



The Lewis Carroll Writing Competition 2021

The Tent in the Trees

By Elena Barham (Under 20s Competition)

Elena says, "A life-long fan of the Alice books, I wanted to incorporate the elements of Carroll's writing into The Tent in the Trees (nonsensical logic, eccentric characters, Wonderland's otherworldliness, and - of course - his humour). Sloths are a favourite species of mine and renowned for their strangeness, so the character of Sloth felt natural to Wonderland and appeared to write herself! The poem she recites, in the shape of a sloth's paw, is in homage to The Mouse's Tale poem by Carroll and was my favourite part to write"

Elena Barham had just turned eighteen at the point of writing and is studying an English Literature degree. Recently, she won the Ilkley Literature Festival Young People's Poetry Prize and had prose published and awarded by the author Joanne Harris and also by Goldsmiths University, Writing East Midlands and Broadway Arts Festival.

This chapter is placed after chapter 6, 'Pig and Pepper' and before 'A Mad Tea-Party' in "Alice in Wonderland".

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'And what if I keep on growing when I am inside the March Hare's house?' wondered Alice, 'Why, my head may shoot through the roof!'

That would be very ill-mannered of a guest indeed she thought (having forgotten by this time that she had not been invited there). She walked into the wood, deciding to return once she had recited the monarchs of England in order of reign length as she had done at school. 'For,' reasoned Alice, 'once I've finished that then I shan't have any energy left to grow with.'

She found, however, that she could not begin. 'Now, I know George III was the longest ruler and Lady Jane Grey the shortest, but what has their height to do with anything?'

Alice was aware this was nonsense but was too hungry to chide herself for it. How she wished for scones still hot from the oven laden with raspberry jam! Perhaps the March Hare might have some, she thought, beginning to walk back.

The trees were grander than any Alice had seen, interloping and creating arches with one another so that the sky was quite hidden. In the darkness, she couldn't discern the way she had come. Certainly, she was lost. Yet Alice wandered on and on, for she was sure to get somewhere if she walked anywhere.

Eventually, she found a tree much thicker than the rest and easily the tallest. Two tubes twisted down it serpentine, one glass (labelled 'UP') and the other golden ('DOWN'). Upon one of the tree's uppermost boughs, Alice fancied she could see a peppermint and crème striped tent and yet its being there seemed perfectly reasonable to her. For you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened that day that Alice scarcely noticed the strangeness she had wandered into.

'If it is a tent,' Alice said, 'surely somebody must be inside. I'll ask them the way to the March Hare's house.'

She found she could easily slip into the glass tube but could not climb up inside of it, sliding down it each time she tried to do so.

By the tree, Alice noticed a table with a large jar of honey. An idea occurred to her and she plunged her hands into the jar, spreading a thick gloop of honey up to her elbows. She did so wish to get into the tent to ask directions. Besides, she did not like to stay in the wood, for the trees – terrible gossips, you know – whispered about her. Again, Alice attempted to climb up inside the glass tube. Now, she found she could do so with relative ease.

‘Well!’ she exclaimed, ‘I feel quite as if I’m a spider! I should like to be a spider, then I may crawl upside down across my bedroom ceiling. I imagine that’d be very nice indeed. I should have to be wary of Dinah though.’

Alice supposed she would have been afraid of the height had she not just hours earlier been more than nine feet tall herself. It seemed to her she had climbed for days by the time the tube's end came into view. She clambered out of the tube, wiping her hands on her dress, never thinking what she looked like. Besides, there was nothing else with which she might do it.

Alice fancied she could hear a faint snoring omitting from the tent. She coughed politely before entering, so that she might not startle anyone within.

Inside, in the very middle of the tent, hung a trapeze and from it an upside-down curious creature. Alice didn't know quite what it was. Its fur was walnut coloured and, Alice thought, if she touched it would feel just like the hair on a coconut's shell. Upon the animal clung its child to her stomach. Both of them were asleep.

Alice did not like to disturb them in their tranquillity yet did so want to know the way to the March Hare's house. She was positively famished and had struggled indeed to not lap up the honey when she had found it.

‘Excuse me,’ began Alice, ‘I was wondering if you might –’

The adult creature awoke, slowly opening eyes as dark and shining as the most polished conkers.

‘You might have knocked.’ She said, not unkindly.

‘I would have, except there was nothing to knock upon.’

The creature muttered that three sharp raps upon the tree's trunk would have sufficed.

‘Else,’ she said, ‘how are we to distinguish between the common houseguest and the invader? It would be anarchy - *sheer* anarchy. Kindly pass me my spectacles, I should like to see who I am addressing.’

Alice found them upon a table and held them out to the creature.

‘Would you mind?’ asked the animal, indicating for Alice to help her put the spectacles on.

She did so, and the creature thanked her, her mouth slowly stretching into a broad smile.

‘Yes, I can see you perfectly clearly now. I would have done it myself, only it's difficult for me, I only have the three toes per paw. Now, that's a tale if ever there was one!’

Alice should have liked to know this tale but was in such a hurry to get to the March Hare's house, she did not like to ask the creature any questions about it.

'Do you know the way to the March Hare's house, please?' she asked, 'I'm certain I found it before, a cat told me where to. I always thought they'd be good at Geography. But then I got lost –'

'Could you brush my fur with that comb over there, please? A Sloth likes to look presentable for guests.'

So that is what you are, thought Alice and brushed her fur. She was beginning to feel quite cross with the Sloth; it wasn't fair that she kept interrupting her, particularly as she had helped her so much already.

'I'm sorry to be rude,' said Alice, 'but please could you tell me where the March Hare's house is? I do so want to go there.'

'The March Hare's house, if you please!' exclaimed the Sloth, 'Why ever do you want to go there? He's barmy, that one.'

Alice being a truthful girl told her why, that she was hungry and supposed the March Hare would have plenty of food.

'That I can understand,' said the Sloth, 'I once stole a macaron from the Queen. That's how I lost my toes, in fact. I used to have five on each paw.'

Alice could see the Sloth was intent on telling her how she had lost them and was clearly not easily going to be stopped.

'How?' Alice asked, her stomach growling loudly.

The Sloth drew in a slow deep breath and said:

‘When	the	Queen
caught	me, she	said
“I do	decree	this sloth
has made	an enemy	of me!”
And so	I ran away	to sea
then lived	in a beech	tree until
the day	she	captured
me.	“Slothy, you	see (she
said to me), your offence was one of the highest degree. I shall		
slice off your lovely toes, dip them in cream and		
then devour them with my		
afternoon tea!”		

‘Goodness! That was harsh for just one macaron,’ said Alice (whose annoyance at the Sloth was melting into sympathy), ‘Although, I wonder she didn’t cut all of your toes off. I mean, if she was going to cut any off at all, she may as well have done them all.’

‘She hadn’t the appetite, I suppose’ the Sloth replied, ‘Now, should you like to sit on my trapeze? You’ve had a long climb, you know.’

‘Yes, please. Why do you have a trapeze, Sloth? It’s not very comfortable.’ said Alice when she had sat upon it beside her.

‘I’m afraid I’m quite bored of you now, dear’ the Sloth said, scratching her chin, ‘That’s the trouble with guests – they just don’t know when to stop talking.’

In a series of rapid motions so quick that Alice would never be able to fully comprehend how they were achieved, the Sloth (with child now on back) scaled the trapeze’s ropes and freed it of its restraints.

‘Good riddance!’ she shouted, ‘My regards to the Hare!’

Alice managed to grip onto the trapeze just as it swung out of the tent, feeling very glad for the honey remnants still on her hands. She was plunging down through the wood endlessly, ricocheting into trees but she never fell.

‘If I don’t manage to do very well at school,’ Alice thought, ‘I’d at least make an excellent acrobat.’

After seemingly an eternity and with her hair perfectly untidy, the trapeze finally deposited her at the bottom of a ruby and jade path leading to a house.

‘Why!’ said Alice, ‘This is the March Hare’s house - that Sloth did know the way! I thought she was lying. Still, this was a cruel trick. I might’ve landed anywhere or I might’ve never landed at all!’

The welcome sound of conversation and the polite clinking of teacups drifted down the path. Tired and yet happy in her conviction that nothing truly bad could happen in this topsy-turvy land, Alice instinctively followed the noise.

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