

# Who Killed Humpty Dumpty

## Mickey Zucker Reichert

The icehouse was every bit as cold as its name, and Alice shivered as she walked amid the boxes, straw, and ice blocks, lighting the way with her candle and using her hand mirror to reflect the dark corners where monsters might lurk. "One can't be too careful," she told herself, scuffling through sawdust to make certain nothing horrible lay sleeping beneath it. "Of course, if a monster slept there, then I would have awakened it and I would much rather share an icehouse with a sleeping monster than a wide-awake one." Alice moved more cautiously now to the big wooden crate that held the eggs. She reached inside to brush straw aside when suddenly one egg leapt from the others and stood staring at her, tiny hands on the roundness where a human would have hips. But an egg could not have hips, you know.

"Oh, dear," Alice said, unable to think of anything more clever in her startlement.

"It is very insulting," said the tiny egglike creature, "to be called a deer when you look nothing like one. Very insulting indeed."

Another jumped up beside the first. "Contrariwise, if you were a deer, it would not be insulting at all."

Alice looked around nervously, quite expecting more to join these two, an egg army with eyes, noses, mouths, legs, arms, shoes, and cravats—certainly not the sort of thing one usually expects in an icehouse. "I wasn't calling you a deer, I just said, 'Oh, dear,' because you frightened me."

"Some people," said the first, tipping back his head to look at her over his nose. Since he stood so much smaller than she did, this required him to turn his eyes crosswise and to stare only at her shoes. "Some people call others names when they get frightened."

"Contrariwise," said the second, "she could just as easily have called you a cow."

"And sounded just as stupid," said the first.

Alice stomped her foot indignantly, forgetting about the monsters she might awaken in the straw. "You sound almost just like these two boys I know called Tweedledum and Tweedledee." (Truly, she had only met them once—during her adventures through the Looking-Glass). "Only ruder. And you look like Humpty Dumpty himself."

"Almost or just like," said the second egg. "You can't have it both ways."

"Our mentors and our father," replied the first, without giving Alice a chance to explain.

"Contrariwise," said the second, "our fathers and our mentor. But that wouldn't be right, of course."

At that, the first gave the second a kick that knocked him onto his bottom in the crate. Alice cringed, concerned that he might break, but he rocked back and forth a few beats, then picked himself up without so much as a glare at his companion, as if they did just this on a regular basis.

"I am Hum, and he is Dum," said the first with nary a look at his companion.

Alice thought the second name particularly apt, but she was too polite to say so. "Well, I would say Tweedledee trained Hum and Tweedledum trained Dum."

"Then you would say wrong," said Hum. "And that would little surprise me. What more could you expect from a girl who chatters to herself about monsters?"

Alice ignored the insults, not wishing to drag out the conversation. The coldness of the icehouse was creeping into her fingers, toes, and nose.

"If Dum trained me," said Dum, "we would forever be calling ourselves by each other's name. That would get too confusing. I might wind up raising him, and that just wouldn't do."

Alice didn't see how anyone could make such a mistake. Besides, Dum had the same irritating habit as Tweedledee of shouting "contrariwise" all the time.

"Our father was killed, you see."

"Someone pushed him off a wall."

"The king sent all his horses and all his men, as he promised."

"But they couldn't put him back together."

Alice looked at each as they spoke in turn, though it made her quite dizzy. She remembered the incident both from the poem and from the single time she met the giant egglike being who had been their father.

"They said he was too scrambled."

"Beaten."

"Fate played him a cruel yolk."

Not to be left out, Alice added a pun of her own. "At least it brought him out of his shell."

Angry stares met this proclamation. Hum's tone went as icy as the house, and he spoke directly to his brother as if Alice no longer existed. "Spiteful, isn't she?"

"I bet she *is* the one who did it."

"Did what?" Alice enquired, hating to be left out of anything.

But the egg brothers did not answer, only looked sadly at one another. "Come with us," Dum finally said. He leapt for Alice's hand mirror with a suddenness that made her drop the candle and nearly the mirror as well. She cringed, expecting him to shatter himself on the surface, but he passed right on through it. The candle's wick fizzled out, trailing a thin plume of smoke.

"Go on," Hum said.

Alice looked at the mirror. Her face reflected back, a perfect opposite.

"You are a slow little girl," Hum remarked. "Hurry up, now. Go on through."

Alice was not sure she could go through the mirror, even if she wanted to do so. (She had had such fun the last time she entered the Looking-Glass, but she had met some very strange creatures, too.) She touched the mirror with a finger, and it had the same smooth feel as always.

"Go on through. Go on through," Hum badgered her.

Alice pushed harder, but it was no use. The mirror remained too solid for her to enter it. "I can't," she lamented, just as Dum reappeared from the egg crate.

"I said to come along."

"I can't," Alice repeated.

"Well, certainly not with that attitude," Hum said.

"Here, eat this." Dum handed Alice a wedge of cheese.

Dutifully, Alice nibbled at it, recalling how foods had altered her size the day she fell down the Rabbit's hole.

"Delicious, isn't it?" Dum asked.

"Yes," Alice agreed as she waited for the world to grow around her. But nothing changed.

"Go through. Go through," Hum said, shoving at Alice's shoe, a wasted motion as he was so much smaller she scarcely noticed.

Alice tried again, still without success. "Why aren't I changing?"

"I don't know," Dum replied. "Do you usually?"

"Not from moment to moment," Alice admitted. "But I do grow over time."

"Well don't be growing here," Dum shot back. "That certainly isn't going to help."

Alice stared at the second egg brother, who seemed less intelligent but not nearly so nasty. "I thought that cheese might help me go through."

"Does cheese usually make you go through things?" Dum stared back at Alice, and Hum shook his head as if he found her too silly for comment.

"No," Alice said.

"But you have to admit, it was delicious," Dum finished.

"I don't have to admit anything." The cold had begun to make Alice irritable, and the odd

conversation was not helping her mood.

"Contrariwise," said Dum, "not admitting something doesn't make it any less so."

"Come on." Hum jumped onto a box and placed one tiny hand on Alice's huge fingers. Dum followed, pinching the thumb of her other hand into his gloved palm.

The icehouse disappeared around Alice, replaced by a room filled with creatures of myriad shapes and sizes. Some were animals, some cards, and some chess pieces. Either she had grown smaller or Hum and Dum bigger, for they stood at her either hand as large as she. Larger, for their shape made them the size of very round people indeed.

Alice recognized many of the creatures she saw. On a cluster of thrones were seated the red and black kings and queens she had met when she followed the White Rabbit down his hole, as well as the black and white royalty she had gotten to know on her adventures through the Looking-Glass. The Gryphon sat on a chair, wearing a monocle and a white wig. "The judge," Alice guessed aloud, and several of the animals glanced toward her as she spoke. The kings and queens numbered twelve in all. "The jury," Alice guessed, proud of her understanding.

The white king's Messengers, Haigha and Hatta, stood stiffly by a door. As Alice and the egg brothers had appeared in the middle of the room without actually entering, the Messengers seemed quite agitated. They whispered back and forth all the while. At least, their voices had the hissing quality of whispers, though they spoke quite loudly; and some of their sentences reached Alice's ears over the chattering of the crowd. "Really, how rude. How do they expect us to announce them when they won't use the door like well-bred people?"

The conversation nearest to Alice and her escorts died, the ring widening as more of the guests noticed her. Soon, the only sound was that of the Queen of Hearts pacing wildly before the other pairs of royalty shouting, "Off with her head! Off with her head!"

"Not yet, my dear," the King of Hearts soothed softly, though, as he was the only one speaking, his words reached the assemblage quite plainly. "She must get a fair trial first."

"Very well," agreed the Queen. "A fair trial. *Then* off with her head!"

Alice winced, glancing around, feeling very sorry for the victim of the Queen's verbal attack. What use was a fair trial if the punishment remained the same?

Dressed in a tabard and a regal air, the White Rabbit blew a shrill blast on his trumpet. It sounded more like a scream than music, but it drew the attention of all in the room, including the Queen of Hearts, who finally went quiet and took her place among the others.

The creatures filed to various corners, leaving Alice and her eggy escort in the center.

"Begin!" hollered the Gryphon judge.

The Rabbit cleared his throat, searching frantically about his person. Finally, he looked at the judge and confessed, "I cannot find my paper."

"Here, use mine." The Mad Hatter stepped from among the assemblage and plucked a piece of parchment from his hat band.

The Rabbit raised his head and read loudly, "Style 28. Four pounds. Eight shillings."

Alice glanced about, bewildered. She had not seen so many creatures assembled since the day she had become a queen in the Looking-Glass land.

"That's not right!" shouted the Queen of Spades.

"It is, too," returned the Hatter. "I set the price myself."

"Well, un-set it," shouted the King of Spades, "and get a different paper."

"My turn! My turn!" shouted Tweedledee, whom Alice now noticed standing amid the others. He handed a crumpled bit of paper to the Rabbit. "I do so love poetry. I'd give you something longer, but I don't know how to write."

"Then how could he put even a short poem on paper?" Alice whispered, truly interested.

"Sssh," said Hum.

"Contrariwise, ssh," Dum added.

Alice went quiet as the Rabbit read:

*My girl, Charlotte, is always there  
A smile on her beautiful face.  
Wherever I am, that's where she is  
In a long dress bedecked with fine lace.*

*Charlotte's favorite dinner is steak;  
She won't settle for anything less.  
She takes my arm when we walk the street.  
It makes me feel strange, I confess.*

*Charlotte is sweet, with impeccable taste.  
Her wardrobe is really quite pretty.  
What I can't understand, in my human haste:  
Why can't Char be a regular kitty?*

The Queen of Hearts sprang from her throne again. "Why that has nothing to do with anything! Off with his head."

To Alice the poem made as much sense as anything else in this place. But, before she could say as much, guards started racing from all directions. The White Rabbit covered his eyes with his ears, as if this might hide him. But, before the guards could carry out the Queen's awful decree, the Gryphon banged his gavel so hard his wig slipped over his beak. He shoved it back into place too hard, and it flopped backward onto one wing. Apparently, he did not notice this as he left it in place, shouting, "Order! I'll have order in my court!"

Obediently, the guards ran about, slamming into each other repeatedly and knocking one another down on a regular basis. Eventually, they separated themselves out and lined up numerically, from two to ten. By that time, the other queens and kings had coaxed the Queen of Hearts back into her proper position, her command quite forgotten.

"Very well now," said the Gryphon. He looked over at the White Rabbit, who still stood in place with his eyes covered. "What our court announcer was trying to say is that we have all gathered to try this girl Alice..." He waved a wing in her direction, which sent the wig flying. It landed on a pig, who cocked his head this way and that trying to see. "... for the murder of Humpty Dumpty."

Well, Alice was more than a little frightened and surprised by this. "But I didn't kill anyone!"

"Contrariwise," said Dum, " 'anyone' wasn't murdered. Our father was."

"Silence in the court!" the Gryphon bellowed, so loudly he sent the lined-up cards toppling like dominoes. Everyone obeyed, even the kings and queens, though they looked ruffled and unused to having others order them about. "As the first witness, I would like to call the Hatter."

The Mad Hatter strode to the center of the floor, snatching back his paper from the White Rabbit and replacing it in his hatband. The Rabbit had finally peeked from beneath one ear, the Hatter's sudden movement startling him into hiding again. The Hatter cleared his throat, then looked directly at Alice.

"Do you know this girl?" the Gryphon asked.

"I know her pourly," said the Hatter. "We had tea. She poured. It was six o'clock." He shook his watch, which had stopped years ago and, Alice remembered, only showed the day of the month anymore.

"That watch doesn't tell him the time," Alice felt obliged to remark.

"No," the Hatter admitted sadly. "It doesn't tell me. I have to look at it."

"Go on," the Gryphon encouraged.

"Well." The Hatter scratched at his head, only, since the hat got in the way, he scratched at it instead. "She couldn't tell me how a raven is like a writing desk."

"But, it was a riddle," Alice said. "And I didn't know the right answer."

"See," said the Hatter. "Insults. She called me 'butt,' you heard. It seems to me that a girl who can't tell a raven from a writing desk could prove very dangerous. Very dangerous indeed."

"I didn't insult anyone!" Alice defended. "I said 'but,' with only one't'."

"Yes," the Hatter acknowledged. "We had only one tea. More with a murderer would have been the pity."

"I'm not a murderer. And the question wasn't about the differences—"

"Off with her head!" shouted the Queen of Hearts again, and by the time all the others had shushed her, the Gryphon had dismissed the Hatter and coaxed Tweedledum and Tweedledee to the stand.

The two stood perfectly still beside one another, each with an arm across the other's back. Though Alice had met them previously, she could not tell them apart now except that Tweedledee had "DEE" embroidered across his collar while Tweedledum had "DUM" on his. "I told her the poem about the 'Walrus and the Carpenter,'" Tweedledee explained. "Shall I recite it here again for the court?"

"No!" everyone shouted at once so that it sounded ear-splitting, like thunder.

"Well," Tweedledee said among the echoes, clearly put off by the forcefulness of their answer. "Then you'll just have to remember that the two tricked hundreds of innocent oysters to the shore, then ate them every one."

"Cruel creatures," said a plaintive voice from the corner. Before Alice could identify the speaker, another said, "Sick creatures." This last seemed to come from a clam perched near the jury.

"She said she liked the Walrus." Tweedledee pointed an accusing finger at Alice with his free hand.

"Contrariwise," added Tweedledum, "she said she liked the Carpenter best as well."

Alice had to think back to remember exactly what she *had* said. It was not until the judge dismissed the brothers that she remembered calling both of the characters unpleasant, favoring the Walrus only because he seemed to feel a little remorse, then favoring the Carpenter because Tweedledee told her he had eaten fewer of the oysters.

Alice had no time to sort out these details before the court erupted into shouted hisses and boos, all directed at her!

The Gryphon spoke over the crowd with a question for Alice. "Young girl, how old did you say you were?"

Humpty Dumpty had once tricked her with that same inquiry. Not to be fooled twice, Alice answered, "I didn't say. But I'm eight—"

"She ate too!" Tweedledee shouted. "No wonder she liked the Walrus *and* the Carpenter best."

"No! No!" Alice said. "Stop interrupting! It's rude."

"So is murder," said Hum. "And *we* haven't yelled at *you* for that."

"But I didn't kill anyone!" Alice shouted.

"Order! Order!" demanded the Gryphon, and quiet returned to the courtroom. "I would like to call the White King as a witness."

"Then do so," the White King returned.

"Very well." The Gryphon looked at the Rabbit, who had finally returned his ears to their proper position.

"Calling the White King as a witness!" bellowed the Rabbit rather more loudly than was necessary.

The White King wove through the jury grouping and into the center of the room. Alice knew enough about courts to feel certain it was not proper for a juror to serve as a witness, too. But, she liked the White King and hoped he would prove fairer in his judgments of her than those who came before him.

The Gryphon addressed the King. "I understand you were nearby when Humpty Dumpty fell from

the wall."

"Pushed by this murderer," Hum added loudly.

"Alleged murderer," Alice said, proud of her knowledge of such a long word, though still a bit frightened by the proceedings.

"Ah ha!" shouted Hum. "A-ledged she was. She admits she was up there with him."

"Silence!" shouted the Gryphon with such intensity that all sound disappeared completely. "Except you, Your Majesty." The Gryphon bowed, waving a talon at the White King. "You may answer, Sire."

"Yes." The King responded as if none of the interruptions had occurred. Even Alice had already forgotten the Gryphon's question. "I was near. And I sent all my horses and men, as I promised. Exactly four thousand two hundred and seven." He paused a moment in thought. "Well, since I am in a court of law, I should say that actually two of the horses didn't go because the Queen needed them for the games and my two Messengers went to town. But otherwise all my horses and men went."

"And you saw this girl there?" the Gryphon persisted, refusing to be sidetracked.

The White King peered at Alice, as if noticing her in the courtroom for the first time. "Yes, oh yes. Hello! She came by just after the Great Fall, you know. Very pleasant company."

The Gryphon glanced about the courtroom, as if challenging all those assembled to cause a commotion again. But, this time, no one spoke. "Was there anyone else nearby? Anyone else who might have been responsible for Humpty Dumpty's fall?"

"No," the King said sadly. "No others about..." He paused, face lost in a pile of thoughtful wrinkles. Then his eyes and nose reemerged from the creases. "I did ask her to look for my Messenger on the road, and she said she saw Nobody on the road." The King sighed. "I remember envying her vision, that she could see Nobody when I had a hard enough time seeing real people in the twilight." He glanced at his Messengers near the door. Haigha nodded thoughtfully, and Hatta studied his shoes as if he planned to do a painting of them.

The Gryphon winked at Alice, then leaned forward to question the White King further. "Which direction was this Nobody person going?"

"Well." The King laced his fingers through his beard. "Well, since I didn't actually see him, I had assumed him to be coming toward us. But, then, Haigha said he had passed Nobody on his way to us. And Nobody never arrived, so I'd now have to guess that Nobody was actually going away from us."

"And away from Humpty Dumpty," the Gryphon finished.

"Yes, quite so," said the King. "And he didn't stop to pay his respects, which is impolite if not illegal, so he must have been avoiding us."

"Which means," finished the Gryphon as every creature in the courtroom stared in fascination, "that he must have had something to hide."

"So Nobody killed Humpty Dumpty!" the White King hollered, voice deafening in the quiet room.

"Nobody?"

"Nobody!"

"Nobody?"

"NOBODY!" The word was whispered, shouted, squeaked, barked, quacked, and screamed around the courtroom until it all became a painful clamor that ached through Alice's ears.

"Therefore," the Gryphon called over the others, "if Nobody killed Humpty Dumpty, then I have to rule his death a suicide. Case dismissed." The bang of the gavel disappeared beneath the hubbub.

The courtroom doors banged open as creatures of every description poured outside. The noise grew softer as more and more hopped, walked, or slithered from the courtroom, leaving Alice alone in a silence that felt comfortable in her ears. She had just turned to leave herself when she heard a gentle, familiar voice. "Hello." Alice turned to face a huge, pointy-toothed grin hovering over the judge's table. This, she felt certain, belonged to the Cheshire Cat she had met during her visit down the Rabbit's hole. She knew of no one else who could perform this trick; but, then again, she had known of no one at all

who could until she met this Cheshire Cat.

Now, Alice breathed a sigh of relief. She had always found the Cheshire Cat more sensible than the others here, though it named itself mad. At least, it acknowledged its strangeness while all the other creatures seemed to assume themselves normal. She waited patiently while the Cat's other features appeared in appropriate positions around the smile: first the eyes, then the nose and whiskers, the head, and finally the body and tail. "Oh!" said Alice, impressed with the Cheshire Cat's grooming. "Your coat shines today."

"There are things one can eat to put a sheen to one's fur," the Cat said, winking. "In a way, you might say Humpty Dumpty bequeathed me my good grooming."

The only outfit of Humpty Dumpty's that Alice recalled was a cravat that his strange build had caused her to mistake for a belt. Nevertheless, it seemed respectful to speak kindly of the dead, especially after having been found innocent of his murder. "He had good taste."

"I would say," said the Cheshire Cat, grin widening and voice rumbling like a purr, "he was a creature of egg-ceptionally good taste. Egg-ceptionally good, indeed."

Not wishing to contradict, Alice simply nodded.

"For fur, there is nothing like a hefty meal of raw egg."

"I should think," Alice said, "that a bath and a good grooming would be better."

"I didn't say there was nothing better. Only that there was nothing like it." The Cat started to fade.

Only then understanding dawned. "Wait! *You* ate Humpty Dumpty?" Before Alice could question the Cat further, it melted into the background, teeth lingering the longest. "Come back! Come back!" yelled Alice to the empty air. She flailed wildly at the place where the cat had hovered.

And found herself shaking two eggs in the icehouse. The very eggs she had gone to fetch. Alice looked from one to the other. "Hum and Dum," she whispered, then placed them back in the box and chose different ones in their places. After all, she would not be responsible for murder.