

ALICE IN QUARANTINE

'Well I know it's hard Alice, but your sisters have chicken pox so you have to stay in doors for a while.'

'Why do I have to stay in doors just because my sisters are ill? I did so want to see Mr Dodo today'.

'Mr Dodgson is well aware of the situation. I sent a note round this morning saying that you were in quarantine.'

'What does being in quarantine mean Mama? It sounds like a dance for four people'.

'That's a Quadrille Alice. Perhaps your dance teacher will teach you the steps when your sisters are better. Being in quarantine means that you must stay away from your friends. It also means you must be a good girl and not go into your sisters bedrooms because they are quite ill. You might catch it and with all of you unwell I would not be able to receive visitors.'

Alice was musing in the window seat watching the black trees sway in the garden. She thought back to the last time she saw the man with glancing eyes who lived next door. His large eyes were often thoughtfully lowered, with a playful smile hovering around his lips. His presence spoke of inner worlds and intuitively she knew that they both understood the value of nonsense. She loved the smell of his house when she visited. It had a strange chemical odour mixed with a faint smell of boot polish. She wondered how his dark room could put light into pictures.

She had seen him disappear under his black cloth out on Christchurch Green. He became a strange five legged creature as he peered into his wooden camera box to capture photographic scenes. Some weeks ago they had seen his Zoetrope contraption.

After tea he had rather theatrically closed the drapes. Around the winter fire the girls and their mother had watched spellbound as a tiny animated character danced a jig inside the whirling paper drum. Alice's eyes were as round as saucers.

A little later the girls gathered round table lamp as from his top pocket young Mr Dodgson produced a strange little book with a flourish.

'I occasionally do some tiny drawings' said Mr Dodgson showing them the first page, 'It's called a flip book.' With a sudden flourish of his thumb the book came to life.

The first drawn image in the little booklet was of a rabbit in a waistcoat running. The rabbit then appeared to pull out a large pocket watch. Suddenly it turned and dived headfirst into a rabbit hole. The last thing to be seen was the rabbits fluffy tail disappearing into the dark hole.

'Isn't this fun? Why -- you girls can make one yourselves.'

'Do it again, do it again,' cried Alice jumping up and down.

'Alice decorum!' said mother sternly. She glanced down at her exquisite little fob watch broach. It is time to leave Mr Dodgson. Thank you so very much for the tea.'

'Alas, my dear Mrs Liddell 'Oxford Time' prevails.' replied Mr Dodgson as he stood up and bowed his head in mock charade of sadness.

'Oxford Time?' Quizzed Alice.

'Another time, alas, young lady,' Mr Dodgson smiled down at Alice from his great height.

'I will tell you about Oxford Railway Time and Big Tom the very next time we meet. Did you also know Alice, that nowadays one has to run to stay in the same place?'

Alice looked at him quizzically. Suddenly she smiled, picked up her skirts and started running energetically on the spot.

'Decorum Alice decorum!' said her mother quite sharply.

'Oh' exclaimed Alice. A tear rolled down her cheek.

'Dear lady, please forgive me. It was entirely my fault. But as you know there is now mathematical proof that the world is indeed spinning under our feet. I believe young minds need stretching, Mrs Liddell. If I may make so bold.'

'Indeed you may not' smiled Mrs Liddell flirtatiously as she shepherded her young girls from his front door.

The tall young man watched as his visitors retreated down the path. He found himself musing about Alice's hair. Her short hair was so very different from her sisters flowing locks. Indeed Alice Liddell's hairstyle was quite unlike any he had ever seen on a young girl - but how to ask the question?

'It is so very curious and so is she. She seems twice as alive as anyone around her' he thought himself.

During the long afternoon without her sisters Alice carefully completed her little flip book. She drew with a pencil and did quite a lot of rubbing out with her India rubber at first. She embellished each page with pen, carefully blotting the black Indian ink that she had appropriated from her mother's desk. This was something she would show Mr Dodo when she was out of quarantine.

She had started off drawing a rather wide cat with almond-shaped eyes. But she couldn't think how to draw the rest of the cat's face. So under the almond eyes she drew long whiskers and a very wide smile.

Finally she began to get tired of drawing the cat and so quite gradually the cat's body disappeared until only its face was left. At last there was only the cat's large grin on the last few pages. Alice smiled to herself as after cutting the paper, she tightly sewed the binding of the little book together with blue silk thread. The cat's tail flicked this way and that as she thumbed through the small tight flip book pages. She was sure this curious cat would make Mr Dodo smile.

Later that night Alice couldn't sleep. She tiptoed into her sister's strange smelling quarantined bedroom. In the strange luminescence of moonlight Alice saw a huge bottle of medicine on the night table. It looked, for all the world, like a magic potion. There was a label tied round neck of the bottle on one side. She was enchanted by the doctor's spidery writing. She decided that in the morning she would look for a suitable bottle in which to create a magic potion of her own.

'I will make a spell - a magic spell to make sisters better and stop this horrid horrid quarantining ' she whispered as she gently closed the sickroom door.