

Alice in Windowsland

Because life's no tea party when you work on a helpdesk



Begin at the beginning

Alice climbed into bed, her head still buzzing after another utterly ridiculous day on the Windows support helpdesk. It had started badly and gone downhill from there. First, the two trainees, now and forever to be known as Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber, had, between them, somehow managed to crash the system right before Alice's shift started. Once they got *that* sorted out, Alice had settled down to take her first call and then realised no-one but her had even turned up yet. Sighing, as she did most mornings these days, she realised Dora Mowse had obviously overslept *again*. Dora was very sweet, and it was hard to dislike her, but she really was hopelessly unreliable. Alice had sat there, silently cursing all her colleagues when Dwight Rabbett had barrelled through the door, wailing "I'm late! I'm late!" He'd collapsed into the chair next to Alice and fanned himself with his hands.

"I have *such* a hangover," he'd moaned. "I tried that new club, Wonderland, last night? They had these *amazing* cocktails. I couldn't resist! They were practically screaming 'Drink me! Drink me!' But now my head feels like it's four times normal size."

"Well you'd better get yourself hooked up ASAP. It has *not* been a good morning and Mad Hattie's on the warpath." Alice had quickly picked up a call as their supervisor, Harriet Loud, arrived at speed. Unfortunately it was a really simple call, which meant she was already wrapping it up as Mad Hattie had appeared at her shoulder.

"... well that's no problem, you're very welcome.."

"Move on! Move on!" Mad Hattie had barked. "There's no time for chit-chat!"

Alice had sighed, ended the call and grabbed the next one from the queue. Honestly, could it reduce her productivity *that* much to exchange a few pleasantries?

Off with your head!

Well clearly it could, if the Company President was to be believed. Scarlet McQueen had swept down from the executive offices on the upper floor and treated them all to an increasingly irate review of their efficiency and performance. Her face had grown redder and redder as she'd ranted about call statistics and timekeeping.

"So let this be a warning! There will be

mandatory appraisals starting this afternoon! And if you're not pulling your weight ... heads will roll!" she'd announced.

I give myself good advice, but I seldom follow it ...

When it was time for Alice's appraisal, she'd been understandably nervous. It didn't seem to matter much how good you actually were at your job. Oh, McQueen had daily reports, but she classified those as either true (if they were bad, because they confirmed her poor opinion) or faked (if they ventured an opinion that wasn't hers). What good, Alice often wondered, is a president who doesn't believe their own advisers? (*answers on a Tweet, anyone??*) She'd fidgeted as McQueen read over her call statistics. Deep down, Alice knew she was a pretty good employee and that callers generally liked her, but was that a good thing? Or did it mean McQueen would assume she actually *wasn't* any good? Frankly, it gave her a headache.

"I've decided you're an entirely adequate employee," McQueen had declared finally. "So I'm giving you an un-pay rise."

"A pay rise?! Alice had gasped. This was wholly uncharted territory.

"Don't be ridiculous. An un-pay rise. And since you're *so* adequate, I shall recommend you for another un-pay rise next month."

You must be mad or you wouldn't have come here ...

Yes, Alice reflected as she turned out the light, the whole place was completely mad. She sighed and tumbled down the rabbit-hole into sleep

Curiouser and curiouser ...

"Move up!! Move up!!" Alice jerked her hand to her headset, but she wasn't wearing it. She opened her eyes and found she was sitting at a table filled end to end with computer screens. The table seemed to stretch to infinity. She blinked and shook herself.

"Move up! Come on! Everyone has to move up!" Mad Hattie poked Alice in the arm.

"Everyone, who?" asked Alice, looking at the empty chairs.

"Everyone-everyone!" Phones rang up and down the table, and as they were answered, Alice noticed

people gradually fade into view. They nodded and smiled at her, chatting all the while.

"... Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

".. so you knew it was spam, but you clicked on it anyway, uh-huh ..."

"Yes, that is true, the error message would have been a blue box, but I was hoping you noticed what was *in* the box ... no? Just that it was blue, OK"

"... no, that was the monitor you turned off and on again... yes, I'm sure Because computers don't restart that quickly"

As each call ended, the people faded away again, till there was nothing but a smile and a headset, and then nothing at all.

"Move up!" snapped Hattie again.

Alice sighed and shifted into the next chair along, putting the headset on as she sat down.

But before she could take her first call, a silence fell across the immense length of the table as Scarlet McQueen appeared. Her face seemed even redder than usual as she stalked up and down the helpdesk.

"You!!" she snapped at a poor unsuspecting worker. He gulped, and shrank so far back into his chair, he became practically two-dimensional. "You've been on that call for twenty-six seconds! What've you got to say for yourself?"

"I ... I ... I'm waiting for her computer to reboot ...?"

"No excuse! You're on report!! I'm docking your pay!! Off with your head!!"

"You!!!" She prodded a passing man hard in the chest. "Why aren't you at your desk? *Well?!!* Nothing to say for yourself? You're a disgrace to the workforce! Here .." she slapped £50 into his hand, "... consider that your severance pay. You're fired! Get out!!"

The man shrugged, pocketed the cash and strolled away, whistling.

"Appalling," muttered McQueen. "Who was he anyway?"

A timid worker raised his hand. "Ummm... he was just delivering a parcel. He doesn't actually work here."

McQueen spluttered for a moment and then rallied. She pointed an accusing finger at the hapless man who'd raised his hand.

"Don't tell me things I don't want to hear! Disciplinary hearing at 5pm!! And prepare to lose your head!"

Casting about for someone else to victimise, she spotted Alice.

"You!! You .. you ... you're not even on a call!! Off with your head!"

"That's unjust and unfair!" Alice jumped up in indignation. "I'm appealing!" McQueen frowned. "Do you think she's appealing?" she asked Mad Hattie.

"Not even slightly."

"There you are then," she told Alice smugly. "Off with your head."

"But ... but ... I'm good at my job."

"Who says so?" asked McQueen.

"You said so yourself! Why, you gave me an un-pay rise yesterday!"

Gasps sounded up and down the table.

It's no use going back to yesterday ...

"But perhaps you were a different person yesterday," pondered McQueen. "So we shall put you to the test on computer support!"

"Very well," said Alice confidently, folding her arms. "Fire away."

"Why is a pigeon like a keyboard?"

"*What?* What kind of question is that?"

"A very good one, evidently, since you can't answer it."

"What's it got to do with computers?"

"There was a keyboard in the question."

"Oh this is just nonsense!"

"She doesn't know the answer!" crowed Mad Hattie.

"I do .. I *do* ... it's ... because ... they both have 'home' built in!!!" finished Alice triumphantly.

"Do they?" asked McQueen.

"Well ... yes. Isn't that the answer?"

"How should I know? You're supposed to be the expert."

Alice was furious.

"You mean you're asking me questions and you don't even know the answers? How is that a test?"

"Ah, but the people who phone don't know the answers, or they wouldn't need to phone, would they?" asked McQueen, with annoyingly irrefutable logic.

Alice continued to fume.

"Look, I don't think ..."

"Then you shouldn't speak," snapped Mad Hattie.

"Ohhhh!" Alice was incensed. "This is as stupid as people who ring and ask where the 'any' key is!"

"Really?" McQueen looked over Alice's shoulder at the keyboard on the desk. "Where is it then?"

"Well there isn't one, is there? It's what it says on the screen sometimes - 'press any key to continue', so people ask where the 'any' key is."

"But there isn't one?" McQueen wanted to be sure she was understanding this.

"No," said Alice, wishing now she'd never started down this conversational cul-de-sac. "It just means you can press any of the keys." She paused. "Well, except Alt or Control or Shift or ..."

"So it *says* any key, except there's no such key, but what it *means* is any *of* the keys, except it doesn't mean that either." McQueen gave her an accusing stare. "And you have the nerve to say *my* question was nonsense?"

"Oh, this is like trying to believe six impossible things before breakfast," Alice complained.

"I do that every day," retorted McQueen.

"And twelve on Sundays."

At that point, Dwight Rabbett ran the length of the table, crying "I'm late! I'm late!" It took on a Doppler effect as he disappeared into the distance. Everyone stopped and stared. Then McQueen turned to Mad Hattie.

"When he returns"

"Off with his head," nodded Mad Hattie.

"Duly noted."

McQueen resumed her terrorising of the staff.

"You there!!" Her angry gaze had fallen on Dora Mowse across the table, who was snoring faintly. McQueen ranted till she turned the colour of an eggplant, but Dora snoozed through it all. Frustrated at being ignored, McQueen set off to march around the table so she could scream at Dora from close quarters. Alice searched in her pockets for *anything* she could throw at Dora to wake her up. Ah-ha! She'd lost a button from her jacket earlier and had stuffed it into her pocket to sew back on later. She just hoped her aim was good

As McQueen hove into sight having rounded the end of the table, Alice's button *pinged!* off Dora's forehead.

"Huh? Wzzt?" Dora sat up and looked around.

Sentence first, verdict afterwards ...

Slightly out of breath, McQueen pulled up beside her.

"You were asleep!" she shrieked.

"I most certainly was not," replied Dora.

"You were! This must go to tribunal!" McQueen drew herself up. "You have been found guilty of sleeping on the job," she pronounced with finality. She turned to Mad Hattie. "Write that down."

"Wait a minute," Alice interrupted.

"What about witnesses?"

McQueen glared at her, but then conceded. "Very well. I call myself as the first witness. Did I see this worker sleeping? Yes I did. The guilty verdict stands! Off with her head!!"

Beedeley-beedeley-beep!

Mad Hattie pulled her mobile phone from her pocket and checked the screen.

"Tea break!" she announced.

McQueen rubbed her hands.

"Excellent! Sentencing always makes me hungry."

All the computer screens faded away to be replaced by cups and saucers, while plates of cakes and sandwiches dotted the tabletop. Alice reached for a sandwich, but had her knuckles soundly rapped by Mad Hattie.

"Have you no manners? At *this* table, we wait till someone says grace." She nodded to McQueen, who stood and said, "Grace!" That done, she sat down. "Now you may begin."

Alice reached again for a sandwich.

"Move up! Move up!"

"What?" asked Alice crossly. "Why are we moving again?"

"It's the rules," declared Mad Hattie.

Alice grudgingly shifted one seat over and muttered "I don't even *like* tea. Why can't I have coffee?"

"Ah," said McQueen, "you'd prefer

coffee?"

"Oh, yes. Please. May I?"

"May you what?" asked McQueen.

"Well ... have coffee?"

"No you may not. There isn't any."

"Then why did you offer?" asked Alice.

"I didn't," said McQueen.

"You did!"

"I did not. I merely surmised you would prefer it. Anyway ..." she clapped her hands "... tea break is over!"

"But I haven't had anything yet!" wailed Alice, as she watched the teacups fade away and be replaced by computer screens again.

"Then you shouldn't have wasted so much time asking for things you can't have. Back to work!"

Alice jammed her headset on with poorly-disguised ill grace and pasted a smile on her face.

"Good morning .." she began.

"It's *evening*," hissed Mad Hattie from behind her.

"Good evening," Alice tried again.

"You're speaking to Alice, how may I help?"

"I have a hole in my window."

"I'm sorry?"

"Well your being sorry is no use to me," snapped the voice. "What are you going to do about it? It's double-glazed as well."

"Sir, we're not glaziers."

"Now you listen to me, young lady. It says right here that this is a windows helpline, so I demand you help me!"

"But it's not for that kind of window!"

"Oh! Oh! It's like that is it? That's false advertising, that is. I shall be complaining about you!!!" [*Click!*]

Alice shook her head and took another call.

"Good evening .."

"It's *morning*," hissed Mad Hattie from behind her. "You just had morning tea."

"I didn't have anything," pointed out Alice crossly. "And how can it be morning when it was evening a minute ago?" she shouted at Mad Hattie's retreating form.

Sighing, she turned her attention back to her caller, but they'd already rung off. She ground her teeth. This was quite the most ridiculous place she'd ever worked. She answered another call.

"Good morning ..."

"And the patio door's cracked!"

"Sir, for the last time, I can't fix your windows!!!"

There was a shocked silence around the table. Alice watched in horror as McQueen and Mad Hattie both bore down upon her.

"Can't fix Windows? You're telling people you *can't* fix Windows?!!" McQueen screamed at her from two inches away. "You're fired! Off with your head!"

"But ... no ..." Alice's protests fell on deaf ears as she was dragged from her chair by Mad Hattie and McQueen. Their nails dug into her skin as she fought to escape.

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Wwwrrrrroowwwlllll!

Alice woke with a start, as her cat Dinah raked her claws down Alice's arm, meaning it was one minute past time for feeding her.

"Oh Dinah!" sighed Alice. "I've just had the most curious dream!"