

The Hunting of Depth in the Dark

(With apologies to Lewis Carroll)

Serena Benjamin

FIT THE FIRST

The Landing

“Just the place for some depth!” Alan joyfully cried,
as he surveyed the cavern with care.
Supporting his team, but sometimes snide,
with his survey book waving in air.

“Just the place for some depth! I have now said it twice.
That alone should encourage my crew.
Just the place for some depth! I have now said it thrice.
What I tell you three times is true.”

The crew was complete: all shod in gumboots,
also well stocked with foods.
Janine, brought in to smooth out their disputes
and Serena, to help tote their goods.

Petr, with his strength, graces us with his presence,
perhaps carrying more than his share.
Plus Stefan engaged for his science-minded essence,
had the whole of their photography in his care.

There also was Stephen, who liked things high-tech,
with odd gadgets, whose numbers would grow.
“This,” Alan said, “if not kept in check,
could weigh down the mission below.”

Andreas was famed for the number of things
he forgot when he signed up for such cave trips:
his trog suit, his Stop, all his ‘biners and things,
and thermals coloured bright to transfix.

He had forty-two cavepacks, all carefully packed,
with his name clearly writ in a sentence.
But, since he omitted to mention the fact,
they were all left behind at the entrance.

The loss of his thermals hardly mattered, because
he had seven coats on when he came.
With three pair of boots – but the worst of it was,
he had wholly forgotten his name.

He would answer to “Hi!” or to any loud cry,
such as “Magoo!” or “Fritter my wig!”
To “What-you-may-call-um!” or “What-was-his-name!”
but especially “Thing-um-a-jig!”

While, for those who preferred a more forcible word,
he had different titles from these.
His intimate friends called him “Anchor-ends,”
and his enemies “Toasted-cheese.”

“His form is ungainly, his intellect small”
(so Alan would often remark).
“But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,
is essential hunting depth in the dark.”

He would joke with drop-bears, returning their stare
with an impudent wag of the head.
and he once took a walk, paw-in-paw, with a gummi bear,
“Just to keep up its spirits,” he said.

He came as an Austrian, but owned, when too late
(and it drove poor Alan half-mad)
he loathed to survey – for which, I may state,
made the other bold cavers quite sad.

The last of the crew needs description in breadth,
though he looked an incredible dunce.
He had just one idea, but that one being “Depth,”
good Alan engaged him at once.

He came as a Frenchman, but gravely declared,
when they’d been caving together a week,
he often dislodged rocks; Alan looked scared,
and was almost too frightened to speak.

But at length Alan explained, in a tremulous tone,
the cave had only one boulder pile, not too broad,
which he felt would be wise to explore on his own;
Any death of injury would be deeply deplored.

Stephen by chance who heard the remark,
protested, with tears in his eyes.
Not even the trill hunting depth in the dark
could atone for that dismal surprise!

He strongly advised that Gabriel should be
on a caver’s apprenticeship.
But Alan declared that would never agree
with the plans he had made for the trip.

Navigation was always a difficult art,
though with only one Distro and one book,
he feared he must really decline, for his part,
that yet another cave trip be undertook.

Stephen’s best course was, no doubt, to procure
a second-hand boulder-proof suit.
And so Andreas advised him to ensure
Gabriel went first down any chute.

Yet still, ever after that sorrowful day,
when Gabriel was standing nearby,
Stephen kept looking the opposite way,
and appeared unaccountably shy.

FIT THE SECOND

Alan’s Speech

Alan himself many praised to the skies:
Such a carriage, such ease and such grace!
Such solemnity, too! One could see he was wise,
the moment one looked at his face!

He had brought a large map representing the cave,
without the least trace of a plan.
And the crew were much pleased that as surveying slaves
this was a map they could all understand.

“What’s the good of 2D plans, profiles or cave passages
dry,
LRUD’s, passage detail, and plot lines?”
so Alan would cry, and the crew would reply
“They are merely conventional signs!”

“Other maps are such shapes, with their pitches and landscapes!
But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank”
(So the crew would protest) “that he’s brought us the best
A perfect and absolute blank!”

This was charming, no doubt; but they shortly found out
that the Captain they trusted so well
had only one notion for his surveying motion,
and that was to berate people and yell.

He was thoughtful and grave, but the orders he gave
were enough to bewilder the crew.
When he cried “Survey a backsight node, but keep it out of
backsight mode!”
what on earth were the surveyors to do?

Then the forward sights got mixed with backwards sometimes.
A thing, as Alan remarked,
that frequently happens in caving confines,
when the surveying is, so to speak, “farked.”

But the principal failing that occurred in the surveilling,
and Alan, perplexed and distressed,
said he hoped, at least, when what they drew as due East,
that the cave would not trend due West!

But the danger was past – they had landed at last,
with their DistoXs, dive gear, and cave bags.
Yet at first sight the crew were displeased with the view
which consisted of chasms and crags.

Alan perceived that their spirits were low,
and repeated in voluminous tone
some obscene jokes he had kept for a season of woe
but the crew would do nothing but groan.

He served out lolly snakes with a liberal hand,
and bade them sit down on Mt Niggly beach.
And they could not but own that their Captain looked grand,
as he stood and delivered his speech.

“Colleagues, cavers, and troglodytes, lend me your ears!”
(They were all of them fond of quotations.)
So they ate lollies to his health, and they gave him three
cheers,
while he served out additional rations.

“We have caved many months, we have caved many weeks,
(in many different caves you may mark),
but never as yet” (‘tis your Captain who speaks)
“have we caught the least glimpse of the deepest depth in
the dark!

“We have caved many weeks, we have caved many days,
(in Tachy, Ice Tube and KD I allow),
but the deepest depth in the dark, on which we might
lovingly gaze,
we have never beheld till now!

“Come, listen, my colleagues, while I tell you again
the five unmistakable marks
by which you may know, wheresoever you go,
how to seek genuine warranted deepest depths in the dark.

“Let us take them in order. The first is good taste,
requiring colourful stuff, not too hip.
This includes a trogsuit, often baggy at waist,
to be held up by harness and alloy clip.

“Those with a habit of getting up late you’ll agree,
are less likely to achieve it I say.
Thus breakfast at Banjo’s, perhaps with some tea,
also provides goods for the rest of the day.

“The third is a willingness to take things in jest,
should you happen to venture on one.
Otherwise caving with me could leave one deeply distressed,
As I’m fond of making a pun.

“The fourth is a fondness for mud it seems,
which is a constant thing that’s about.
Some believe it adds to the beauty of scenes –
a sentiment open to doubt.

“The fifth is ambition. So it would be right
to say when rigging a cave from scratch,
that, when the cold truly does start to bite,
you may easily meed with your match.

“For, although common depths do no manner of harm,
yet, I feel it my duty to say,
some are Boojums – “ Alan broke off in alarm,
For Andreas had fainted away.

FIT THE THIRD

Andreas’s Tale

They roused him with muffins. They roused him with ice;
they roused him with mustard and cress;
they roused him with jubes and judicious advice;
they set him conundrums to guess.

When at lengths he sat up and was able to speak,
his sad story he offered to tell.
And Alan cried “Silence! Not even a shriek!”
and excitedly sat down as well.

There was silence supreme! Not a shriek, not a scream,
scarcely even a howl or a groan,
as the man they called “Ho!” told his story of woe
in an antediluvian tone.

“My father and mother were honest, though poor – “
“Skip all that!” cried Alan in haste.
“If soon we don’t embark, there’s no chance of depths in the
dark.
We have hardly a minute to waste!”

“I skip many years,” said Andreas, in tears,
“and proceed without further remark
to the day when you took me onto this cave trip,
to help you in hunting depth in the dark.

“A dear uncle of mine (after whom I was named)
remarked, when I bade his farewell – “
“Oh, skip your dear uncle!” Alan exclaimed,
as frustrated, he stared to yell.

“He remarked to me then,” said that mildest of men,
“if your depths be depths, that is right,
sketch the cave by all means – both plan and profile scenes,
but ensure you have a working light.

“You may seek it with DistoX’s, and seek it with care;
you may hunt it with survey legs and rope;
you may break the record with a bit of dare;
deepening cave passages with increasing slope –“

(“That’s exactly the method,”) Alan bold
in a hasty parenthesis cried.
(“That’s exactly the way I have always been told
that the capture of depths should be tried!”)

“But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day.
If your depths be a Boojum! For then
you will softly and suddenly vanish away,
and never be met with again!

“It is this, it is this that oppresses my soul,
when I think of my uncle’s last words:
and my heart is like nothing so much as a bowl
brimming over with quivering turds!

“It is this, it is this –“ “We have had that before!”
Alan indignantly said.
And Andreas replied “Let me say it once more.
It is this, it is this that I dread!

“I engage with the depths in the dark in dreams that are stark
In a dreamy delirious fight.
I sketch plan and profile scenes, though somehow it seems,
this is hampered by the magnet on my Scurion light.

“But if ever I meet with Boojum, that day.
In a moment (of this I am sure),
I shall softly and suddenly vanish away
and the notion I cannot endure!”

FIT THE FOURTH

The Hunting

Alan looked uffish, and wrinkled his brow.
“If only you’d spoken before!
It’s excessively awkward to mention it now,
with the depth, so to speak, at the door!

“We should all of us grieve, as you well may believe,
if you never were met with again.
But surely, my man, when this caving trip began,
You might have suggested it then?
“It’s excessively awkward to mention it now
as I think I’ve already remarked.”
And the man they called “Hi!” replied, with a sigh,
“I informed you the day we embarked.

“You may charge me with murder or want of sense
(we are all of us weak at times)
but the slightest approach to a false pretence
was never among my crimes!

“I said it in Austrian; I said it in Dutch;
I said it in German and Greek.
But I wholly forgot (and it vexes me much)
that Australian is what you speak!”

“Tis a pitiful tale,” said Alan, whose face
had grown longer at every word:
“But now that you’ve stated the whole of your case,
more debate would be simply absurd.

“The rest of my speech” (he explained to his men)
“you shall hear when I’ve leisure to speak it.
But the depth record’s at hand, let me tell you again,
‘tis your glorious duty to seek it!

“To seek it with DistoX’s, and seek it with care;
to hunt it with survey legs and rope;
to break the record with a bit of dare;
deepening cave passages with increasing slope.

“For the depth’s a peculiar creature, that won’t
be sought in a commonplace way.
Do all that you know, and try all that you don’t.
Not a chance must be wasted to-day!

“Though none expects it – I forbear to proceed.
“Tis a maxim tremendous, but trite,
and you’d best be unpacking the things that you need
to rig yourselves out for the fight.”

Then Stefan endorsed the scientific prospectives,
and took a photo or two for notes.
Andreas with care combed his beard and hair,
and shook the cave dust out of his coats.

Gabriel and Serena calibrated the Disto as an aid,
each trying to do it in turn.
But Stephen sat eating Shapes, and displayed
no interest in the concern.

Janine sat and ferociously planned
a novel way of surveying but froze.
When looking at Petr she saw that with quivering hand
he was snorting cave mud out of his nose.

But Gabriel turned nervous, and dressed himself fine
with yellow thermals and a muff;
said he felt it exactly like going to dine.
Which Alan declared was all “stuff”.

“Introduce me, now there’s a good fellow,” he said,
“if we happen to meet the depth together!”
And Alan, sagaciously nodding his head,
said “That must depend on the cave weather.”

Stephen went simply galumphing about,
at seeing Gabriel so shy.
And even Andreas, though stupid and stout,
made an effort to wink with one eye.

“Be a man!” said Alan in wrath, as he heard
Stephen beginning to sob.
“Should we meet with a Jubjub, that desperate bird,
we shall need all our strength for the job!”

FIT THE FIFTH

Stephen's Lesson

They sought it with DistoX's and sought it with care;
they hunted it with survey legs and rope;
they tried to break the record with a bit of dare;
deepening cave passages with increasing slope.

Then Stephen contrived an ingenious plan
for making a separate sally
and had fixed on a spot unfrequented by man,
a dismal, squeezey and desolate valley.

But the very same plan to Garbiel occurred:
He had chosen the very same place.
Yet neither betrayed, by a sign or a word,
the disgust that appeared in his face.

Each thought he was thinking of nothing but "depth in the dark"
and the glorious work of the day
and each tried to pretend that he did not remark
that the other was going that way.

But the valley grew narrow and narrower still,
and the mud got darker and colder,
till (merely from nervousness, not from good will)
they marched along shoulder to shoulder.

Then a scream, shrill and high, rent the shuddering sky,
and they knew that some danger was near.
Gabriel turned pale and through mud began to flail,
and even Stephen felt queer.

He thought of his childhood, left far far behind –
that blissful and innocent state –
the sound so exactly recalled to his mind
a pencil that squeaks on a slate!

"Tis the voice of the media Jubjub!" he suddenly cried
(this man that they used to call "Dunce").
"As Alan would tell you," he added with pride,
"I have uttered that sentiment once.

"Tis the note of the media Jubjub! Keep count, I entreat;
You will find I have told it you twice.
Tis the song of the media Jubjub! The proof is complete,
If only I've stated it thrice."

Gabriel counted with scrupulous care,
attending to every word.
But he fairly lost heart, and outgrabe in despair,
when the third repetition occurred.

He felt that, in spite of all possible pains,
he had somehow contrived to lose count,
and the only thing now was to rack his poor brains
by reckoning up the amount.

"Two added to one – if that could but be done,"
he said, "with one's fingers and thumbs!"
recollecting with tears how, in earlier years,
he had taken no pains with his sums.

"The thing can be done," said Stephen, "I think.
the thing must be done, I am sure.
The thing shall be done! Bring me paper and ink,
the best there is time to procure."

Gabriel brought paper, portfolio, pens,
and ink in unfailing supplies:
while the rest of the cavers waited for these tow media tart:
again,
and watched them with wondering eyes.

So engrossed was Stephen, he heeded them not,
as he wrote with a pen in each hand,
and explained all the while in a popular style
which Gabriel could well understand.

"Taking three hundred and ninety five as the subject to
reason about –
a convenient number to state –
we add seven, and ten, and then multiply out
by one thousand diminished by eight.

"The result we proceed to divide, as you see,
by nine hundred and ninety and two.
Then subtract seventeen, and the answer must be
exactly and perfectly true.

"The method employed I would gladly explain,
while I have it so clear in my head,
If I had but the time and you had but the brain.
But much yet remains to be said.

"In one moment I've seen what has hitherto been
enveloped in absolute mystery,
and without extra charge I will give you at large
a Lesson in Natural History."

In his genial way he proceeded to say
(Forgetting all laws of propriety,
and that giving instruction, without introduction,
would have caused quite a thrill in Society),

"As to temper the media Jubjub's a desperate bird,
since it lives in perpetual passion.
Its taste in costume is entirely absurd;
it is ages ahead of the fashion:

"But it knows any friend it has met once before.:
It never will look at a bribe:
And in charity-meetings it stands at the door,
and collects – though it does not subscribe."

Stephen would gladly have talked till next day,
but he felt that the Lesson must end,
and he wept with delight in attempting to say
he considered Gabriel his friend.

While Gabriel confessed, with affectionate looks
more eloquent even than tears,
he had learned in ten minutes far more than all books
would have taught it in seventy years.

They returned hand-in-hand, and Alan, unmanned
(for a moment) with noble emotion,
said "This amply repays all the wearisome days
we have spent on this caving commotion!"

Such friends, as Gabriel and Stephen became,
have seldom if ever been known;
in winter or summer, 'twas always the same –
you could never meet either alone.

And when quarrels arose – as one frequently finds
quarrels will, spite of every endeavour –
the song of the media Jubjub recurred to their minds, and
cemented their friendship for ever!

FIT THE SIXTH

Stephen's Fate

They sought it with DistoX's and sought it with care;
they hunted it with survey legs and rope;
they tried to break the record with a bit of dare;
deepening cave passages with increasing slope.

And Stephen, inspired with a courage so new,
it was matter for general remark,
rushed madly ahead and was lost to their view
in his zeal to discover depth in the dark.

But while he was seeking with DistoX and care,
a Bandersnatch swiftly drew nigh
and grabbed at Stephen, who shrieked in despair,
for he knew it was useless to fly.

He offered large discount, he offered a cheque
(drawn "to bearer") for seven-pounds-ten,
but the Bandersnatch merely extended its neck
and grabbed at Stephen again.

Without rest or pause – while those frumious jaws
went savagely snapping around –
he skipped and he hopped, and he floundered and flopped,
till fainting he fell to the ground.

The Bandersnatch fled as the others appeared
led on by that fear-stricken yell.
And Alan remarked :It is just as I feared!"
and solemnly toned down his yell.

He was black in the face, and they scarcely could trace
the least likeness to what he had been.
While so great was his fright that his trogsuit turned white
a wonderful thing to be seen!

To the horror of all who were present that day,
he uprose in full evening dress,
and with senseless grimaces endeavoured to say what his
tongue could no longer express.

Down he sank in a chair – ran his hands through his hair
and chanted in mimsiest tones
words whose utter inanity proved his insanity,
while he rattled a couple of bones.

"Leave him here to his fate – it is getting so late!"
Alan exclaimed in a fright.
"We have lost half the day. Any further delay,
and we shan't deepen this cave before night!"

FIT THE SEVENTH

The Vanishing

They sought it with DistoX's and sought it with care;
they hunted it with survey legs and rope;
they tried to break the record with a bit of dare;
deepening cave passages with increasing slope.

They shuddered to think that the chase might fail,
and Stefan, excited at last,
went bounding along, through mud he did flail,
on the surface, daylight was near past.

"There is Thingumbob shouting!" Alan said,
"He is shouting like mad, only hark!
He is waving his hands, he is wagging his head.
He has certainly found the deepest depth in the dark!"

They gazed in delight, while Gabriel exclaimed
"He was always a desperate wag!"
They beheld him – their Andreas – their hero unnamed
on the top of a neighbouring crag.

Erect and sublime, for one moment of time.
In the next, that wild figure they saw
(as if stung by a spasm) plunge into a chasm, while they
waited and listened in awe.

"It's the deepest depth in the dark!" was the sound that first
came to their ears,
and seemed almost too good to be true.
Then followed a torrent of laughter and cheers.
Then the ominous words "It's a Boo – "

Then, silence. Some fancied they heard in the air
a weary and wandering sigh
that sounded like "-jum!" but the others declare
it was only a breeze that went by.

They hunted till the darkness of fading batteries came on,
but they found
not a skerrick, or trace, or mark,
by which they could tell that they stood on the ground
where Andreas had found depth in the dark.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say;
in the midst of his laughter and glee,
he had softly and suddenly vanished away –
for the depth *was* a Boojum, you see.
