

The White Knight's Tale

Now, the first thing I must tell you, in fact the most important thing, is how a knight moves. It really is very straightforward. It's one step to the right then two steps forward, ...or one step back and two left, ...or two back and one forward, no, that's not right...

Anyway the point is that if you fall off it's a simple matter of just getting back on. Nobody minds. I've had years of practice. Yes, most straightforward... You must pardon me if I'm rather distracted. The game that's just finished was very exciting and quite unusual in one significant aspect.

I trust you are familiar with the rudiments of what we call 'the game'. You have a similar arrangement too, I believe, which you appear to call Life. The resemblances are remarkable what with pieces having the freedom to move and conflict being at the very heart of it. But you seem to have some difficulty in clearing the board and starting again. Why, I can't imagine, but there you are. No matter.

We, like you, have a variety of roles and there are rules which regulate how we behave. Roles and rules. Yes, indeed. A queen, for example, can move anywhere, wherever she likes, bustling, interfering, exerting an *influence*. A king, however, moves slowly, if at all. Pottering away, working on his own projects, and yet he bears the whole responsibility of the game. We must defend him to the last man - or woman - and if we fail, its game, set and mate. Disaster! Until the next time, of course.

My colleagues in this endeavour are a drab lot with largely uninteresting moves. You know the sort of thing straight up, straight down, diagonal. I'd like to see how they'd cope with two up, one across or whatever it is.

The ones I hold in the highest regard, the ones I cherish, are the blessed pawns. Uncomplicated, pure, unaffected. They barely comprehend the moves taking place around them, but with simplicity of purpose they know they must move forward. And they can capture, oh yes, they can capture...

Where was I? That game, the one that was so interesting. It had reached a well-advanced stage and although there were just a few of us left we were slowly encircling the red king who typically seemed to have fallen asleep. And I'll tell you a strange thing about his dreams - if it should turn out that we here, all of us, you, everyone you know, actually only existed in his fevered imagination, would we want him to wake up? Existentially a bit uncomfortable, don't you think?

Back to the game. Only one of our dear white pawns was left, still in her starting position, but with only a few pieces left she might yet have a big influence on proceedings. Then amazingly the Red Queen arrived beside her. Really their queenly majesties are so majestic they'll even tell the other side what to do. But the one she started talking to was not at all who I had expected...

RQ: Where do you come from? And where are you going? Look up, speak nicely and don't twiddle your fingers all the time.

Alice: I've lost my way.

RQ: I don't know what you mean by *your* way, all the ways about here belong to me - but why did you come out here at all? Curtsey while you're thinking, it

The White Knight's Tale

saves time. (Pauses, looking at watch).

It's time for you to answer now, open your mouth a little wider when you speak, and always say "your Majesty".

Alice: I only wanted to see what the garden was like, your Majesty –

RQ: That's right, though when you say 'garden' – I've seen gardens, compared to which this would be a wilderness.

Alice: - and I thought I'd try and find my way to the top of that hill –

RQ: When you say 'hill', I could show you hills, in comparison to which you'd call that a valley.

Alice: No I shouldn't, a hill can't be a valley you know. That would be nonsense –

RQ: You may call it nonsense if you like, but *I've* heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!

At which point silence fell. The young girl then noticed the layout of this land of ours, the hedges and brooks dividing it into what the pedantic call "squares".

Alice: I declare, it's marked out just like a giant chessboard! And there should be chessmen on some of the squares. And so there are! It's a great huge game of chess that's being played – all over the world! Oh, what fun it is! How I wish I was one of them! I wouldn't mind being a pawn though of course I should like to be a Queen, best.

RQ: That's easily managed. You can be the White Queen's pawn, if you like. Lily's too young to play.

I was astounded at this. The Red Queen had invited a stranger to play in the game. Mind you I have said on many a previous occasion that Lily was too young for the game and am I listened to...? Now that a *queen* has suggested it, well there you are... The newcomer – Alice as we grew to know her as – of course wasn't really sure what to do next. You can rest assured that the Red Queen had plenty of advice.

RQ: I am placing some pegs in the ground. Listen carefully. At the end of two yards I shall give you some directions. At the end of three yards I shall repeat them – for fear of your forgetting them. At the end of four, I shall say goodbye. And at the end of five, I shall go.

Two yards. A pawn goes two squares in its first move, you know. So you'll go *very* quickly through the third square – by railway, I should think – and you'll find yourself in the fourth square in no time. Well, *that* square belongs to Tweedledum and Tweedledee – the fifth square is mostly water, – the sixth belongs to Humpty Dumpty – But you make no remark?

Alice: I – I didn't know I had to make one just then.

RQ: You *should* have said 'It's extremely kind of you to tell me all this'. However we'll suppose it said. The seventh square is all forest. I expect that one of the knights will show you the way there. And in the eighth square we shall all be queens together and it's all feasting and fun!

Three yards. Speak in French when you can't think of the English for a thing. Turn out your toes as you walk. And remember who you are!

The White Knight's Tale

Four yards. Good-bye!

Five –

Alice: Your majesty...? Well, I do believe she's gone. Did she vanish or just run off quickly? Anyway what matters is that I am now officially a pawn. (Pause).
Now how exactly do I move?

Well that was all quite extraordinary! The new pawn – Alice – obviously didn't know the game very well, if at all, so she needed protection as she moved on. The Red Queen in that very melodramatic way of hers moved to the side of the board and still required careful watching.

Alice got off to a very good start by moving two squares – by train. Here, at least, they can be relied upon. So, safely on to the fourth square. I hope she remembers it all – the journey passes so very quickly.

There is something I must tell you about the game. It would be much simpler if the inhabitants of this land, board, call it what you like, were just we players. We would deal with each other in accordance with the rules and act honourably as gentlemen, women – and girls. However it is my duty to tell you that we share this realm with those I shall refer to as 'characters'. They occupy some of our squares and, while you may find them enchanting, to us players they are, well, awkward.

I tell you this because Alice was next to encounter the Tweedles – messrs Dum and Dee. They were standing under a tree, each with an arm round the other's neck. Alice knew which was which because one had 'Dum' embroidered on his collar and the other 'Dee'.

Alice: I suppose they've both got 'Tweedle' round the back of the collar. If I could just see round the back –

Dum: If you think we're waxworks you ought to pay, you know. Waxworks weren't made to be looked at for nothing you know. Nohow!

Dee: On the other hand if you think we're alive, you ought to speak.

Alice: I'm sure I'm very sorry. I was a little distracted. There are some words that I can't get out of my head:

*Tweedledum and Tweedledee
Agreed to have a battle
For Tweedledum said Tweedledee
Had spoiled his nice new rattle*

*Just then flew down a monstrous crow
As black as a tar barrel
Which frightened both the heroes so
They soon forgot their quarrel*

Dum: I know what you're thinking about, but it isn't so, nohow.

The White Knight's Tale

Dee: On the other hand, if it was so, it might be; and if it were so; it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic.

Alice: I was thinking which is the best way out of this wood. It's getting so dark. Would you tell me, please? (Pause) Are you going to say something or just stand there grinning?

Dee: Do you like poetry?

Alice: Ye-es, pretty well – some poetry. Would you tell me which road leads out of the woods?

Dee: What shall I recite to her?

Dum: *The Walrus and the Carpenter* is longest, brother of mine.

Dee: *The sun was shining –*

Alice: If it's very long, would you please tell me first which road –

Dee:

*The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright –
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.*

*The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done –
'It's very rude of him,' she said
'To come and spoil the fun!'*

*The sea was wet as wet can be,
The sands were dry and dry.
You could not see a cloud, because
No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead –
There were no birds to fly.*

*The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand.
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
'If only this were cleared away,'
They said, 'It would be grand!'*

*'O Oysters, come and walk with us!'
The Walrus did beseech.
'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each.'*

*The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:*

The White Knight's Tale

*The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head –
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.*

*But four young Oysters hurried up
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed
Their shoes were clean and neat –
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.*

*Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more –
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.*

*The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And there they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row:*

*'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax –
Of cabbages – and kings –
And why the sea is boiling hot –
And whether pigs have wings.'*

*'But wait a bit,' the Oysters cried,
'Before we have our chat;
For some of us are out of breath,
And all of us are fat!'
'No hurry!' said the Carpenter.
They thanked him much for that.
'A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said,
'Is what we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed –
Now, if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed.'*

*'But not on us!' the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
'After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!'*

The White Knight's Tale

*'The night is fine,' the Walrus said.
'Do you admire the view?'*

*'It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!'
The Carpenter said nothing but
'Cut us another slice.
I wish you were not quite so deaf –
I've had to ask you twice!'*

*'It was a shame,' the Walrus said,
'To play them such a trick.
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!'
The Carpenter said nothing but
'The butter's spread too thick!'*

*'I weep for you,' the Walrus said:
I deeply sympathize.'
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size ,
Holding his pocket handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.*

*'O Oysters,' said the Carpenter,
'You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?'
But answer came there none –
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one.*

Alice: I like the Walrus best because he was a *little* sorry for the poor oysters.

Dee: He ate more than the Carpenter, though. You see he held his handkerchief in front, so the Carpenter couldn't count many he took.

Alice: That was mean! Then I like the Carpenter best – if he didn't eat as many as the Walrus.

Dum: But he ate as many as he could get.

Alice: Well, they were both very unpleasant characters. At any rate I'd better be getting out of this wood, for really it's becoming very dark. Do you think it's going to rain?

Alice was wrong about the rain as we will see. We Tweedle watchers know what would inevitably happen, starting about now –

Dum: Do you see *that*?

Alice: It's only a rattle. An old rattle – quite old and broken.

Dum: Well, now it is! It's spoilt, of course!

Alice: You needn't be so angry about an old rattle.

Dum: But it isn't old! It's new, I tell you – I bought it yesterday – my nice new RATTLE! Of course you agree to have a battle.

The White Knight's Tale

Dee: I suppose so, only *she* must help us to dress up, you know.

And so it was that in the middle of a game one of our most important pieces was strategically engaged in the business of dressing these two for battle. Out came all the armour: blankets, hearth rugs, pillows, table cloths, dish-clothes, coal scuttles.

Dum: I hope you're a good hand at pinning and tying strings. Every one of these things has got to go on, somehow or other.

Alice: I'm doing my best you know. (To herself) Really they'll be more like bundles of clothes than anything else! (To Dee) What's this bolster for?

Dee: It will keep my head from being cut off. You know, it's one of the most serious things that can possibly happen to one in a battle – to get one's head cut off.

Dum: Do I look very pale?

Alice: Well – yes – a *little*.

Dum: I'm very brave, generally, only today I happen to have a headache.

Dee: And I've got a toothache. I'm far worse than you!

Alice: Then you'd better not fight today.

Dum: We *must* have a bit of a fight but I don't care about going on long. What's the time now?

Dee: Half past four.

Dum: Let's fight till six, and then have dinner. And she can watch us!

Alice: And this is all because of a rattle?

Dee: I shouldn't have minded, if it hadn't been a new one. There's only one sword you know, but you can have the umbrella – it's quite as sharp. Only we must begin quick. It's getting as dark as it can.

Dum: And darker!

Alice: What a thick black cloud that is. And how fast it comes! Why, I do declare it's got wings.

Dum: It's the crow!

Dee: We're off!

So our friends disappeared and the little girl was left in the dark, still with no idea of where the next square was. But all that flapping created quite a breeze...

Alice: Here's somebody's shawl being blown away!

You may remember that the point of this game is to trap the king, which we were no closer to doing. Fortunately *our* queen stabilised sufficiently to move alongside Alice and offer some help. Let's hope she concentrates.

WQ: Ooooooooooh!

Alice: Here, let me help you with you shawl. I'm very glad I happened to be in the way.

WQ: Bread and butter, bread and butter, bread and –

Alice: Am I addressing the White Queen?

WQ: Well, yes, if you call that a-dressing. It's not my notion of the thing at all.

Alice: If your majesty told me the right way to begin, I'll do it as well as I can.

WQ: But I don't want it done at all. I've been a-dressing myself for the last two hours.

The White Knight's Tale

- Alice: (To herself). Then why is she so dreadfully untidy? (To WQ) May I put your shawl straight for you?
- WQ: I don't know what's the matter with it, It's out of temper, I think. I've pinned it here, I've pinned it there, but there's no pleasing it.
- Alice: And dear me, what a state your hair's in.
- WQ: The brush has got entangled in it. And I lost the comb in there yesterday.
- Alice: Well, you look better now. But you should really have a maid!
- WQ: I'll take you with pleasure. Tuppence a week and jam every other day.
- Alice: I don't want you to hire me – and I don't care for jam.
- WQ: It's very good jam.
- Alice: Well, I don't want any today, at any rate.
- WQ: You couldn't have it if you wanted it. The rule is: jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam today.
- Alice: It must come sometimes to 'jam today'.
- WQ: No, it can't. It's jam every other day. Today isn't any other day, you know.
- Alice: It's all so dreadfully confusing.
- WQ: That's the effect of living backwards, it always makes one a little giddy at first–
- Alice: Living backwards! I've never heard of such a thing!
- WQ: – but there's one great advantage in it, that one's memory works both ways.
- Alice: I'm sure mine only works one way. I can't remember things before they happen.
- WQ: It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.
- Alice: What sort of things do *you* remember best?
- WQ: Oh, things that happened the week after next. Now let me just put this plaster on my finger. Take the King's messenger. He's in prison now being punished and the trial doesn't begin till next Wednesday, and of course the crime comes last of all.
- Alice: Suppose he never commits the crime?
- WQ: That would be all the better, wouldn't it? There, that's fixed that (the plaster).
- Alice: There's a mistake somewhere –
- WQ: My finger's bleeding! Oh, oh, oh, oh!
- Alice: What is the matter? Have you pricked your finger?
- WQ: I haven't pricked it yet, but I soon shall – oh, oh, oh!
- Alice: When do you expect to do it?
- WQ: When I fasten my shawl again, the brooch will come undone directly. Oh, oh. There you are!
- Alice: Take care! You're holding it all crooked! And now... you've pricked your finger!
- WQ: Yes, and that accounts for all the bleeding, you see.
- Alice: But why don't you scream *now*?
- WQ: Oh, I've done all that. What's the point in having it all over again?

You now see the kind of help that our Queen provides. So did Alice.

- Alice: It is so very lonely here. (She cries).
- WQ: Oh, don't go on like that. Consider what a nice girl you are. Consider what a long way you've come. Consider what o'clock it is. Consider anything, but don't cry! Let's consider your age to begin with – how old are you?
- Alice: I'm seven and a half.

The White Knight's Tale

WQ: Yes, yes, I can believe that. Now, something for you to believe. I'm one hundred and one, five months and a day.
Alice: I can't believe that!
WQ: Can't you?. Try again. Draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.
Alice: There's no use trying, you can't believe impossible things.
WQ: I dare say you haven't had much practice. When I was your age I always did it for half an hour. Why, sometimes I would believe six impossible things before breakfast. There goes that shawl again!

Her majesty then at last showed Alice the way to the next square.

To summarise the current position. We were in a far superior position to red. Our men, tired but clear minded knew the end is in sight. However the final manoeuvres crucially involved the progress of the last pawn (who we know quite well now as 'Alice') and she has just followed the White Queen to the fifth rank.

Unfortunately at this point the queen to use an expression current in your realm 'lost it'. I mean, it's one thing to absent-mindedly lose your shawl, another entirely to whimsically change your species.

Suffice to say that via becoming a sheep, a visit to a shop, a spot of rowing on the river (which actually has a lot be said for it for entertaining young pawns) she delivered Alice to the sixth rank, where, I am slightly fearful to relate, she must meet another of our unnecessary characters. As if the king's men haven't anything better to do...

Alice: Surely, up on that wall, it must be... Humpty Dumpty! How does he balance on that narrow perch? He's not moving at all and taking the least notice of me. Perhaps he's stuffed. And how exactly like an egg he is!

Hump: It's *very* provoking to be called an egg – *very*!

Alice: I said you *looked* like an egg, sir. And some eggs are very pretty, you know.

Hump: Some people have no more sense than a baby!

Alice: Yes, I see. (Pause). 'All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty –'

Hump: Don't stand chattering to yourself like that, but tell me your name and business.

Alice: My *name* is Alice, but –

Hump: Well, that's a stupid name. What does it mean?

Alice: *Must* a name mean something?

Hump: Of course it must. *My* name means the shape I am – and a good handsome shape it is too. With a name like yours you might be any name.

Alice: Why do you sit out here all alone?

Hump: Why, because there's nobody with me! Did you think I didn't know the answer to *that*? Ask another.

Alice: Don't you think you'll be safer on the ground? That wall is so *very* narrow!

Hump: What tremendously easy riddles you ask! Of course I don't think so! Why, if ever I *did* fall off – which there's no chance of – but *if* I did – *if* I *did* fall, *the King has promised me* – ah, you may turn pale, if you like! You didn't think I was going to say that, did you? *The King has promised me* – *with his very own mouth* – to – to –

The White Knight's Tale

Alice: To send all horses and all his men.
Hump: Now, I declare, that's too bad!
Alice: It's in a book.
Hump: Ah, they may well write such things in a book. I've spoken to a king, you know. Yes, all his horses and all his men. Pick me up in a moment, they would. However this conversation is going a little too fast: let's go back to the last remark but one.
Alice: I'm afraid I can't remember it.
Hump: In that case we start afresh and it's my turn to choose a subject. So here's a question for you. How old did you say you were?
Alice: Seven years and six months.
Hump: Wrong! You never said how old you were!
Alice: I thought you meant 'How old are you?'.
Hump: If I'd meant that, I'd have said it. (A long pause).
Alice: What a beautiful belt you've got! Or a beautiful cravat I should have said – no, a belt, I mean – I beg your pardon!
Hump: It is *most provoking* when a person doesn't know a cravat from a belt.
Alice: I know it's very ignorant of me.
Hump: It's a cravat, child, a cravat. A present from the White King and Queen. An *un-birthday* present.
Alice: I beg your pardon?
Hump: I'm not offended.
Alice: I mean, what's an un-birthday present?
Hump: A present given when it isn't your birthday, of course.
Alice: I like birthday presents best.
Hump: You don't know what you're talking about! How many days are there in a year?
Alice: Three hundred and sixty-five.
Hump: And how many birthdays?
Alice: One.
Hump: So there are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents –
Alice: Certainly.
Hump: And only *one* for birthday presents. There's glory for you.
Alice: I don't know what you mean by 'glory'.
Hump: Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you'.
Alice: But glory doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'.
Hump: When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more or less.
Alice: The question is whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.
Hump: The question is which is to be master, that's all. They've a temper some of them – particularly verbs: they're the proudest. Adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs. However I manage the lot of them! Impenetrability! That's what I say!
Alice: Yes... if you know so much about words, would you tell me, please, what this means?
Hump: Now you talk like a reasonable child.
Alice: Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem 'Jabberwocky'?

The White Knight's Tale

Hump: Let's hear it. I can explain all the poems that were ever invented – and a good many besides.

Alice:

*'Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Hump: That's enough to begin with, there are plenty of hard words there. '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon – the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner.

Alice: That'll do very well. And '*slithy*'?

Hump: Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy'. You see it's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed into one word.

Alice: I see it now. And what are '*toves*'?

Hump: Well, '*toves*' are something like badgers, something like lizards and something like corkscrews.

Alice: They must be very curious looking creatures.

Hump: They are that. They make their nests under sun-dials and... live on cheese.

Alice: And what's to '*gyre*' and '*gymble*'?

Hump: To '*gyre*' is to go round like a gyroscope. To '*gymble*' is to make holes like a gimblet.

Alice: And '*the wabe*' is the grass plot around a sun-dial, I suppose?

Hump: Of course it is. It's called '*wabe*' because it goes a long way before it and a long way behind it –

Alice: And a long way beside it!

Hump: Exactly so. '*Mimsy*' is 'flimsy and miserable' – another portmanteau for you. A '*borogove*' is a thin shabby looking bird with its feathers all sticking out – something like a live mop.

Alice: And then '*mome raths*'?

Hump: Well, a '*rath*' is a sort of green pig, but '*mome*' I'm not sure about. I think it's short for 'from home', meaning they've lost their way, you know.

Alice: And what does '*outgrabe*' mean?

Hump: Well, '*outgribing*' is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of a sneeze in the middle. Where did you find all this hard stuff?

Alice: I read it in a book. Although I have heard some poetry recited to me today –

Hump: As to poetry, you, I can recite poetry as well as other folk, if it comes to that –

Alice: Oh, it needn't come to that –

Hump: In that case, goodbye!

Alice: Oh. Right then. Goodbye, till we meet again.

Hump: I shouldn't know you again if we *did* meet. You're so exactly like other people.

Alice: The face is what one goes by, generally.

Hump: That's just what I complain of. Your face is the same as everybody has, two eyes, so symmetrical, nose in the middle, mouth under. It's always the same. Now if you had the mouth on top, for instance...

Alice: It wouldn't look nice.

Hump: Wait till you tried.

Alice: Goodbye, then. (Pause). Of all the unsatisfactory people I ever met –

The White Knight's Tale

She never finished that sentence because there she was interrupted by a great deafening crash. I think you know what had happened. But our King is a man of his word. All the king's horses and all the king's men were scrambled (so to speak) but what could they do?

Fortunately the king himself – his majesty – was now on the next square. He stirred himself and had a word with her. You never know, he might have remembered that there's a game here to be won.

WK: I've sent them all, you know. Did you see any of my soldiers coming through the wood?

Alice: Yes, I did, several thousand, I should think.

WK: All of the men, yes. And all except two of the horses who were wanted in the game. Nor my two messengers who have gone to town. Just look along the road and tell me if you can see either of them.

Alice: I can see nobody on the road.

WK: I only wish *I* had such eyes. To be able to see Nobody! At this distance too! It's as much as I can do to see real people in this light!

Alice: I see somebody now!

WK: It's one of my messengers. His name is Haigha. The other messenger is called Hatta.

Alice: Haigha and Hatta? That sounds familiar...

WK: I must have two, you know. One to come and one to go.

Alice: I beg your pardon?

WK: Now, now, it isn't respectable to beg.

Alice: I meant: why one to come and one to go?

WK: Didn't I tell you? I must have two. One to fetch and one to carry. You don't seem to understand royalty. Ah welcome messenger! Who did you pass on the road?

Haigha: Nobody.

WK: Quite right. This young lady saw him too. Of course nobody walks slower than you.

Haigha: I do my best. In fact I think nobody walks faster than I do!

WK: Oh no, he can't do that. He'd have been here before you! Now then, tell us what's happened in the town.

Haigha: I'll whisper it. (Shouts) They're at it again!

WK: Call that a whisper?

Alice: Who are at it again?

WK: The Lion and the Unicorn, of course. Fighting for the crown. And the best part of it is that's my crown and I'm not letting go! Let's go and see.

And so our king, who seems to share the same sense of urgency about winning the game as the others we have met, takes Alice off to the town to see the aforementioned legendary creatures.

Alice:

The Lion and the Unicorn were fighting for the crown:

The Lion beat the Unicorn all around the town.

Some gave them white bread, some gave them brown:

Some gave them plum cake and drummed them out of town.

The White Knight's Tale

- WK: The messengers tell me that it's all going very well. Each one of them has been down about eighty-seven times.
- Alice: Will they soon bring on the white and brown bread?
- WK: Good idea. Stop play! Ten minutes allowed for refreshments!
- Alice: When does it all finish?
- WK: I don't think they'll fight any more today. Messenger, go and order the drums to begin!
- Alice: Look, look! In the distance, the White Queen is running across the country! How fast she runs!
- WK: Some of the enemy's after her, no doubt. The wood is full of them.
- Alice: But aren't you going to run and help her?
- WK: No use, no use, she runs so fearfully quick! But I'll write a memo about her if you wish. She's a dear good creature. Now, how many e's in 'creature'? Oh hello, Unicorn.
- Uni: I had the best of it this time, did you think?
- WK: A little, a little. You shouldn't have run him through with your horn, you know.
- Uni: It didn't hurt him. What is this?
- WK: This is, I believe, a child. I found her today. Large as life and twice as natural!
- Uni: I always thought they were fabulous monsters! Is it alive?
- WK: She can talk.
- Uni: Talk, child.
- Alice: But I always thought unicorns were fabulous monsters too! I never saw one alive before.
- Uni: Well now we *have* seen each other, if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?
- Alice: Yes, if you like.
- Uni: Come, fetch out the plum cake, old man. None of your brown bread for me!
- WK: Good idea, break out the plum cake! Welcome, Lion!
- Lion: What's *this*?
- Uni: You'll never guess, Lion. I couldn't.
- Lion: What are you, animal, vegetable or mineral?
- Uni: It's a fabulous monster!
- Lion: Well then, monster, hand round the plum cake!
- Uni: What a fight we've had for that crown, your majesty.
- WK: Yes, well, you can't actually –
- Lion: I should win easily.
- Uni: I'm not so sure of that.
- Lion: Why, I beat you all around the town!
- WK: All round the town? Did you go by the old bridge, or the market place? You get the best view by the old bridge.
- Lion: I don't know, there was too much dust. Why is the monster spending so long cutting the cake?
- Alice: It's very provoking. I've cut several slices already but they always join up again!
- Uni: That's not how cakes work here. Hand it round first and cut it afterwards.
- Alice: So I just walk round with the plate... and it's dividing itself... into three pieces! One piece for you, your majesty, one for the Lion and one for the Unicorn.

The White Knight's Tale

Lion: Now cut it up!

But Alice didn't have to work out how to do that with an empty plate, because then the drums began. The air seemed full of them and they rang through and through her head till she felt quite deafened. They drove her over the nearby little brook onto my square, at last.

Well, it would have been my square just as soon as I could work out exactly how to make the move. One square forward – but before I could do anything the unexpected happened. A *red* knight (completely unlike me, of course – he seems to have trouble mastering the moves), a *red* knight had jumped into the square next to Alice (the very one I was aiming for). He was attacking the king – 'check' indeed, the cheek of it – he was attacking the queen, and worse than that he was in a position to talk to Alice and make a nuisance of himself. Very well then, two steps up and one to the left, and by George it worked. We were face to face.

The red knight was claiming Alice as his prisoner which is not exactly playing by the rules. What could I do but rescue her? The honourable rules of battle were to be followed and soon we were engaged in subtle complex combat. To the uninitiated this may look like bashing each with clubs: if one hits the other falls off, if one misses then he falls off. But we knights are versed in the ancient lore of chivalry and we knew that when we both fell off onto our heads I had won and he beat an honourable retreat.

WKn: It was a glorious victory, wasn't it... Alice?

Alice: I don't know. I don't want to be anybody's prisoner. I want to be a queen.

WKn: And so you shall. I'll see you safe till the end of the wood.

Alice: Thank you very much. May I help you off with your helmet?

WKn: Well... no... I can manage... but...oh, very well.

Alice: I couldn't help but notice, but you have a little wooden box fastened across your shoulder armour.

WKn: Ah yes, my little box. It's my own invention for carrying clothes and sandwiches in. But you see the clever thing is that I carry it upside down so that the rain can't get in

Alice: But things can get *out*. Do you know the lid's open? And you seem to have a beehive fastened to your saddle.

WKn: Yes, it's a very good beehive, but not a single bee has come near it yet. And that other thing there is a mousetrap. I suppose the mice keep the bees out – or the bees keep the mice out, I'm not sure which.

Alice: I was wondering what the mousetrap was for. It isn't very likely there would be any mice on the horse's back.

WKn: Not very likely, perhaps, but if they *do* come, I don't want them running about. You see, you have to be prepared for everything. See those anklets round the horse's feet? To guard against shark-bites. And they are very effective. Now we must be on our way. I hope you've got your hair well fastened.

Alice: Only in the usual way.

WKn: Oh dear, the wind is so very strong here.

Alice: Have you invented a way for preventing hair from being blown off?

WKn: No, but I've know a way for preventing it falling off. Take an upright stick. Make your hair creep up it, as if you were training a plant. Hair falls off

The White Knight's Tale

because it is hanging down, things never fall upwards you know. It's a plan of my invention. You may try it, if you like.

Alice then fell silent for a while as we trotted along in my usual style. It was as if she was observing me.

Alice: I have noticed that when the horse stops (which it does quite often) you fall off the front. When it goes on again (which it does quite suddenly) you fall off behind. Apart from that you keep on pretty well except for when you fall off sideways, usually onto the side that I'm walking. I'm afraid you don't seem to have had much practice at riding.

WKn: What makes you say that? (Falls off) Sorry, if you could just give me hand up and...

Alice: Ouch, that's my hair!

WKn: Oh sorry, there that's it, back up now. Where was I? Now what makes you say I've not had much practice?

Alice: Because people don't fall off so often, when they've had some practice.

WKn: I've had plenty of practice, plenty of practice!

Alice: Really?

WKn: The great art of riding is to keep – oh dear!

Alice: Right on your head this time! I hope no bones are broken?

WKn: None to speak of. The great art of riding, as I was saying, is to keep one's balance. Like this you knooooow – Plenty of practice, plenty of practice!

Alice: It's too ridiculous. You should have a wooden horse on wheels!

WKn: Does that kind go smoothly?

Alice: Much more smoothly.

WKn: I'll get one. One or two – several. (Pause) I'm great hand at inventing things. Now, of course, the cleverest thing I have done was inventing a new pudding during the main course.

Alice: In time to have it cooked for the next course? That was quick work.

WKn: Well, not the next course, not exactly the next course.

Alice: Then I suppose it was the next day. You couldn't have two pudding courses in one dinner anyway.

WKn: Well, not the *next* day, not the next *day*. In fact I don't believe the pudding was ever cooked. It began with blotting paper –

Alice: That wouldn't be very nice!

WKn: Not very nice alone, but you've no idea what a difference it makes, mixing it with other things – such as gunpowder and sealing wax. And now it is the end of the wood and I must leave you.

Alice: Sealing wax? And gun –

WKn: You seem sad. Let me sing you a song to comfort you.

Alice: Is it long?

WKn: It's long, but it's very very beautiful. Everyone who hears me sing it, well either it brings tears to their eyes, or else –

Alice: Or else what?

WKn: It doesn't. The name of the song is called '*Haddock's Eyes*'.

Alice: Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?

WKn: No, you don't understand. That's what the name is *called*. The name actually is '*The Aged Aged Man*'.

Alice: So should I have said, 'That's what the song is called'?

The White Knight's Tale

WKn: No, that's quite another thing. The song is called 'Ways and Means', but that's only what it's called, you know!

Alice: Well, what is the song then?

WKn: I was coming to that. The song is 'A-sitting on a Gate'. The tune is my own invention.

*I'll tell you everything I can:
There's little to relate.
I saw an aged aged man,
A-sitting on a gate.
'Who are you, aged man?', I said
'And tell me how you live'.
His answer trickled through my head,
Like water through a sieve.*

*He said, 'I look for butterflies
That sleep among the wheat:
I make them into mutton pies,
And sell them in the street.
I sell them unto men,' he said,
'Who sail on stormy seas;
And that's the way I get my bread –
Now, some change, if you would please.'*

*But I was thinking of a plan
To dye one's whiskers green,
Then always use so large a fan
That they could not be seen.
So, having no reply to give
To what the old man said,
I cried, 'Come, tell me how you live!'
And thumped him on the head.*

*He said, 'I hunt for haddocks' eyes
Among the heather bright,
And work them into trouser flies
Upon the silent night.
And these I do not sell for gold,
Or coin of silver shine,
But for a copper new or old,
And that will buy you nine.'*

*But I was thinking of a way
To feed oneself on batter,
And so go on from day to day
The tiniest bit more fatter.
I shook him well from side to side,
Until his face was blue:
'Come tell me how you live,' I cried,
'And what it is you do!'*

The White Knight's Tale

*'I sometimes dig for buttered rolls,
Or set sticky traps for crabs:
I sometimes search on grassy knolls
For wheels of taxi-cabs.
And that's the way (he gave a wink)
By which I get my wealth –
And very gladly will I drink
Your honour's noble health.'*

*I heard him then, for I had just
Completed my design
To keep the Menai bridge from rust
By boiling it in wine.
I thanked him much for telling me
The way he got his wealth,
But chiefly for his wish that he
Might drink my noble health.*

*And now, if e'er by chance I put
My fingers into glue,
Or madly squeeze a right hand foot
Into a left hand shoe,
Or if I drop upon my toe
A very heavy weight,
I weep, for it reminds me so
Of that old man I used to know –
Whose look was mild, whose speech was slow,
Whose hair was whiter than the snow,
Whose face was very like a crow,
With eyes, like cinders, all aglow,
Who seemed distracted with his woe,
Who rocked his body to and fro,
And muttered mumblingly and low,
As if his mouth was full of dough,
Who snorted like a buffalo –
That summer evening long ago,
A-sitting on a gate.*

WKn: You've only a few yards to go now, down the hill and over that little brook, and then you'll be a queen. But you'll stop and see me off first. I shan't be long. You wait and wave your handkerchief when I get to that turn in the road. It'll encourage me, you see.

Alice: Of course I'll wait, and thank you very much for coming so far – and for the song – I liked it very much.

WKn: I'm glad, but you didn't cry as much as I thought you would.

I always find goodbyes very difficult but I had to move back to the square where I'd come from, for tactical reasons, as we still want to win the game. Alice moved onto the final rank. When a pawn becomes a queen she gains a crown, but loses...

The White Knight's Tale

something. The one move with the excitement of only looking ahead becomes all moves, the choice of what to do next, and none. This is as it always was.

The red queen and ours (back to her normal shape I see) moved to either side of her, ready to instruct her in queenly ways. If we eavesdrop we will no doubt hear some of their sophisticated regal talk.

RQ: Speak when you're spoken to!

Alice: But, your red majesty, if everybody obeyed that rule, nobody would ever say anything!

RQ: Ridiculous! Why, of course, they would... The point is, you can't be a queen till you've passed the proper examination. And the sooner we begin, the better!

WQ: Can you do addition?

Alice: Of course I can, your white majesty.

WQ: What's one and one?

Alice: I don't know. I lost count.

RQ: Can't do addition! Can you do subtraction? Take nine from eight. Now!

Alice: I can't you see, because –

WQ: She can't do subtraction. Oh dear. What about division? Divide a loaf by a knife – what's the answer to that?

Alice: I suppose –

RQ: Bread and butter, of course. Try another subtraction. Take a bone from a dog: what remains?

Alice: The bone wouldn't remain, of course, if I took it – and the dog wouldn't remain: it would come to bite me – and I'm sure I wouldn't remain!

RQ: So you think nothing would remain?

Alice: I think that's the answer.

RQ: Wrong, as usual. The dog's temper would remain.

Alice: But I don't see how –

RQ: Why, look here! The dog would lose its temper wouldn't it?

Alice: Perhaps it would.

RQ: Then if the dog went away, its temper would remain.

Alice: They might go different ways –

WQ: She can't do sums at all!

RQ: Can you answer useful questions? How is bread made?

Alice: I know that! You take some flour –

WQ: Where do you pick the flour? In a garden?

Alice: It isn't picked at all, it's *ground* –

WQ: How many acres of ground? You mustn't leave out so many things.

I am very glad to say that Alice soon tired of those two. The White Queen disappeared to a strategic position and Alice soon captured the red queen – good for her! The game was over and victory was ours.

The memories I will treasure are not of great deeds of derring do (although I have to say that my capturing the red knight was rather special) but seeing a young one setting off on her great journey. Curious, undaunted, discovering pure logic, revelling in new

The White Knight's Tale

entertainments, it's a joy to amuse and bemuse her before troubles and intrigues sweep her away.

To the next game!

Did I tell you the most important thing about being a knight was mastering the complex moves? Two to the front, one to the right, three to, no never three, surely...