



The Lewis Carroll Writing Competition 2021

The Bishop in the Tower

By Stephen Alexander

This is imagined as a missing chapter from Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass, inserted between Chapter 7 (The Lion and the Unicorn) and Chapter 8 (It's My Own Invention).

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On and on went the drumming, like a thousand fingernails on a gigantic pane of glass; and, try as she might, Alice could not make out where it was coming from, nor block out the dreadful din.

"Oh dear!" thought Alice. "I shall go quite mad if it goes on much longer!"

With her hands clamped firmly over her ears, and her eyes tightly shut too (for, in her confusion, Alice had the strange idea that this would help), she stumbled wildly about, not knowing in the least where she was going, but determined to put as much distance between herself and the drumming as possible.

Suddenly, Alice lost her footing; the world seemed to turn upside-down, and she felt the prickle of rough leaves and branches scratching at her arms and legs. When she opened her eyes, she saw that the world did indeed seem to be upside-down; above her head she could see dry earth and patches of grass, while beneath her the blue expanse of the sky stretched for miles and miles, like a vast ocean dotted with fluffy white clouds.

"Well!" thought Alice. "What a curious sensation! It's almost as if up were down, and down were up! I'm not at all sure I shall get used to this, you know."

Alice did not like to move, for fear that she should fall into the endless sky below her. "For then," she thought to herself, "I might go on falling for ever and ever, and where would that get me? I suppose I might go on falling until I reached the Moon. Or perhaps the Sun? I should much prefer to land on the Sun, you know; I daresay it's much warmer there than on the Moon. But suppose I got sunburn? That would never do."

After considering the matter carefully for some time, Alice concluded that she would have to move somehow. "Otherwise," she thought, "I shall have to stay *here*, and that wouldn't do either." With great caution, she began to move one of her legs to take a step, and in a moment, she fell into a graceful roll and found herself sitting on the grass, with the ground and the sky back once again in their accustomed position.

“That’s much better,” said Alice aloud. “I don’t think the upside-down life agreed with me at all. Why!” she gasped, looking behind her. “I do believe I was in a hedge all that time!” There, sure enough, was a thick hedge about three feet high. “I must have stumbled over it when my eyes were closed! Thank goodness the drumming has stopped, at any rate.”

As Alice stood up to brush the dirt from her dress, her attention was caught by the sight of a large tower looming up ahead of her. It was perfectly cylindrical in shape (“Like an enormous chimney pot!” thought Alice), and seemed to be built entirely out of large stone bricks, weathered with age. Peering upwards, Alice could just make out the crenelations around the circular top of the tower, and pretty little latticed windows were spaced at intervals. Directly in front of Alice was the tower’s oaken front door, and, burning with curiosity, she gave it a gentle push.

The door creaked open to reveal the bottom of a rather narrow stairwell. Alice looked critically up at the outside of the tower. “It’s an old building, certainly,” she pondered, “but it seems structurally sound at any rate. If it were about to fall down, there’d be a sign over the door saying ‘Danger—Unsafe’, or something like that. I’m sure it will be quite safe to climb, anyhow. I should *so* like to see the view from the top!”

So she began climbing the stone stairway, which curled tightly around on itself, reminding Alice very much of a corkscrew; and, after some time (for the tower really was *very* tall), Alice emerged, a little out of breath, onto a small landing, where another closed door awaited her. “This—must be—the door—to the rooftop,” said Alice, as she tried to get her breath back. She pushed the door, and, to her great relief, it opened; but it did not lead onto the rooftop after all.

It led into a queer little room, which was dimly-lit with candles, while all the windows were covered by curtains and drapes. Poking through the curtains were brass telescopes of all different sizes. At a desk opposite Alice, a man was sitting with his back to her; he was hunched over and seemed to be scribbling intently with a quill and ink. From the little Alice could see of him, he appeared to be wearing a long white cassock, as well as a tall white hat which rose to a point above his head. “He must be the White Bishop—at least, *one* of them,” thought Alice to herself.

The Bishop had evidently not noticed Alice’s arrival, so she waited patiently for a few moments, unsure whether it would be quite polite for her to interrupt him. After several more moments of silence, however (apart from the scratching of the man’s quill), Alice decided she could wait no longer.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said, very politely. She was not at all sure of the correct way to address a bishop, but thought this a safe way to begin. No sooner had the words escaped her lips, however,

than the man gave a startled cry, and upset the ink bottle so violently that it smashed to pieces against the floor, where it created a dark pool of ink which began to spread rapidly.

“Oddsbodikins!” cried the Bishop, who then clapped both hands suddenly over his mouth, a look of shock in his bulging eyes.

“I’m dreadfully sorry,” said Alice, and she began looking around quickly for something to help clear up the mess; but the man did not pay the least attention to the broken bottle or the pool of ink seeping across the floor, but continued to stare at Alice in horror with his round eyes. “I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said apologetically.

At this, the man took off his hat, and sank down despondently in his chair. Alice was astonished to see a tear trickling down his cheek.

“Why, it’s only an ink bottle!” she said gently. “You needn’t cry about it.”

“I’m not crying about the ink bottle,” said the Bishop, in a choked voice. “I’m crying because I said ‘Oddsbodikins’ just now.”

“Why should you cry about that?” asked Alice.

“Because,” said the man dolefully, “I had taken a vow of silence, and now I’ve broken it. Oh, all that time without uttering a word, and now I shall have to start all over again.” With this, he broke into full sobs, which moved Alice deeply.

“I’m dreadfully sorry,” she said again; and really she was. “How long had you managed to keep your vow?”

“Oh, ages,” said the man through his tears. “Why, until you came in just now, I hadn’t spoken for nearly ten minutes.”

“That’s not a very long time,” said Alice, frowning a little. “Judging from the fuss you’re making, I thought it was much longer.”

“Ten minutes is a very long time!” said the Bishop indignantly.

“No it isn’t,” said Alice decidedly.

“Have you ever tried holding your breath for ten minutes? Or standing on one leg? Try it, and then tell me whether you think it’s a long time or not.”

“But those things are harder to do than keeping silence,” said Alice. “Anyone can stop talking.”

“I wish *you* would stop talking,” said the Bishop sourly, glaring at her.

“Oh dear,” thought Alice to herself. “We don’t seem to have got off at all on the right foot. — I’m dreadfully sorry, sir,” she said for the third time, giving a little curtsy as she spoke. “I am right in calling you ‘sir’, aren’t I?”

“The appropriate form of address would be ‘Your Excellency’,” said the Bishop, “but I don’t suppose it matters much now.”

“I was wondering, Your Excellency,” said Alice politely, “why you were sitting up here all alone in this tower.”

The Bishop was about to answer, when he was suddenly interrupted by a loud scratching, tapping sound. Alice looked around for the source of the noise but could not find it. The Bishop, however, rose and walked calmly to one of the windows, where he drew back the velvet curtain, and stood back to allow a rather bedraggled-looking bird into the room. It stuck out its leg, and allowed the Bishop to remove a piece of paper which was tied to it.

“Why, it’s a pigeon!” exclaimed Alice.

“She does have eyes, then,” said the pigeon, looking at her sharply with one of its own, which was black and beady.

Alice chose to ignore this remark, and instead asked, “What’s that, Your Excellency?”

“I daresay it’s a letter from the other White Bishop,” said the man, fumbling to retrieve a pair of spectacles. “We both keep an eye on what’s going on in the game, you know, and we often discuss strategy.”

After unrolling it and reading it carefully, a concerned look came over the Bishop’s face. “Is your name Alice, my dear?” he asked earnestly.

“Why—yes!” she answered in surprise.

“Oh dear,” said the Bishop gravely. “Oh dear.”

“Here!” said the pigeon suddenly. “How comes you’re talking? I thought you’d given it up.”

“Never mind that now,” snapped the Bishop. “You’re in the wrong square, my dear,” he said, turning back to Alice.

“The wrong square?” said Alice in alarm. “How can that be?”

“I don’t know,” said the Bishop, “but you’re supposed to be in D7, and yet you seem to have stumbled into E7. You do realise pawns can only move forwards, and not sideways?”

“Of course,” said Alice. “I certainly didn’t mean to move sideways. I’m trying to get to the Eighth Square and become a queen.”

The Bishop looked at her sternly over his spectacles. “You won’t become a queen making illegal moves like this, you know.”

“Oh, but it was an accident!” said Alice desperately. “I can’t understand how it happened.”

“Let me see,” said the Bishop, scanning the letter again. “The other Bishop has been watching you for some time. According to him, you passed D3 by railway—well, that’s only natural—then in D4 you crossed paths with Tweedledum and Tweedledee.”

“Yes, I remember all of that,” said Alice.

“You seem to have been going the right way until after you met the Lion and the Unicorn in D6.”

“Why, that was just now!” said Alice in great excitement. “Just as I was handing round the plum-cake, the drumming started, and it was so frightfully loud I could scarcely hear myself think.”

“What did you do then?” asked the Bishop.

“Why, I—I put my hands over my ears, and I shut my eyes, and I—”

“Ah! That explains it,” said the Bishop triumphantly. “You must have stumbled over the border into this square by mistake.”

“The hedge!” said Alice, understanding at last.

“Well, you’ve no time to lose!” cried the Bishop. “You must hop back over the hedge into the proper square before anyone else notices you’ve gone. Otherwise I dread to think what might happen.”

“I’ll go at once!” cried Alice, making for the door.

“Of course,” called the Bishop after her, “you won’t remember any of this, you know. Once you’re back in your correct square—it’ll be as if it never happened at all.”

“Well!” thought Alice, as she hurried back down the spiral staircase. “Fancy forgetting a whole portion of the day! But I simply must get to the Eighth Square and be a queen.”

By this time, she was running across the grass towards the hedge which formed the border. Just before she jumped over it, she thought to herself, “I shall certainly have to watch where I’m going in future!”

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