Following Down into Wonderland

by Merfilly

Summary

Alice finds Wonderland, but perhaps this was a trip she could not have missed.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Church was a most somber affair this day for Alice. All of the people she knew were dressed in gray or black, with the women veiled and the men doing that curious thing where they pretended they had no tears to shed. Alice honestly did not know what the matter was, and with her sister failing to keep a close eye on her, it was so easy to slip away down by the creek. She truly wished to remove her shoes, for the water looked oh so enticing to her, but she did not wish to be naughty enough to remove her stockings and they would get all wet.

As she was pondering other things that might make the somber morning less of a tragedy in her own eyes, she glanced about and beheld a most curious creature. Perhaps it was a rabbit, for there were two bits sticking up from its head, and the legs were crooked like an animals. Yet Alice had never heard of nor seen a creature with no fur, just reddish skin, and such a long tail behind it.

"Come along now, or you will surely be late!" it called to her, or maybe that was what she thought the curious creature said. With a glad heart for a little adventure, Alice left behind the somber church by the creek, speeding along behind the not-rabbit toward a fissure in the bank.

The fissure grew dark and dank, but still Alice persisted, intrigued and wishing to learn what manner of creature had beckoned her so boldly. All of a sudden, just as Alice heard the plaintive meow of a cat behind her, the ground beneath her feet simply vanished, and down down down Alice fell.
"I do hope that wasn't Dinah," she said after her first squeal of surprise, for the falling did not hurt, nor was she truly scared.

When she alighted upon solid ground again, Alice found herself in a spectacle of reds, golds, and rusts bespeckling craggy walls all around her. There was only one way to go, toward a door by which a new creature awaited Alice's need to know more. She could see a massive bull's head, complete with long, wickedly curving horns whose tips were gilt and shining the odd light. That head, though, rested upon a massive barrel of a man's chest... a wickedly bare chest at that, above legs that had little more than a napkin covering that which set men apart from women!

"Excuse me, sir?" she called with her eyes fixed on the bull's head. "Did you see a most unusual creature of red skin go by?"

The large bovine eyes appraised her but no words came from his mouth. Of course, Alice knew that cattle were not in the habit of speaking, but surely he could answer her somehow! Boldly she walked forward, intending to go to the door, but as she got near to being in reach of the bull-man, he lunged, and she leaped back with another squeak.

"Please, sir, I only wish to go beyond the door to see if the little red thing went there!"

He snorted violently in her direction, beginning to pace between her and the door.

"Perhaps if I were to do something for you, sir, you might let me pass?" she called to him, trying to keep her courage around her like a cloak. He stood still then, covering that massive naked chest with crossed arms, watching her. Her mouth went dry, and she wondered just what she could give him. Mayhaps a song would settle his temper? Trembling, she opened her mouth and began to sing of the stars in the sky, twinkling high above, and wishes that could be made. To her surprise, the bull-man sat down upon the ground, his head beginning to loll as he listened. She kept singing, inching forward bit by bit, until she was past him and able to at last turn the knob to the door beyond. With a quick twist of the knob, she threw herself through the opening, while the bull-man dozed behind her.

The queer lighting persisted even here, yet Alice found herself upon a path, and up at the very end of it, she saw the red-skinned, long-tailed not-rabbit she had chased into the fissure.

"Still running late, I see! Do hurry, or it will end badly!" he called before vanishing over the rise in the path through a garden.

In a hurry, Alice picked up her pace along the path, reaching the edge of the garden swiftly. She tried to keep that quick trot, mindful of the decorum her sister would be scolding her for breaking, but no sooner had she entered the garden than she knew the bull-man was not the only threat to her progress. The flowers snapped and hissed, heads shaped like cats, wolves, and lions. The long blades of grass slashed at her, leaving weals and tiny cuts that were dark red with blood. In trying to avoid a wolf's mouth lunging toward her ankle, she backed up to the other side of the path, and a lion lapped at the blood it found on her calf.

"Oh, this is most unwise!" she exclaimed, and ran, heedless of the cuts and the unholy raucous noise of the animal-plants. "Who knew wolf's bane and dandelions could be so literal, or that pussy willow could be so loud and rude!" she cried, running as the stinging pain drove her along right over the rise and down again. Ahead of her, there was a clearing, broad and empty it seemed at this distance. She ran as hard as she could, not even thinking of her sister's scolding now.

Alice looked down at her feet and the tears in her stockings and the blood along her legs, bringing fresh tears to her eyes. When she looked up, the clearing she had striven to reach had been
transformed into a parlor, all white and black. The reddish lights were gone within, and only a dim blue glow lit the whole of the black and white checkerboarded room with its ornate table and chairs.

"Do sit down, Alice," said a voice that was not unkindly, yet nor was it known to her. She startled, looking about, to see a man in a peculiar top hat, its band broad and sporting the sizing ticket yet. Beneath the hat's brim she saw spectacles that were not round but rectangular in appearance, curiously darkened in. With a breathless awareness that she was most unfit for a tea party, Dinah knew that she had to give what courtesy she could. She bobbed into a curtsy, dropping her eyes briefly.

"You have the advantage, kind sir, for you have called me by name and yet I do not know yours," she said bravely.

"You may call me Tom," he introduced, smiling at her. She thought when she glanced up that his teeth glinted with points, but perhaps that was merely the lighting of this parlor. "Do sit, have some tea, perhaps a bite to eat?"

Appalled at finding herself in a party without a proper party gown and knowing she looked a fright, Alice began to demure, but then a creature that looked like a shaggy man with a rat's face and one that looked more like a rabbit than the red-skinned creature yet standing like a man were there, pulling out a chair and indicating she should sit. Upon the table a service of the finest ivory awaited, though the cups and plates both had a sheen not like that of her mother's serving set. Alice could not refuse without being ruder than she had already been, so she climbed into the seat. The rat-man served her a small cup of tea, while the rabbit one scooped out something that looked to be red seeds matching the hard fruit she could see in the center of the table.

"Mister Tom, what, sir, are these?"

"Merely a local tradition, my dear Alice. You shall find them to be most tasty, and to have magical properties, I should think." He sat with his hands folded primly in front of him, and Alice did not wish to offend him, even if he had not doffed his hat in the presence of a lady.

She took one of the seeds and set it in her mouth. It did taste quite good, and without thinking of it, she swallowed it right down. More followed, and she reached for her tea to wash them all down, wondering all the while why Tom's smile grew larger and sharper with each passing moment. Scarce had she drunk the tea down, though, then a loud roar sounded through the parlor, and her host with his odd guests simply vanished.

The roar sounded again, quite fierce in its timbre, as the white and black walls melted away to reveal a coastline overlooking a fiery red sea. The waves leapt up, tipped in shining gold, and hissed in a cacophony of dissent. Alice tried to back away, only to find herself bumping into something behind her. She whirled, and there facing her was a wonder such as was only seen in the storybooks of distant lands. The body was leonine, with small wings upon the back, while the front of the creature had a bosom not unlike that which Alice might someday have. Above this, a wise face of a woman, though the teeth were quite sharp, peered down at Alice. This had not issued the roar, though, for that sound came again, somewhat closer now.

"Excuse me, madam, but I fear I am in mortal peril," Alice told the creature, though she was unsure what good it might do.

"Nonsense, for that coil is shuffled, and now you must decide. Face that which roars from the west, and be gone forever, or answer a riddle and take up the role you have cast yourself into by showing your wits."
"I am but a girl, and I do not understand," Alice complained, growing more fearful as the roar sounded once more.

"Girl no longer, for your tenure here has changed you. See?"

On the word from the winged cat-woman, an oval mirror showed to Alice a maiden, full grown, and garbed in a splendid gown of satin and lace in dark hues.

"This is me?" Alice asked, raising a hand to her mouth and seeing that the maiden did as well.

"It may be, or there may be naught but an illusion of life there in the silver sheen," the being told her. "Now, do you wish the riddle, or will you face the dreaded destroyer that even now is charging toward this fiery sea?"

"The riddle, madam, if you please," Alice said quickly, as a new roar made her bold and hope her wits were clever.

When my first is a task to a young girl of spirit,  
And my second confines her to finish the piece,  
How hard is her fate! But how great is her merit  
If by taking my whole she effects her release!

The words were not said so much as they appeared above the curious winged cat-woman. Alice read them through, thinking that perhaps they were familiar. Perhaps her sister had read something like it aloud once, from her books with no pictures?

The roar was almost upon her, and Alice struggled to find the right memory within her. She caught the tail of the time spent listening to her sister and gasped as it come to her. "Hem-Lock! It is Hem-Lock, yes?"

The being gave a smile and it was sharp, but approving. The roar faded away, and Alice's benefactress said, "You have passed the final test, and long may you reign, Queen of Hearts, for your passion and curiosity alike." The darkly hued satins and lace took on a blood-red color, as Alice found herself in a court, awaiting the time when her subjects would bring to her new courtesans. She knew, from the moment she sat upon her dark throne, that this would give her many tales for future days. At her side, the imp that was not a rabbit awaited her bidding.

Lorina came to in her bed at last. "Alice?"

The good reverend at her side reached out, placing a damp towel over her forehead. "It seems she doesn't remember the fever took the girl," he said sadly.

Lorina wanted to tell him that she had seen Alice in awful danger, but the fever gripped her tighter, and into sleep she fell once more.

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End Notes

Additional sources: Greek Mythology, Tom Petty's "Don't Come Around Here No More", Jane Austen, "Godfrey and the Werewolf" by Halina Gorska
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