

Lady Alyssa and the Barrel of Ice

Lady Alyssa tells of her journey to the Earth's core in a barrel of ice, and what she found there to precipitate the downfall of the government of New Zealand.

The Countess asks the Lady of Essex to Tell Her Tale

"I have long been impressed by the extent of your travels, Lady Alyssa. This is a good night for tales, so perhaps you could share with us the tale of your journey to the Earth's core in a barrel of ice, and what you found there to precipitate the downfall of the government of New Zealand."

Lady Alyssa Prepares to Tell Her Story

Lady Alyssa laughs for several minutes before responding. "I must thank you, my dear Countess. I hadn't thought of that adventure in a very long time. However, before I begin, I must beg all present company," she pauses to look each person in the eye, including the butler and Sally, before continuing, "for the utmost discretion in what you are about to hear, for the protection of both myself and the others who were involved in this extraordinary chain of events. The Earl prefers me not to talk of such things these days. I trust, since I am amongst friends, that you will all respect my request."

Lady Alyssa and the Barrel of Ice

"I must begin my tale by explaining that I found myself in difficult circumstances when I first moved to Paris. I had earned myself a place as a chorus girl in Madame Fleuverie's show, Les Filles avec des Plumes, but I quickly found myself several months behind on my rent. Paris was an expensive city even back then. I was forced to supplement my income as a private dancer, performing at bachelor parties and the like. I soon earned myself a reputation in certain circles for my Wine Barrel Act. I would hide inside a wine barrel with an unsecured lid and be wheeled in with the other barrels at the beginning of the party. I would remain crouched inside, waiting for my cue, whereupon I would burst out of the barrel, dressed as a harem dancer and perform the Dance of the Nine Veils.

"On this particular occasion, I had been invited to perform at Versailles by King Louis XV as a surprise for one of his favoured stable hands who was to be married the following day. It was the height of summer and the party was to be held in a secluded garden at the far end of the estate. The staff decided, both for their convenience and my own comfort, as it did get rather stifling inside, that instead of my barrel being empty they would half fill it with ice. The plan was, after I had leapt out of the barrel, it would be used to chill the seafood. Although, there was some discussion that the men might enjoy adding chunks of this ice to their drinks. Well, they were French, after all."

Contessa Barbara offers her view

"Good heavens," says the Countess of Tango, "you must have been cold."

Lady Alyssa and the Runaway barrel of Ice

"Well, yes Countess, it was rather cold but one never argued with Louis who was rumoured to be more than a little odd in his entertainment requests. I thought, since it was such a hot day and I would only be on ice for a brief period of time, that the several months of rent and extra veils I could then afford to buy with my inflated fee would be more than worth a few moments of pain.

Unfortunately, Helene, a friend of mine who usually accompanied me to these appointments, was unable to come to Versailles as she was auditioning for a new Off the Champs musical in Paris. I was forced to entrust my protection and safety to one of the groundsmen. I waited in the sun for as long as I could, delaying the inevitable. When it was time, the groundsman helped me climb inside and placed the lid on the barrel. He then wheeled it out, I assume, to join the other wine barrels. I was aware of being loaded onto a wagon and driven some distance. My barrel bounced around somewhat and I inside it, so that by the time the ride was over and the barrel unloaded onto the ground, I had bruises on my elbows and knees and several other unmentionable places.

Nothing else happened for quite some time and I remained crouched inside, straining to hear a nearby discussion about the music and drink service. I was still waiting for my cue when suddenly, I was on my side and rolling at great speed as if someone had tipped the barrel over and was making a rapid escape with it."

Contessa Barbara and the Lady Kathryn disagree

"I do not imagine," began the Contessa, "that this was the last time you saw the groundsman. If the King's wine was being stolen, the fellow would have considered it his duty to bring it back, even if it meant he had to track the thieves from Versailles to Moscow and back again. I'll wager," she continued, flipping a silver coin across to Alyssa, "that's exactly what happened."

Lady Kathryn gives a rather derisive sniff. Gerald is somewhat startled.

"Really Countess. It is well know that the hiring procedures of the French Monarchy are *the* most lax in the world. Indeed - despite his *obvious* unsuitability - my cousin Fergus once managed to gain employment as Grand Poohbah and Offerer of Important Advice on Cultural Matters to King Louis XV himself. True, he was not in the King's services for long. But it was sufficient time for him to retrieve the stolen galley proofs of a small, if rather controversial, volume that I once wrote on 'The Breeding of French Monarchs'. She smiles. "But that is, of course, another story."

Lady Kathryn places her own silver coin in front Lady Alyssa. "I wager that you did indeed see the groundsman again - but only because it was he who had stolen you and your barrel. Furthermore I wager that this groundsman was not of French extraction at all, but revealed himself to be no less than that ex-convict and scourge of the antipodes Steve 'The Crocodile Hunter' Crocodilehunter!"

As the conversation continues, Contessa Barbara, frowning at being contradicted, retrieves her silver coin from Lady Alyssa and offers in its stead a gold. "Lady Kathryn, before you begin your digression, I feel I must point out the error in your logic. Without for one moment doubting your obvious expertise in the matter of fraudulent entry into positions of trust, and while it is undoubtedly true that hiring procedures of the French Monarchy are atrociously lax if - as you say - a relative of yours was able to find a position of any importance (when not qualified), in the case of Palace Groundsmen, the situation is altogether different. Indeed, the groundsmen of Versailles are widely acknowledged to be

quite without equal anywhere in Europe in their honour and diligence. It is for this reason that I surmise that the groundsman in this case is sure to have tracked the King's wine all the way to Moscow (and back again), seen to the proper punishment of the thieves and in all likelihood played some small role in Lady Alyssa's escape.

"Correct me if I am wrong, Lady Alyssa, but it was - I believe - King Louis XI who began the tradition. In times of war, common men have the opportunity to cover themselves in glory and demonstrate before their King their diligence, honour, wit and strength. They may thus aspire to positions of high office. In times of peace, it is usual for the sons of nobility to be given such positions - and while noble blood is indeed the stronger for its purity, there are exceptions and it does happen that men - such as your cousin Fergus - are thus appointed for offices to which they are entirely unsuitable. Louis XI noticed this and decided to create a peacetime opportunity for common men. It had to be a position close to the King, where the men could be directly observed in their work. It had to be a position suited to the commoner, but a position of some small responsibility. Thus, the Royal Groundsmen of Versailles were established. Ambitious young men from around France seek entry into the RGV because it is known that the King sees the position as a testing ground. If, within a year of service, a Groundsman is able to distinguish himself in every way, he is given a position of trust and status in the King's service. If not, he is flogged severely for his arrogance in thinking he could compete with nobility, and sent home in shame. Only the best of the aspirants are allowed even to try, so the Groundsman in Lady Alyssa's story would have been an exceptional young man."

Lady Alyssa, the Groundsman and Moscow

"The Contessa is right. The Groundsman, Monsieur Marc Jean-Claude, was indeed an exceptional man. He was probably the bravest and kindest, most honourable and stubborn man I have ever had the pleasure to know." She pauses for a brief, nostalgic moment.

"You are well versed Contessa in the nuances of the King's court. However, you give away only a part of the ending. Marc was in fact the groundsman who helped me, a little apologetically I must add, inside the barrel and it was he who placed the lid on top. He had promised to watch over me while I waited to perform.

However, my efforts to draw his attention to my kidnap were in vain. My cries for help were drowned out by the noisy parade of the Cirque which, as my luck would have it, chose that exact moment to cross the grounds. I remained inside my barrel, being bounced and thrown around. As you can imagine, by this time I was very cold and scared. At some point, I recall a rather large lurch and my barrel became airborne, hitting something solid before smashing to the ground with great force. I believe this is what caused me to black out.

I only remember regaining consciousness to the sound of two men arguing about wine, or rather, the lack of it. I soon discovered that my hands had been tied together and fastened above my head to a pipe which ran along the ceiling of the room we were all within. I had not, however, been removed from my barrel and the ice had begun to melt. As I stood knee-deep in my icy bath, I was aware of movement on my periphery. I turned to see the same groundsman crouching behind me. He quickly introduced himself. He explained that he had been in hot pursuit of the barrel as it was his sworn duty to protect the King's possessions. At the time, he had thought, as had my captors, that the barrel was filled with wine. He had pursued the thieves to Paris, sneaked aboard their vessel and hidden. He confidently informed me that this vessel was headed for Moscow and that he had a plan."

The Doctor wagers

The Doctor pushes forward a silver coin. "I'll wager Monsieur Jean-Claude was mistaken, not as to the destination, but as to the manner of the conveyance, for I assume that you were in a submarinical device, and Jean-Claude was entirely ignorant of such vessels, being merely a French menial and not, for example, a nautical engineer. Monsieur Jean-Claude's escape plan must have been, therefore, fatally flawed, and you would have had to save the both of you from certain death with nothing but your wits and your veils."

A plan, of sorts

Lady Alyssa laughs. "Yes, as it turned out, the plan was a little too simplistic for our situation. We were to wait until my captors were asleep, sneak up to the deck, dive off and swim to shore. I waited for the signal for what seemed like a very long time and as I watched the men pressing switches on some sort of control system and arguing, I had a strange, sinking feeling. Frankly, I was a little concerned about the plan, mostly because I couldn't swim and I didn't want to tell Marc because, well, never mind that now." She coughs slightly before continuing.

"Eventually the men fell asleep and Marc was finally able to untie me. At last I was freed from my barrel! We crept across the room, our backs pressed to the walls, feeling our way in the dark. It was the strangest thing, we could find neither a door nor a flight of stairs up to the deck. The only entrance appeared to be the trap door in the ceiling that Marc said he had dropped through earlier.

It seemed as though there was no escape for us. I looked frantically about and my eyes caught sight of the control panel. I went over to it and looked through some sort of eyepiece device as I had seen one of the men do earlier. I could see nothing but blackness. As I leaned forward to a more comfortable position, as the eyepiece was a little too high for me, my hand accidentally brushed a switch which turned on a light. Suddenly I could see, but what I did see alarmed me. I wanted my growing suspicions to be wrong. I wanted to see a harbour, or in the worst case, distant land. Instead, I saw a large school of fish. In that instant, I realised we were not aboard a ship. We were, as the good Doctor has surmised, on board a submarine. However, worse than that, we were at great depth and still sinking! We were forced to abandon our plan. Marc was a talented protector - brave and strong and true - but unfortunately, he was not the greatest strategist. We decided to resume our positions, he hidden behind a stack of boxes, and I tied to the pipe, and wait to seize a better opportunity for our escape.

The submarine kept sinking. Just as I had finally decided that the ocean must be infinite in depth and we were not going to crash horribly into the bottom, the vessel lurched, switched directions and sped up. It felt as though we had been sucked down the great drain on the ocean floor. I had always thought that to be a great village myth. I was mistaken. I also had not noticed that the men had been woken until I heard one tell the other that we were still on route to the rendezvous point."

Lady Alyssa and the Market Place of Doom

Worried that she had bored her listeners to sleep, Lady Alyssa was glad of Lady of Basingstoke's interjection. "Well, yes, it was unfortunate that I had to get back into the barrel but Marc tied my

hands loosely enough for me to easily escape and, funnily enough, the deeper our vessel sank, the warmer the water in the barrel became. Actually, the warm bath was exactly what I needed to soothe my nerves.

Information I gathered from snippets of my captors' conversations told me we were in a tunnel, of rather ingenious and complex structural engineering, leading to the centre of the earth. It was one of several new trade routes being established and controlled by a few ambitious entrepreneurs of rather shady background. The stack of boxes piled next to me, apparently, contained goods these men intended to sell for a high price on the black market. It seemed that energetic, young women also fetched a high price on this particular market. This was why they hadn't thrown me overboard when they had opened the barrel and discovered me instead of wine inside. I was most anxious to escape the fate they had intended for me.

Finally the submarine slowed to a halt and docked. The larger of the two men untied me and strong-armed me off the vessel. I was led into a square where I was overwhelmed by the busy throng of people buying, selling and negotiating. It reminded me of the marketplace in Downtown Cairo. The smell of smoke mingled with coffee was overpowering. The two men stopped to have a brief argument about the precise directions to a place called 'Chez Sheila' before they strode off towards the far side of the square, dragging me after them."

The Contessa and the Doctor combine wagers

The Countess, who had been too engrossed in the story to speak, now interjects: "So there you were, held by two strong men, lost in a strange marketplace at the centre of the world, with nothing but your veils and your wits. But veils, at least, can be tied together and silk is the strongest of fibres... I'll wager that your famous lassoing skills helped you out of a tight spot."

She discreetly passes a silver coin to Lady Alyssa.

The doctor, miffed at missing his previous wager, pushes forward a gold coin. "Since, clearly, as you are sitting here opposite me, though I'd scarcely credit it otherwise, you escaped this vile den of thieves and colonists with your honour and person intact, I will wager that you did so with the aid of..." He pauses to think. "Your now-empty barrel, three loaves of bread, the contents of the pockets of a passing German, low cunning and ungentlemanly combative arts, seven of your nine veils, an abandoned cannon and Marc's long-lost cousin, Guillaume."

An escape, Lady Alyssa and the ever-decreasing number of veils

Indeed, Doctor, I did execute an escape, if a little haphazardly. So much happened in a such a short period of time. I'll do my best to relate the series of events in the order in which they occurred.

I was dragged into 'Chez Sheila' and forced to stand between the two men as they waited to speak with the Manager. When the Manager came downstairs, the three engaged in heated negotiations regarding French goods trafficked by the men and left on the submarine. Although fluent in English, I found it very difficult to understand the Manager as he had a strange and thick accent. I soon realised this establishment was an old-fashioned bordello when the Boss came to join them and negotiations turned to focus on me. Further, I recognised the Boss to be a prominent member of the New Zealand

Government! Parisian newspapers had recently covered his visit to France where tense discussions were held concerning the ownership of various Pacific islands. As I stood there wondering what involvement the New Zealand Government could possibly have with these thieves, three of the men left the room. I was left in the foyer, guarded by one of my kidnappers who seemed more engrossed in some papers on the table beside him than securing his captive.

I seized my opportunity, wrenching my arm from his grip, kicking him swiftly in the shins and following these moves with a forceful thrust of my knee to a sensitive part of his body. Caught unaware, the guard doubled over in pain and I ran from the establishment, heading back towards the market square. I continued to run, passing several stalls, searching for a place to hide. Suddenly I heard someone call my name and as I came to a stop, a large man stood up from a table just inside a nearby wine bar. He looked surprisingly similar to Marc. He introduced himself as Guillaume Jean-Claude and explained that he was the long-lost cousin of my protector. Apparently he had been taking care of some business in the square when he had bumped into Marc who had been following me. After a brief and joyous reunion, Marc had explained the situation and his plan to rescue me from 'Chez Sheila'. Guillaume had been more than willing to offer his services, agreeing to watch for Marc or a woman dressed in many veils and assist in any way he could. He had promised to help me get to the submarine where we would wait for Marc.

I was most relieved by this news until Guillaume pointed behind me to men rapidly approaching. It seemed my escape had been noticed and my kidnappers had come after me, and Marc was after them. We hurried off in the opposite direction and I began placing objects behind me, directly in the path of our pursuers. I flung chairs, a table, a random abandoned cannon that I found decorating the entrance to a Scandinavian restaurant. However, the men easily dodged each obstacle and were gaining on us. I passed a bakery, grabbed a loaf of bread off a display table and hurled it behind me. It hit the closest of the men in the eye, a skill I had learnt during my Vaudeville days, stunning him briefly. I quickly repeated the move a second and third time. These loaves hit the second man in the head, halting his pursuit. My actions were successful in slowing the men down and enabled Marc and Guillaume to tackle them, each becoming engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

Anxious to help, I looked around, hoping to find a weapon of some kind but to no avail. I tried to attract help from passersby and finally managed to stop a kind, German man. He was reluctant to get involved but emptied his pockets, offering me all he had. I sifted through his spare change, in various currencies, and found a Swiss Army Knife, packets of pepper and salt and a Belgium chocolate. Grateful for the sugar rush, I popped the chocolate in my mouth. Energised, I rushed into action, grabbing a pinch of pepper I ran up to the man that Guillaume was wrestling and blew it into his face, dodging an unconnected punch as I did so. Blinded and rendered helpless due to an involuntary sneezing fit, the man was quickly overpowered by Guillaume and I offered one of my veils to help secure him. However, due to the complex knot-tying, a talent highly valued in France, two of my veils were required for the task. I then repeated my tactics and helped to disable the man wrestling Marc.

The three of us made our way back to the submarine with my kidnappers in our custody. Alas, the battle was not yet over. When we arrived at the dock, a man who worked for 'Chez Sheila' was waiting to unload the goods, unaware of the kerfuffle. Recognising the men in our custody he made a move to fight us. Marc quickly lunged to place a sharp kick in the man's stomach as I ran aboard and grabbed the closest object I could find - my barrel. I quickly emptied it, ran back to the fight and dropped the barrel on our new aggressor's head, rendering him unconscious. We led the two thieves aboard the vessel and secured them to the same pipe as I had been earlier, using another one of my veils for each. As I fixed the remaining veils to a more discreet arrangement about my person, Marc went to retrieve the barrel, now in several pieces, determined to return the King's property in full. The

unconscious man we had left on the dock was starting to wake so, at Marc's request, I gave another of my rapidly disappearing veils to secure him to the dock to avoid any further possible acts to prevent our escape once the submarine door was sealed.

Finally we were able to set coordinates for our return voyage to France, Marc having some experience with submariner vessels. On our return to Versailles, Marc presented the King with his stolen property and organised for my kidnappers to be brought to justice. In addition, the information of New Zealand's possible involvement in colonising the centre of the earth, controlling the trade routes in and out and in particular ownership of brothels was much appreciated by King Louis. Marc was rewarded for his heroic acts and eventually earned a place in the King's Personal Protection Guards at Versailles. Interestingly, France was able to secure ownership of several of the contentious Pacific islands due to the untimely and suspicious dissolution of the young New Zealand government, apparently due to a total lack of trust by the people who have decided to remain without a centralised governing body ever since.

Go back to [the_first_game](#)

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Last update: **2008/08/27 18:35**

