Summary

It has been many years since Alice and the Hatter defeated the Jabberwock. Too long, by the Hatter's accounting. But how to find her and convince her to return with him are questions he's just mad enough to attempt answering. Alice/Tarrant.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

When one wore a Liddell hat, one was sure to be noticed. However, this had to be carefully weighed against the fact that the proprietress of Liddell's Millinery, one Mrs. Alice Liddell by name, was not only not respectable, but didn't really seem to care that she wasn't. This was why, when the Season approached, Mrs. Liddell took to hanging the "CLOSED" sign on the door at three o'clock in the afternoon, receiving customers by appointment only through the back door. She considered it something of a lark to see the dank alleyway favoured by local cutpurses and prostitutes filled with a queue of barouche boxes and landaus, their ornaments covered with dark cloth and shades drawn down so as not to betray the identities of those fashionable personages concealed within.

Everyone knew, of course. When Lady Talbot showed up at Ascot in a beribboned chartreuse confection that mocked gravity and propriety with its voluptuous felt form, everyone knew that the hat had come from Liddell's. When the Duke of Edinburgh's latest protégé showed up at the Bradleys' ball in a tiny cap that was covered in iridescent feathers so that it looked as if it were fashioned of quicksilver, there was no doubt whose talented fingers had sewn the hat that was endlessly imitated. But she was always a step ahead of her competitors, always the first to introduce the most fantastical textiles and feathers, and this was the way it had been from the day she had first
opened her doors.

This is why, on a trip back from the artist's neighbourhood that supplied her with hand-dyed wool, exotic fabric, and other curiosities, Alice stopped short at the sight of a furry, white object attached to a lady's hat. The hat was a somewhat old-fashioned wire-brimmed style, but it sported an elaborate purple bow, at the centre of which was the white ball of fur about the size of Alice's fist. The overall effect was that of an exotic orchid on a bed of black velvet, and Alice couldn't tear her eyes away from it.

Then she lost sight of it in the crowd, and she found herself using her elbows to push through, after the woman in the hat. Her mind was on fire. She had to find out where on earth the lady had found such an unusual creation. Paris? Vienna? The crowd parted at last, and Alice caught sight of a flash of white fur. She hurried after the woman, and the crowd began to thin as they neared Charing Cross Road. She could see the young woman clearly now. Her hair was mousy brown beneath the hat, and she wore a simple dark dress with almost no ornamentation. She crossed the street and Alice followed her.

"Excuse me, miss!" she called.

The woman glanced behind her, as if she had heard something and then decided she hadn't. She hurried into a crowd surrounding a beggar man who was haranguing passers-by from atop an old soap box. Alice could just make out the white fur through the sea of brown and black. When she emerged from the listeners, she looked up and down the street for any sign of the girl in the striking hat, and scowled. It was as if she had vanished into thin air. She was about to give up and go home when the jingle of a door bell made her stop and look.

The door's paint was peeling and the shop windows were lined with brown paper, but the lady who stepped out of the shabby door was anything but. Her walking costume was of red and black velvet, trimmed with jet beads. Alone, it would have been striking, but with the hat she wore, her ensemble was breathtaking. The small black hat wasn't particularly ornate - it would have detracted from the dress, otherwise - but the eye was drawn to the single large black and red striped feather, set at a rakish angle. It was unusual to come across a hat that was not one of hers that was as beautiful as it was original - it was unprecedented to come across two in the same day. Her curiosity abruptly turned into annoyance as she recognized the face beneath the hat as belonging to a client of hers, Flora Pinkerton.

Fortunately Miss Pinkerton, a social climber of the most desperate sort, didn't seem to recognize Alice when she was not waiting on her hand and foot, and stepped past her without obvious snubbing. The fact that Alice had not yet seen her professionally this season cemented the suspicion that had been brewing in the back of Alice's mind since first spotting the fluffy white furry sphere: she had a proper competitor.

Once Miss Pinkerton had gone off in search of people to admire her, Alice glanced behind her before opening the door to the seemingly abandoned shop. The inside of the shop took her breath away. She was suddenly in a sea of colours, surrounded by feathers and fabric of every description. There were hats everywhere, and in no sort of orderly display. There were hats piled on top of one another, there were hats scattered on display cases that were still covered by dust cloths. The girl she had seen on the street had laid her hat on a display case and was now rolling up a bolt of taffeta that had been draped around a narrow spiral staircase.

"Can I 'elp you?" she asked.

"Are you the owner of this establishment?" Alice asked.
"Lawn love you, no," she said, expertly folding up the end of the fabric. "That'd be Mister Adder and 'e's out for the afternoon. There's open appointments tomorrow, though. Mister Adder's frightful clever. 'e'll make you somethin' special."

"Thank you, no," said Alice only half consciously using more aristocratic accents than she usually did. "I shall look now."

"Is there anythin' in particular you're looking for?"

"I'll know it when I see it," said Alice decisively.

She explored the shop and admired the hats, which appeared not only to be whimsically designed in every colour of the rainbow, but also very well made. The stitching was meticulous and even, and the feathers were unlike any Alice had ever seen, which was saying something, considering that Alice's own exotic array of feathers came from species she had only encountered in her travels and studies overseas.

"I'm curious about this Mister Adder," said Alice to the shop girl, who was trying in vain to organize a group of hats that had been stacked in a precipitous pile. "Do you know with whom he apprenticed or where?"

"Don't know," said the girl. "But I do know 'e's made hats for the queen."

Alice tried not to let her confusion show. The queen's hatter was an old man called Lingford who favoured shapeless monstrosities trimmed in roses and antique lace - nothing like the modern, sleek marvel that adorned the head of Miss Pinkerton.

"Anyway, 'e's good to work for – lets you 'ave a day off now and then and lets you play in the workroom when business is slow. Strange bloke, but what 'atmaker isn't, eh? And you can mention 'im in polite society, which is more than you can say for some of 'em."

Alice gave the girl an icy smile and was about to give her significantly more than that when a hat made of silver silk caught her eye. The colour palette was completely different than the other hats in the store, which were bold and bright, and the style was unusual, as it appeared to be constructed from a man's top hat pattern. But this was no gentleman's hat - the hat band was sky blue, and it was bedecked with silk hydrangea blossoms and violets, but they had been brushed in silver, which muted the pastels into ghostly greys. There was the least suggestion of a veil made of lace shot through with silver thread hanging from the brim, through which a pair of blue eyes would appear to their best advantage. Alice couldn't help herself. She reached for the hat, but before her fingers closed on the shimmering fabric, the spell was broken by the shop girl's voice.

"That one ain't for sale."

"What?" This brought Alice up short.

"That 'at. It ain't for sale."

"My dear girl," said Alice, not bothering to hide her irritation. "It's on display in a hat shop. Why wouldn't it be for sale?"

"It belongs to someone already, or so says Mister Adder."

Now this was a game Alice could play. "If it belongs to someone already, what makes you think that someone is not me?"
The girl looked bewildered for a moment. "You'd 'ave known it straight away if it was yours."

"I did," said Alice. "I didn't touch any of the other hats. It's even in my colours." Alice indicated her silver and blue-trimmed dress.

"Mister Adder would 'a said if the owner was coming to-day," began the girl.

"As if Mister Adder can control the comings and goings of ladies," scoffed Alice, feeling more confident. "If you are unable to give me the hat that was obviously made for me, then I shall have to find myself a new hatter."

The girl squirmed visibly, and Alice knew she had her. The girl would be in trouble for alienating a customer, but she'd also be in trouble if she let herself be bullied into giving away a bespoke hat to someone off the street.

"I'll just wrap it up for you," she said in a glum voice. "I can 'ave it delivered."

"No need," said Alice, trying not to gloat. "I'll wear it home."

The girl looked even more suspicious and annoyed. "I've got to put it down in the ledger," she said.

Alice's fingers closed on the soft brim of the hat, and she put it on. It was lighter than she expected it to be, and she caught sight of herself in the glass. It really was an extraordinary hat. It made her appear taller, of course, but she hadn't anticipated the way it made her neck appear more slender, or the way the shining material made her hair appear even more golden, or her eyes more luminous.

"Alice?" called the shop girl from across the store.

"Yes?" she replied without thinking.

"That's the name on the slip," said the girl, looking much more confident. "Sign 'ere, please."

Alice was slightly disappointed not to leave the girl in suspense, but she signed her surname as illegibly as she could, hoping the other Alice's last name wasn't something absurdly long or hyphenated.

"Can I 'ave your address? It ain't in the ledger."

Alice considered giving the girl one of her business cards but thought better of it. If Mister Adder wished to get his hat back, perhaps it was wise to keep him from connecting her with her business. Not that she had much reputation to lose, but accusations of stolen designs were serious. She recited the address of the house she let several blocks from her shop and walked smartly out of Mister Adder's establishment, enjoying the appreciative glances of passersby. She reflected that there really was nothing that attracted notice more than a pretty woman in a hat that suited her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Alice was rarely visited by visions of her past; so much of it seemed a dream. But that night, with her new hat on the dresser facing her bed, she dreamed of friends and enemies past. It was all veiled in grey mist, but the voices were clear as bells ringing through the fog of her forgetfulness. She woke with a great jerk, breathing hard, and was surprised to hear a knock at the front door. She muttered several words that she had learnt on her voyage to Sumatra and threw on her dressing gown. It was Tallulah's night off, curse it, but she doubted a knife-wielding maniac or burglar would knock. She was sure to grab the slender sword she had purchased in the Orient and conceal it behind her back as she opened the front door.
Standing on her front step was a most peculiar figure in a top hat nearly identical to the one she had procured that afternoon, though it was decidedly bolder in colour and more masculine in ornament. The face, however, was obscured by a curious pair of leather goggles and a cream silk scarf that was wrapped mummylike about his head. The rest of his figure was concealed by a tweed trench duster.

"Mrs. Liddell, I presume?" came a muffled voice.

Alice's fingers tightened around the sword. "Have you any idea of the time?" she demanded.

"I beg your pardon," he said sorrowfully. "Am I too terribly late?"

Something about his words stayed her hand, which was about to slam the door in the man's face.

"Too late for what?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "You're the one who wished to know the time. Though why I can't imagine. The night-time hours run together like all the colours."

"Not so," she said, glancing at the starless night. "The sky is black."

"Black is indeed all the colours run together."

"Only if we are discussing paint," returned Alice. "If we are discussing light, then all colours together make white, which is quite the opposite."

Alice wasn't certain, but she suspected the man was grinning at her from behind his scarf. "But the opposite of white is not always black, now is it?"

Something in his manner was doing strange things to her stomach. "What do you mean?"

"Come now, Alice," he whispered, placing an affectionate sibilant on the end of her name. "You yourself once opposed white's opposite."

A long-forgotten giggle sounded in her mind. "Impossible," she whispered.

"Impassible," he corrected. "At least while you stand in the doorway."

As if in a daze, she stood aside and let the man into her home. She glanced down the deserted street to see if anyone had noticed her letting a strange man in, then chastised herself. If she was going to have the lowest of low reputations, she might as well have a few moments of impetuousness to show for it.

She shut the door behind her. To her surprise, the man had already managed to light the gas in the room and was peering beneath the drape over the birdcage in the corner, whistling.

The cockatoo that had been asleep woke with a noisy squawk.

"Now you've done it," said Alice, tugging the drape down over the cage. "He'll wake the others now."

The man seemed not to have heard her scolding. "He's lovely! What is his name?"

"Tarrant," she said.

"Oh, how wonderful!" exclaimed the man. "That's my name, too, you know!"
"I thought you were Mister Adder," said Alice, offering the bird a piece of apple to go back to sleep.

"Heavens no," he replied, unwrapping the scarf from his face. "The dear girl I hired can't seem to say 'hatter.' Cat must have her tongue - so terribly sad when a young girl must do without."

She told herself she was prepared to see his face, but when he lifted the goggles to reveal startling green eyes rimmed with pale lashes, Alice had to sit. Her hand flew to her mouth. It was unmistakably him, her own Hatter. But he looked changed - not as dramatically as last time, and yet different somehow.

"Ah, so you do remember," he said, smiling uncertainly. "I knew you must from your hats. But you never came back," he admonished, wild brows sinking.

"I had to see the world," said Alice. "That's why I left in the first place."

"I don't see much of the world in your shop or in this city," he said, doubt making his voice rough.

Alice couldn't help herself and began to laugh merrily. "That's because you haven't seen any of it. If you're going to be cross with me, at least let it be over something real."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

She smiled at him warmly and took his hands, smoothing the pale skin with her thumbs. "Come see."

She led him up the stair to the attic door and pulled on the rope. A pulley squeaked, and the trap door lifted and simultaneously lowered a ladder. Alice handed him a banana from the basket on the hallway table and gestured for him to follow her up.

The familiar wash of steamy air scented with tropical flowers always made her smile, and tonight was no exception. The air was cool because the sun had not yet appeared over the horizon, and her charges slept on, undisturbed by their downstairs neighbour's earlier outburst. The Hatter rose from the trap door and stared at the wonders around him. He bent to retrieve an enormous brown feather that was bedecked with thousands of tiny spots and one large eyespot at the end.

"What is this?"

Alice took the feather and smoothed it, knitting the worried barbs together with careful fingers. "It's a tail feather from my Argus Pheasant," she said, pointing at a large bird roosting in a low tree. "I've been waiting for him to shed for a week." She bent to retrieve a smaller feather from the ground.

"This one's from a Green Turaco," she said. "You can't tell in the darkness, but the feathers are iridescent. They look almost purple in light. These white fluffy ones are from my Bali Mynahs, and they're terribly popular, so I'm keeping an extra-close eye on the chicks. Now, this one is one of my favorites," she said, pointing to a small black bird. "I discovered him in Indonesia and had the privilege of naming him."

"How delightful!" exclaimed the Hatter, feeding a bit of banana to one of the curious mynahs. "I had no idea you had become a woman of science!"

Alice's smile faded. "Unfortunately, this world isn't ready for a female naturalist," she said ruefully. "The Royal Society wouldn't allow me to present my work. With so many live specimens to care for, I could either sell them, which I would never do, give them to a zoo, which I would hate to do, or keep them myself and find some way of feeding them."

"Which is what you did," he said, gracing her with a sweet smile. "And it was cleverly done. You've done very well for yourself, and you made it very easy to find you by the trail of hats. It was only a
matter of time before you spotted young Mary's hat and found me. You never could resist chasing a white furry tail, now could you?"

"The grey silk hat- did you make it for me?"

"Of course I did," he said. "I thought how lovely it would be on your wedding day. Though it sounds as if I brought it to you too late, Mrs. Liddell. I always did find you when you were too Liddell."

"There is no Mister Liddell," said Alice. "It's my professional name. I-" she felt terribly forward disclosing the fact, but he needed to know. "I never married."

The Hatter leapt into the air and did a little twirl. "Then I'm not too late! I feared my watch was years too slow, but it kept on ticking! That settles it then. You will come home with me and become queen."

Alice was too startled for words by this declaration. After a moment's silence, she spoke. "But what about the white queen?"

"Oh, she and the red queen have been taking turns defeating one another's armies since you left. The red queen produced a prophecy and chased the white queen off with a Snark, and then the white queen produced another prophecy and chased her off with a Boojum. They're so evenly matched that it's never going to end, and it's ripping the land apart. What we need is a third queen to stitch things back up and keep them from turning us all into conscripts. You did it before."

"I'm afraid it's out of the question," said Alice. "My place is here."

"Wasp in a Wig!" exclaimed the Hatter. "You promised to come back!"

"I promised to return to you," corrected Alice gently. "I made no promise to become queen."

"You'll see," said the Hatter, fixing her with his unnerving green stare. "It's very bad. And you did promise."

She looked at him kindly. "But I have already returned to you by letting you in. Our being together fulfills the letter of my promise."

"It does not," said the hatter petulantly.

"Besides, your world has always been at war. That is its purpose. Peace is antithetical to its very being, which is why the red and white sides are so well matched. It is by design, not by chance."

"How can you say that?" exclaimed the hatter. "It is very chancy for those of us who live there!"

"My being there will make things no less chancy," argued Alice. "What's to stop both queens from joining forces to oppose me?"

He stared at her incredulously for a moment. "My dear Alice, the world you live in is a very big, smelly, and complex place. So complex, in fact, that I fear you have forgotten us. You defeated that horrible monster because you used your brain in strange and wonderful ways. You showed those of us who were watching how to strategise and how to think. The queens quickly returned to their animosity and predictable lines of battle because that is what they were made for. But you, my dear, were built to stretch yourself and the world you live in."

"And you?" asked Alice.
"I was built for you," he said simply. "When you grew taller, I grew shorter. When you grew shorter, I grew taller. When you were frightened, I was brave for you, and when you were brave, I was frightened for you."

Alice was beginning to understand. "When I was a child-"

"I was a friendly, harmless old hatter," he said, curling up his long fingers for emphasis and taking her hand.

"And when I was a youth?"

"I had the experience and knowledge you needed," he said, removing his hat to reveal a head of hair that had darkened from carrot to auburn. It was strangely beautiful.

She looked up into his pale, heart-shaped face and laid her hand on his cheek. "But now that I am a grown woman?"

"I am a grown man."

She slid her arms beneath the rough fabric of his overcoat and felt the smooth silk she had expected to find. "And if I become queen?"

"Then I will be your king." He looked down at her, and a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "You were never destined to be a pawn here, Alice," he whispered. "You were meant to be as you are now for always and always."

"As were you," she finished, leaning against him.

"If you wish it," he whispered, his lips brushing her forehead, warm and unexpected.

"I don't know what I wish," she breathed, meeting his gaze. She was full of expectations that she didn't know how to voice.

"You don't?" asked the hatter, surprised. "I thought you knew everything. Or nothing, which is the same."

"Everything and nothing are not the same," pointed out Alice. "They are opposites."

"You and I are the same," returned the hatter, "yet we are opposites."

"Does that mean you want the same things I want?" asked Alice boldly, "Or the opposite?"

"Oh, yes," said the hatter, pressing his lips gently against her wrist. "Yes, definitely."

Alice felt joy bubble up within her such as she hadn't felt in over a decade, and she gave a merry peal of laughter. The hatter was laughing as well, and suddenly lowered his face to hers and pressed a warm kiss to her lips. She knew she ought to object or at least act surprised, but couldn't bring herself to do so. In fact, when he withdrew from the kiss, she seized his silk necktie and pulled him back to her, allowing her lips to part and inviting him to explore. He tasted of anise and tea leaves. She could feel his grin against her mouth, and they both began to laugh once more.

He embraced her tightly, and she sighed against his chest. "What an awful lot of nonsense you talk," she admonished fondly.

"I do," he said, resting his chin atop her head. "How it used to vex you!"
"Only because I thought that my world was proper and yours was the absurd one," she said. "Now I know that your world is built on rules, arbitrary though they may be, but mine is completely mad."

"You make madness sound so unpleasant," he said, toying with a lock of hair that had loosed itself from her plait. "I assure you, it can be a great deal of fun."

"Stay with me," Alice said suddenly. "Stay here with me. We shall make beautiful hats, play with the birds, and shock people."

"Should we be married in a church?" asked the hatter.

Alice blinked in surprise. "Are you asking me?"

"I myself should much rather be married in a hat, but I know that some ladies insist on a church."

"I should never insist on a church. I am not in the least respectable," she said, doubting that he would care but wishing to be as forthright as possible.

"Poppycock, I find you as respectable as I do lovable."

Alice looked at him seriously. "But would you be sorry to leave your home forever?"

"Forever?" asked the hatter. "Who said anything about forever?"

Alice looked at him curiously "But how did you intend to return?"

"Through the looking-glass, of course," he said, holding up his pocketwatch, which he opened with the press of a button. The inside cover had been covered with a shining bit of silvered glass. In it, she could just make out the shadowy shape of the hatter's garden. He gave her a shy smile. "It's two-way glass."

Alice couldn't stop tears of happiness from welling in her eyes. "You clever, darling man," she said, embracing him tightly.

He wrapped his arms around her. "Does this mean you'll come with me?"

"Only if it means you'll return here with me as well. The birds will need to be fed on Tallulah's night off."

"Of course," said the hatter. "And you will consider becoming queen, won't you? You'd be awfully good at it. And I would make you a simply splendid crown."

"I should rather have the hat you made me," she said.

The Hatter looked both pleased and displeased. "It's no sort of proper headwear for a queen."

Alice wrapped her arms tightly about him. "I've had just about enough of what's proper," she said fiercely.

She felt him giggle before she heard it. "So you have," he said, smiling. "And so have I."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The End

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Enormous thanks to Mr. 42 for his fantastic beta-reading and to Nom de Plume for SUCH a prompt! On a historical note, Liddell is the surname of Carroll's child friend, who was the Alice of the books.

The pithy title comes from Thomas Percy:

And how should I know your true love/ From many another one?
Oh, by his cockle hat and staff./And by his sandal shoone.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!