know that it has any message and stuff.”

“Charles’ literary work never really had much of that,” said the girl. “Moral and suchlike. But it was ever so much fun ... whimsy, you know.”

“Yes,” said Alice. “I love random, but then I do like things to make sense in a way. That could just be my carnal mindset and stuff. Oh, dear, I’m just like, babbling away. ...”

“No, you’re not,” said the other Alice. “In fact, it’s most awfully enchanting to meet a kindred soul. Anyway, Mr. Lutwidge’s writing was a paradisiacal relief from dreadful stuffiness and suchlike. You do understand, don’t you?”

“I do, having just experienced a little of it,” said Alice. “The stuffiness and stuff, if you don’t mind me saying so. Oh dear, here I go, falling into my deplorable speech habit.”

“I don’t mind at all. I appreciate your forthrightness.”

“Although it was not *half* as bad as the movies have portrayed it,” said Alice, “the Victorian Era and stu- ... suchlike. Your family is very sweet, actually.”

“Thank you. But I, on the other hand have just experienced *your* world, and I envy you. Keep me in your prayers as I have to return to mine.”

“What? Like, *pray* for you a century after it’s all happened?”

The girl nodded. “Nutty putty and suchlike, remember? Anyway, it appears we are now passing each other through its rabbit hole in order to return to our respective homes.”

“The rabbit hole...,” Alice said pensively. “I just read about that. It’s cool hearing and reading a lot about you, but I must say I learned heaps more *being* ‘you,’ and it’s nice to have finally met you.”

“Most assuredly for me to be and meet you too...,” the girl replied and her eyes misted over. “And I had the exquisite pleasure to meet your brother. He’s

ever so loving and caring, and suchlike, as well as being *most* handsome ... as I said—I envy you. I suppose you had the misfortune to meet my cousin.”

“Your c-cousin? Yes, Doyle is a little ... *special*.”

“Not really, unless he has had a complete change of heart. Sometimes I just don’t know what gets into him.”

“I think I have a vague idea,” said Alice.

The girl clasped Alice’s hand. “But I do hope this will not be the first and the last time—the *meet* you part that is!”

“I am sure it won’t be either the first or the last time,” Alice said. “Not if Joshua has anything to do with it! He has a far-out way with that nutty putty.”

“He most certainly has,” the girl said. “And I am certain he will have us stay in touch.”

Suddenly, a wind rushing through the rabbit hole swirled into a vacuum that began pulling Alice forward and her alter ego backward. Neither of them could hold on to the sides of the tunnel any longer.

“I hear my mother calling,” the girl said, and let go of her earthy tether. “It’s time to return.”

“Will you be able to help me when I need you?” Alice called after her.

“I would have to die first!” the girl called back as she floated away. “Which, according to your hour, I already have. Good day.”

“Good day, umm ... *Alice*,” said Alice, and let the vacuum pull her forward.



Alice opened her eyes. It seemed to be mid-afternoon and she was in her bedroom, at home, in Winsley Barnes. Although she was disappointed at not having woken up in Joshua’s manor, the circumstances came as no surprise; that is except for finding herself drenched in sweat beneath a mound of blankets.

Brandon and her parents, Malcolm and Eileen were standing over her.

“We didn’t wake you, did we?” her mother asked. She was holding a tray.

Alice shook her head.

“We just wanted to bring you some toast, juice, and a hardboiled egg in case you were to wake up.”

“That’s ever so nice of you, Mummy. I do feel rather peckish, even though I like, *pigged out* on those battered fish sand..., oh dear, here I

am halting between two modes of speech. It's most *awfully* bizarre, and must be ever so, like, confusing and stuff."

"You were quite delirious a couple of hours ago, darling," said Malcolm. "So it's understandable."

"You mean to say that I was saying the most awfully weird, random-type things?"

"You were," said Brandon, "about soggy fish-paste sandwiches ... Joshua ... a boat ride, a white rabbit, and a walrus."

"That's understandable after such a high fever," her father said.

Brandon put his hand on Alice's brow. "And you still feel a bit hot. Anyway, I'm glad you seem to be pulling out of it."

"I'm most awfully sorry," said Alice. "But pulling out of what?"

"Well, starting on the Saturday afternoon outreach and well into the evening, you were pushing the whole J. A. bit to the max, remember?"

Alice shook her head.

"You don't remember, sis? What is this, still *amnesia*?"

"Amnesia?"

"Yes, Alice," said Eileen, "you had forgotten people's names and previous events, things like that. Even Dinah was a bit skittish. She seems alright now, though."

"Thank You, Joshua," Alice whispered.

"But it actually all worked out for the best," said her father.

"Nevertheless we were quite concerned," said Eileen. "I had put out an online prayer request for you."

"Your mother wondered if it was a result of the rather high-powered Offensive strategy plan we've been adhering to lately, which necessitated your presence at many high-profile functions," said her father. "All that can be a lot of pressure on the nerves of one so young. You can put most of the blame for that on me. I'm sorry."

"It's really not your fault, Daddy."

"Okay, Alice," said Brandon. "It all did seem to be iffy until we met this government dignitary and his wife—they work for the prime minister, and they got super interested and invited us to a banquet on Monday night. A very swanky do—seven courses and all that. We had to rent tuxes and whatnot."

"But you handled the entire occasion with perfect aplomb," said Alice's father. "Amazing. The order of the cutlery, dining protocol, and

so on. And when you suggested saying grace ... which you did in a very formal fashion..."

"For what we are about to receive..." Brandon interjected with a chuckle.

Malcolm continued. "Which, although initially was a bit unnerving for your mother and me, worked like a charm."

"I must say it did," said Eileen. "The strange thing was that you insisted on referring to yourself as Alice Pleasance, much like Dame Drutherford did."

"We wondered about that," said her father, "until Brandon reminded us again that that was the name of your alter ego in your adventures."

"Anyway," Eileen said, "although the situation was a bit perplexing, it worked out wonderfully, thank You, Jesus. And they want to keep in touch."

"Especially with you, Alice," said her father. "They want you to get to know their children. They have a daughter your age."

"I see," said Alice. "But how is it that I am indisposed now? I mean, how did I get sick?"

Brandon grinned. "From the time you woke up from your nap on Saturday afternoon, you bemoaned your wardrobe. You turned into a strangely stubborn little sis, insisting on getting out of your jeans and tee, and wearing a costume from a skit we had performed last year for that Dickens' Christmas Carol pageant. You even wore it for the banquet."

"Oddly enough, nothing else in your wardrobe was to your taste," said Eileen. "Then, as we were making our way back from the banquet, we got caught in a rainstorm and you got soaked because you had refused to wear even your favourite leather jacket as a wrap."

"And we *had* warned you about the weather," said her father.

"I'm most awfully sorry," said Alice. "But I am *totally* unaware that all this happened. There is an explanation, though."

Malcolm patted her shoulder. "You just weren't yourself, darling."

"You could put it that way, Daddy."

"But then I suppose we shouldn't be surprised at anything unusual happening involving you these days, should we, Alice?"

Alice giggled and nodded at her father's questioning grin.

"I'll get you a hot tea with lemon," Eileen said, and she and Malcolm left the room.

Brandon gave Alice a knowing wink. “Let me guess...,” he whispered, “you had one of those experiences.”

“Uh-huh. But it’s different. I was back a century or more with the Pleasance family ... the original Alice’s family. I am curious to know some facts.”

“Facts? Okay,” Brandon said as he sat down at Alice’s desktop and began typing. “Well, sis. Here’s what it says about Alice Pleasance ... sisters Mary and Charlotte ... Mary dies 1876.”

“That’s *it*,” said Alice. “She wasn’t supposed to die yet. But that *is* a bit young.”

Brandon nodded. “Of measles apparently, of all things.”

“She was ever so sweet.”

“Interesting ... it says here that ‘*you*’ were particularly close to her. Hey, is this is to be another *HL* adventure?”

“I think so,” said Alice. “In retrospect.”

The End