



The Lewis Carroll Writing Competition 2021

The Axolotl By Elizabeth Hopkinson

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Elizabeth says, "I wanted to find an interesting new creature for Alice to meet, and chose the axolotl. It is remarkable for the phenomenon of neoteny: the adult axolotl keeps its tadpole-like juvenile features. For this reason, it is sometimes used as a mascot for the ace community, but it also reminds us of the need to keep our childlike curiosity, just like Alice."

This chapter comes after Chapter 5, "Wool and Water" in "Alice Through the Looking-Glass".

"It won't turn into a tree, you know," said a voice from the brook.

"I beg your pardon?" said Alice in surprise.

"Only the Kings or Queens can grant a pardon," said the voice. "And I am neither."

Alice looked around to see who was speaking. Out of the brook came a curious creature. It looked a bit like a newt, a bit like a tadpole. It had pale skin, a round, smiling face and hair like pink trees sticking out of its head.

"Oh, the sweet little baby newt!" cried Alice, rushing up to it.

"I'm not a baby," said the creature crossly. That is to say, it *sounded* cross but it kept smiling, which Alice found rather confusing. "How would you like it if someone called *you* a baby?"

"Sometimes they do, you know," said Alice, thinking of her aunts. "And I don't like it at all. For I'm seven and a half. But then sometimes they say, "Alice, a great girl like you ought to know better!" It's very vexing."

"How do you think I feel?" said the creature. "On the one hand, I'll never fully grow up like other creatures. I'll always be soft and pale. On the other hand, I've raised babies of my own. And yet, people *will* keep calling me a sweet little baby. Last week, one of the white pawns put a little bonnet on me!"

Alice couldn't help smiling at that. "I tried to put a bonnet on my cat, Dinah, once. But she just hissed and scratched me. I might try it again with the kittens, though." *Although I expect the black kitten won't like it any better*, she thought.

"But what are you, anyway, if you're not a newt or a tadpole?" said Alice.

"I'm an Axolotl, of course!" said the creature. "Really, a great girl like you ought to know better."

"But I've never heard of an Axolotl before," said Alice.

"Then you ought to get out more and stop being such a baby," said the Axolotl. "Why, I came here all the way from the Great Lakes of Mexico. In a glass tank!" it added.

"I came here through a Glass, too, so you needn't sound so proud about that!" said Alice.

The Axolotl looked somewhat chastened. Although it was still smiling so it was hard to tell.

"I suppose we ought to be introduced, then," it said.

"I'm Alice," said Alice, with a little curtsy.

"Alice." The Axolotl nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose you were named after your mother?"

"No, indeed," said Alice. "My mother's name is Lorina."

"What does that have to do with it?" said the Axolotl. "I asked if you were named *after* her. Which was named first? Your mother or you?"

"My mother, of course. I couldn't very well be named before my mother," said Alice, with a smile.

"Is that so?" The Axolotl tilted its head on one side, thinking. "Well, I'm sure that's not the way here. For example, my name is Williamson. So it follows that my old father will be named William, once he's young enough to be named."

"Once he's young enough?" said Alice in confusion.

"Of course. It's only babies who are given names. You wouldn't call my Old Father William a baby, would you?" All the pink trees on the Axolotl's head bristled.

"Oh dear. I shall never make sense of this," thought Alice.

"It reminds me of the old rhyme:

Brothers and sisters have I none.

Yet this man's father is my father's son.

"Only I can never remember the solution. Is it his son? Or is it the speaker himself? I shan't ask the Axolotl. It will only get cross again." By this time, the Axolotl had jumped back into the brook and was swimming towards some trees. Alice ran along the bank to keep up with it. The leaves of the trees whispered in the wind and there was a delicious perfume in the air.

"Axolotl! Oh, do stop!" called Alice. For the trees nearest the water were covered in fluffy catkins. The fairies - as Alice and her sisters called the tiny seeds - were floating in the breeze and skimming down the brook like tiny boats. Alice leapt to catch one in the air and make a wish.

"I wish..." said Alice. "I wish I might have a mome rath for Christmas. With a dear little vorpal collar." She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Why on earth would I make such a nonsensical wish? I don't even know what a mome rath is. Now I shall have to catch another fairy." She began to leap in the air again. By this time, the Axolotl had swum back towards her and was clambering out onto the riverbank.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," it said, shaking itself. "Their mothers don't like it."

"They're not real fairies, you know," said Alice, thinking the Axolotl was something of a baby after all. "They're just seeds from the catkins there." She pointed towards the trees.

"Those aren't catkins," said the Axolotl. "They're Cheshire Kittens. They are learning how to make themselves invisible. The tails are the only bit you can see, because they haven't learned how to do that part yet."

"Really?" Alice's eyes grew round as soup spoons. "I met a Cheshire Cat once. He wasn't very polite." She frowned. "But I'd love to meet some darling Cheshire Kittens."

She skipped up to the tree and began stroking the soft, fluffy tails that hung from the branches. One of them gave a squeak, and the next moment Alice felt little teeth biting into her hand.

"Ouch!" Alice snatched her hand away and sucked the wound. "Why, these kittens are just as naughty as Dinah's. If their mothers were here, they would get a cuff round the ear and a good washing!"

It occurred to Alice that - if their mothers were Cheshire Cats - they may well be sitting in the tree, listening to every word Alice said. She took a step back and walked a little further along the riverbank, the Axolotl swimming alongside.

"What kind of trees are these, anyway?" said Alice, to take her mind off her sore hand.

"Cricket-bat Willows," said the Axolotl, carelessly. "Where the Cricket-bats live. Only they're asleep now. You can probably hear them snoring."

Alice listened very carefully and, sure enough, she could hear a faint creaking sound coming from under the leaves in the branches of the nearest tree. She crept up quietly and peeped underneath. Hanging upside-down from a branch were three curious creatures. They had wings of red leather, pointed ears, and feet like the handles of umbrellas.

"To keep them attached to the tree, I suppose," thought Alice.

"They live on freshly-mown grass and cucumber sandwiches," said the Axolotl.

"And what do they dream about?" Alice wondered.

But that put her in mind of the Red King, who Tweedledee had said was dreaming about Alice. The thought made Alice feel queasy. What if she were only a thing in the Red King's dream? She didn't like the idea at all. If only someone could tell her whether or not it was true.

"Oh, Axolotl," Alice ventured. "Do you know the Red King at all?"

"I know *of* him," said the Axolotl. "It would be rather impertinent to speak of *knowing* a King, don't you think? Why, we haven't even been introduced!"

Alice felt this was getting away from the point.

"What I mean to say is..." She thought for a moment. What *did* she mean to say? People seemed to be so concerned about meanings in Looking-glass World.

"I wonder if you could tell me what the Red King is dreaming?"

The Axolotl smiled its usual smile. "Naturally. But if you climb on this wall, you shall see for yourself."

Alice looked up. To her surprise, they had arrived at a narrow brick wall. At the point where Alice stood, the wall was quite low, and easily climbed. But further along, the hillside fell away, making the wall higher and higher. It seemed to go on for miles.

"What a simply enormous wall!" exclaimed Alice. "Perhaps it's Hadrian's Wall." Then, with a burst of inspiration, she added, "Or the Great Wall of China."

"I've never heard anything so ridiculous," said the Axolotl, as it struggled to climb up beside Alice. "When you can plainly see it's made of brick."

"What has that to do with it?" said Alice. "Would you like a hand?" she added.

"No, thank you," said the Axolotl, starchily. "I have two perfectly good hands of my own. And if one came off, I would simply grow a new one. I bet you can't do that." It glared at Alice, as well as it could for smiling.

"No, indeed!" said Alice. "But why couldn't this be the Great Wall of China if it's made of brick? I'm sure there were bricks in China long before there were any in England."

"Because it's not made of china. Really, you can be very dull for your age," said the Axolotl.

"The Great Wall of China isn't made of china," said Alice.

"How do you know? Have you been there?" said the Axolotl, and all its hair-trees stuck out at alarming angles. Alice decided not to anger it further.

"I can't see the Red King." She squinted into the distance. She could see Looking-glass World marked out like a chessboard, with hedges and brooks and tiny, moving figures, just as she had from the Second Square. But none of them appeared to be the Red King. She would have known him by the night-cap. "Perhaps he's hidden by the trees?"

The Axolotl settled itself on the wall.

"I never said you would see the Red King. I said you would see *for yourself*. And you have. Unless someone else is seeing for you. Which is always a possibility," it added.

Alice drummed her heels against the wall in annoyance.

"But I need to know what he's dreaming about!"

“Oh, that’s easy,” said the Axolotl. “He’s dreaming about boys gathering sticks in the snow to make a bonfire.”

And it sang:

Remember, remember the fifth of November

Gunpowder, treacle and plot.

Take the mouse from the treacle

And if he should squeak, I’ll

Put him to bed in the pot.

“Poor little mouse,” said Alice. “Although he’d be safer from cats in the pot than outside it, I suppose. But that’s not how the rhyme goes.”

“Of course it is,” said the Axolotl crossly. “On the fifth of November, you stand in a plot of land and eat treacle toffee. That’s what the rhyme means.”

“That’s not what it means,” said Alice. “And I’m sure it’s *treason*, not *treacle*. But I suppose the Red King wouldn’t like that.”

“Well, then!” said the Axolotl. And now the angles of its hair-branches were positively fearsome. “If you know so much, I shall leave you to it!” And with that, it leapt down from the wall and scuttled towards the brook. Alice heard a little splash as it dived in, and saw the lines of its wake in the water as it swam away.

“Oh, don’t go!” cried Alice, jumping down after it. But it was too late. The Axolotl was gone.

Alice sighed. “Why did it have to be so prickly? I suppose it’s because of those spikes on its head. Now what shall I do?” She looked about her, away from the brook. Further along the wall, something caught her eye.

“Why, I do declare!” said Alice. “It’s the egg I bought in the shop. How could I have forgotten?”

She began walking towards the egg, which grew larger and larger the closer she came.

“I’m sure it wasn’t that big when I bought it,” thought Alice. “Perhaps it’s about to hatch? Only, what will it hatch into, I wonder?”
