Catherine's Adventures in Wonderland

by triskelian

Summary

Catherine Tilney goes down the rabbit-hole.

Notes

Thanks to White_hart, Valderys and Secretrebel for support and suggestions, and to Secretrebel for the first line of Catherine's defence.

Catherine Tilney was playing the part of a romantic heroine: a young wife, left alone for the first time as a married woman in her own home, while her husband went out into the world to perform some essential task that could not be entrusted to another. She moved listlessly from room to room, picking up a book or some sewing, and then putting it down again without having made any progress in story or mending. She sighed often, although with no-body but the cat to hear her, the effect was not quite as she would have liked.

As the hour grew later and Henry did not appear, the heroine became more and more tormented with worry for what had befallen her hero. So many hazards could be imagined on the road, on a winter night which surely would turn stormy any moment!
Flinging herself into an easy-chair, Catherine stared into the fire, imagining her beloved husband attacked by wolves, or kidnapped by brigands, or enchanted away by some terrible magic.

"How hard it is to be married!" she said to herself. "I would almost prefer to be single and to have no husband to wait for!" Of course, she did not mean this, and immediately consoled herself for the disloyal thought by a mental enumeration of the qualities she loved in Henry, and thus lulled herself into an uneasy sleep, populated by dreams in which a far more heroic Henry than existed in the day-to-day world underwent numerous trials during his journey home.

She was woken suddenly by the disturbance of the cat jumping from her lap. The fire had burnt down and the cat was sniffing around it, and when Catherine moved to shoo the cat away, she saw on the other side of the fire an open doorway. The cat looked up at her, and then leapt gracefully over the remains of the fire, through the doorway, and out of sight.

Catherine looked around in astonishment, but as there was no-one with whom she could share this strange occurrence, she decided that her best course of action was to follow, in case the cat got itself into some scrape and needed to be rescued. Holding her gown clear, she stepped carefully out of view around each corner as she approached.

On the other side, Catherine found herself in a narrow twisting passage, with the cat's tail just disappearing around a turn ahead of her. She called to the cat, but it continued on, just whisking out of view around each corner as she approached.

They went on in this way for some time, and Catherine was starting to wonder if she should turn back, when instead of a corner ahead, she saw the cat disappearing through another doorway. She hurried to catch it, and found herself suddenly in a large wood-panelled room, full of noise and activity.

The greater number of occupants of the room were not people at all, but mice and birds and lizards and other small creatures. Seated on thrones at the far end of the room were two people wearing crowns: a man in a wig, who rather reminded Catherine of General Tilney, and a woman who looked just like Mrs Thorpe — or at least, just like Mrs Thorpe would look if she was in a furious temper — and in front of them was a white rabbit wearing a tabard and ruff, and holding a trumpet and a parchment scroll.

As our heroine stared, the rabbit raised its trumpet and blew three blasts, at which some of the noise in the room subsided.

"Order! Order!" the rabbit cried, and the various creatures scampered to take their seats in a raised box to one side of the room.

"Read the charges!" bellowed Judge-King-General Tilney, and the rabbit unrolled its length of parchment, and read out a verse:

"'Tis the voice of Mrs Tilney: I heard her complain,
'Being married is hard; I'd be single again.'
So she crept to her husband who lay in his bed,
Brought an axe down upon him and left him there dead!"

Everyone in the court turned to look at Catherine. She tried to shrink back through the door by which she had entered, but was dismayed to find that behind her was only a wood-panelled wall, offering no way to make an escape. She looked around her for the cat, but it was nowhere to be seen.

"Call the first witness!" said the Judge to the white rabbit, and the rabbit blew again upon its
trumpet and cried "First witness!"

An officer of the court (who appeared to be a hamster), brought Catherine's cat into view, and ushered it to the stand, while the Judge peered over to watch.

"Is your master presently at home?" he enquired.

"No," replied the cat.

"Write down that he is not at home," the Judge directed the jurymen, and they bent to scribble on their slates.

"Where, then, is he?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the cat.

The cross examination went on in this way, with the Judge eliciting the information that Mr Tilney had last been seen by the cat early on the previous evening, before the cat went out for its nightly patrol. The cat was unable to speculate as to its master's whereabouts.

Catherine watched the proceedings in rather a state of shock, and was trying to recall precisely what had been the nature of the business that had taken Henry away, when the trumpet blasted again.

"Call the accused!" the rabbit cried, and Catherine found herself led to the stand by an odd little playing-card-guard. Close to, the resemblance of the Judge to General Tilney was even more remarkable, and Catherine found herself quaking with fear. The real thing, she discovered, was much less pleasant than the thrill experienced by a reader of Mrs Radcliffe's novels.

"Where is your husband?" the Judge demanded.

For a terrifying moment, Catherine was unable to speak, with the eyes that were so very like those of her father-in-law boring into her, and when she found her voice it was high and thin:

"He has gone to town on business."

"A likely story!" snorted the red-faced Queen-Mrs Thorpe. "She's murdered him! Off with her head!"

"Now, my dear, let us conclude the trial before declaring sentence," Judge Tilney said to the Queen.

He turned to Catherine, and shouted: "Have you any written proof of this?"

"No!" she whispered, and held out her arms to show that she was without any possessions save her shawl and her cap.

"What is the evidence against the accused?" the king asked the rabbit, who took out again its roll of parchment, and read again the terrible words:

"'Tis the voice of Mrs Tilney: I heard her complain,
'Being married is hard; I'd be single again.'
So she crept to her husband who lay in his bed,
Brought an axe down upon him and left him there dead!"

The jurymen all turned once more to stare at Catherine.
"And it is written?" the Judge asked.

The rabbit held up the scroll (it had to tuck the trumpet under its arm to do so), and showed it to the assembled company.

"Write down that it is written," the Judge instructed the jury, and they obediently attended to their slates.

The herald's trumpet sounded again, and the rabbit cried "The defence!"

The king and queen looked expectantly to Catherine, who swallowed down her fear and spoke:

"I am young, Father Justice," the suspect said,
"And inclined towards fancies in flight;
But I do not believe that my husband is dead—
I expect his return home to-night!"

"That's no kind of evidence!" screamed the Queen.

"I'm afraid not," the rabbit agreed apologetically. "Your expectations are inadmissible as evidence."

"Well then, that settles it!" shouted the Queen. "Off with her head!"

The jurymen, and General Tilney, and Mrs Thorpe, and the white rabbit, and the strange little playing-card-guards all got up at once from their seats, and started to rush towards Catherine, but just as they were about to reach her, the cat leapt straight over their heads, landed heavily on Catherine, and she was suddenly falling backwards into darkness, with the world spinning and her ears ringing.

She awoke with a start to the ringing of the bell, and having satisfied herself that she was once again in her own dear home, she ran to the door, in dread of what she would find on the other side. So it was with great relief that she encountered her bedraggled husband, dripping wet and tired but smiling to see her.

"Henry!" she exclaimed, "I have had the most curious dream!"

"Then you must tell me all about it," he said, and — still in his wet things — he reached to embrace her.

Over his shoulder, Catherine saw the cat pause as it ascended the stairs. It turned to face her, and solemnly closed one eye, before twitching its tail and turning to leap up the stairs and out of her sight, leaving behind only the after-image of a grin.

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