THE ANNOTATED ALICE

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND
AND
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
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"Wipe your glosses with what you know"

JAMES JOYCE

Introduction

Let it be said at once that there is something preposterous about an annotated ALICE. Writing in 1932, on the hundred-year anniversary of Lewis Carroll's birth, Gilbert K. Chesterton voiced his "dreadful fear" that Alice's story had already fallen under the heavy hands of the scholars and was becoming "cold and monumental like a classic tomb."

"Poor, poor, little Alice!" bemoaned G.K. "She has not only been caught and made to do lessons; she has been forced to inflict lessons on others. Alice is now not only a schoolgirl but a schoolmistress. The holiday is over and Dodgson is again a don. There will be lots and lots of examination papers, with questions like: (1) What do you know of the following; mimsy, gimble, haddocks' eyes, treacle-wells, beautiful soup? (2) Record all the moves in the chess game in *Through the Looking-Glass,* and give diagram. (3) Outline the practical policy of the White Knight for dealing with the social problem of green whiskers. (4) Distinguish between Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

There is much to be said for Chesterton's plea not to take ALICE too seriously. But no joke is funny unless you see the point of it, and sometimes a point has to be explained. In the case of ALICE we are dealing with a very curious, complicated kind of nonsense, written for British readers of another century, and we need to know a great many things that are not part of the text if we wish to capture its full wit and flavor. It is even worse than that, for some of Carroll's jokes could be understood only by residents of Oxford, and other jokes, still more private, could be understood only by the lovely daughters of Dean Liddell.

The fact is that Carroll's nonsense is not nearly as random and pointless as it seems to a modern American child who tries to read the ALICE books. One says "tries" because the time is past when a child under fifteen, even in England, can read ALICE with the same delight

as gained from, say, *The Wind in the Willows* or *The Wizard of Oz.* Children today are bewildered and sometimes frightened by the nightmarish atmosphere of Alice's dreams. It is only because adults—scientists and mathematicians in particular—continue to relish the ALICE books that they are assured of immortality. It is only to such adults that the notes of this volume are addressed.

There are two types of notes I have done my best to avoid, not because they are difficult to do or should not be done, but because they are so exceedingly easy to do that any clever reader can write them out for himself. I refer to allegorical and psychoanalytic exegesis. Like Homer, the Bible, and all other great works of fantasy, the ALICE books lend themselves readily to any type of symbolic interpretation—political, metaphysical, or Freudian. Some learned commentaries of this sort are hilarious. Shane Leslie, for instance, writing on "Lewis Carroll and the Oxford Movement" (in the *London Mercury,* July 1933), finds in ALICE a secret history of the religious controversies of Victorian England. The jar of orange marmalade, for example, is a symbol of Protestantism (William of Orange; get it?). The battle of the White and Red Knights is the famous clash of Thomas Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce. The blue Caterpillar is Benjamin Jowett, the White Queen is Cardinal John Henry Newman, the Red Queen is Cardinal Henry Manning, the Cheshire Cat is Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, and the Jabberwock "can only be a fearsome representation of the British view of the Papacy . . ."

In recent years the trend has naturally been toward psychoanalytic interpretations. Alexander Woollcott once expressed relief that the Freudians had left Alice's dreams unexplored; but that was twenty years ago and now, alas, we are all amateur head-shrinkers. We do not have to be told what it means to tumble down a rabbit hole or curl up inside a tiny house with one foot up the chimney. The rub is that any work of nonsense abounds with so many inviting symbols that you can start with any assumption you please about the author and easily build up an impressive case for it. Consider, for example, the scene in which Alice seizes the end of the White King's pencil and begins scribbling for him. In five minutes one can invent six different interpretations. Whether Carroll's unconscious had any of them in mind, however, is an altogether dubious matter. More pertinent is the fact that Carroll was interested in psychic phenomena and automatic writing, and the hypothesis must not be ruled out that it is only by accident that a pencil in this scene is shaped the way it is.

We must remember also that many characters and episodes in

ALICE are a direct result of puns and other linguistic jokes, and would have taken quite different forms if Carroll had been writing, say, in French. One does not need to look for an involved explanation of the Mock Turtle; his melancholy presence is quite adequately explained by mock-turtle soup. Are the many references to eating in ALICE a sign of Carroll's "oral aggression," or did Carroll recognize that small children are obsessed by eating and like to read about it in their books? A similar question mark applies to the sadistic elements in ALICE, which are quite mild compared with those of animated cartoons for the past thirty years. It seems unreasonable to suppose that all the makers of animated cartoons are sado-masochists; more reasonable to assume that they all made the same discovery about what children like to see on the screen. Carroll was a skillful storyteller, and we should give him credit for the ability to make a similar discovery. The point here is not that Carroll was not neurotic (we all know he was), but that books of nonsense fantasy for children are not such fruitful sources of psychoanalytic insight as one might suppose them to be. They are much too rich in symbols. The symbols have too many explanations.

Readers who care to explore the various conflicting analytic interpretations that have been made of ALICE will find useful the references cited in the bibliography at the back of this book. Phyllis Greenacre, a New York psychoanalyst, has made the best and most detailed study of Carroll from this point of view. Her arguments are most ingenious, possibly true, but one wishes that she were less sure of herself. There is a letter in which Carroll speaks of his father's death as "the greatest blow that has ever fallen on my life." In the Alice books the most obvious mother symbols, the Queen of Hearts and the Red Queen, are heartless creatures, whereas the King of Hearts and the White King, both likely candidates for father symbols, are amiable fellows. Suppose, however, we give all this a looking-glass reversal and decide that Carroll had an unresolved Oedipus complex. Perhaps he identified little girls with his mother so that Alice herself is the real mother symbol. This is Dr. Greenacre's view. She points out that the age difference between Carroll and Alice was about the same as the age difference between Carroll and his mother, and she assures us that this "reversal of the unresolved Oedipal attachment is quite common." According to Dr. Greenacre, the Jabberwock and Snark are screen memories of what analysts still persist in calling the "primal scene." Maybe so; but one wonders.

The inner springs of the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's eccen-

tricities may be obscure, but the outer facts about his life are well known. For almost half a century he was a resident of Christ Church, the Oxford college that was his alma mater. For more than half that period he was a teacher of mathematics. His lectures were humorless and boring. He made no significant contributions to mathematics, though two of his logical paradoxes, published in the journal *Mind*, touch on difficult problems involving what is now called metalogic. His books on logic and mathematics are written quaintly, with many amusing problems, but their level is elementary and they are seldom read today.

In appearance Carroll was handsome and asymmetric—two facts that may have contributed to his interest in mirror reflections. One shoulder was higher than the other, his smile was slightly askew, and the level of his blue eyes not quite the same. He was of moderate height, thin, carrying himself stiffly erect and walking with a peculiar jerky gait. He was afflicted with one deaf ear and a stammer that trembled his upper lip. Although ordained a deacon (by Bishop Wilberforce) he seldom preached because of his speech defect and he never went on to holy orders. There is no doubt about the depth and sincerity of his Church of England views. He was orthodox in all respects save his inability to believe in eternal damnation.

In politics he was a Tory, awed by lords and ladies and inclined to be snobbish toward inferiors. He objected strongly to profanity and suggestive dialogue on the stage, and one of his many unfinished projects was to bowdlerize Bowdler by editing an edition of Shakespeare suitable for young girls. He planned to do this by taking out certain passages that even Bowdler had found inoffensive. He was so shy that he could sit for hours at a social gathering and contribute nothing to the conversation, but his shyness and stammering "softly and suddenly vanished away" when he was alone with a child. He was a fussy, prim, fastidious, cranky, kind, gentle bachelor whose life was sexless, uneventful and happy. "My life is so strangely free from all trial and trouble," he once wrote, "that I cannot doubt my own happiness is one of the talents entrusted to me to 'occupy' with, till the Master shall return, by doing something to make other lives happy."

So far so dull. We begin to catch glimpses of a more colorful personality when we turn to Charles Dodgson's hobbies. As a child he dabbled in puppetry and sleight of hand, and throughout his life enjoyed doing magic tricks, especially for children. He liked to form a mouse with his handkerchief then make it jump mysteriously out of his hand. He taught children how to fold paper boats and paper

pistols that popped when swung through the air. He took up photography when the art was just beginning, specializing in portraits of children and famous people, and composing his pictures with remarkable skill and good taste. He enjoyed games of all sorts, especially chess, croquet, backgammon and billiards. He invented a great many mathematical and word puzzles, games, cipher methods, and a system for memorizing numbers (in his diary he mentions using his mnemonic system for memorizing *pi* to seventy-one decimal places). He was an enthusiastic patron of opera and the theater at a time when this was frowned upon by church officials. The famous actress Ellen Terry was one of his lifelong friends.

Ellen Terry was an exception. Carroll's principal hobby—the hobby that aroused his greatest joys—was entertaining little girls. "I am fond of children (except boys)," he once wrote. He professed a horror of little boys, and in later life avoided them as much as possible. Adopting the Roman symbol for a day of good fortune, he would write in his diary, "I mark this day with a white stone" whenever he felt it to be specially memorable. In almost every case his white-stone days were days on which he entertained a child-friend or made the acquaintance of a new one. He thought the naked bodies of little girls (unlike the bodies of boys) extremely beautiful. Upon occasion he sketched or photographed them in the nude, with the mother's permission, of course. "If I had the loveliest child in the world, to draw or photograph," he wrote, "and found she had a modest shrinking (however slight, and however easily overcome) from being taken nude, I should feel it was a solemn duty owed to God to drop the request *altogether.*" Lest these undraped pictures later embarrass the girls, he requested that after his death they be destroyed or returned to the children or their parents. None seems to have survived.

In *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* there is a passage that expresses poignantly Carroll's fixation upon little girls of all the passion of which he was capable. The narrator of the story, a thinly disguised Charles Dodgson, recalls that only once in his life did he ever see perfection. ". . . it was in a London exhibition, where, in making my way through a crowd, I suddenly met, face to face, a child of quite unearthly beauty." Carroll never ceased looking for such a child. He became adept at meeting little girls in railway carriages and on public beaches. A black bag that he always took with him on these seaside trips contained wire puzzles and other unusual gifts to stimulate their interest. He even carried a supply of safety pins for pinning up the skirts of little girls when they wished to wade in the surf. Opening

gambits could be amusing. Once when he was sketching near the sea a little girl who had fallen into the water walked by with dripping clothes. Carroll tore a corner from a piece of blotting paper and said, "May I offer you this to blot yourself up?"

A long procession of charming little girls (we know they were charming from their photographs) skipped through Carroll's life, but none ever quite took the place of his first love, Alice Liddell. "I have had scores of child-friends since your time," he wrote to her after her marriage, "but they have been quite a different thing." Alice was the daughter of Henry George Liddell (the name rhymes with fiddle), the dean of Christ Church. Some notion of how attractive Alice must have been can be gained from a passage in *Praeterita,* a fragmentary autobiography by John Ruskin. Florence Becker Lennon reprints the passage in her biography of Carroll, and it is from her book that I shall quote.

Ruskin was at that time teaching at Oxford and he had given Alice drawing lessons. One snowy winter evening when Dean and Mrs. Liddell were dining out, Alice invited Ruskin over for a cup of tea. "I think Alice must have sent me a little note," he writes, "when the eastern coast of Tom Quad was clear." Ruskin had settled in an armchair by a roaring fire when the door burst open and "there was a sudden sense of some stars having been blown out by the wind." Dean and Mrs. Liddell had returned, having found the roads blocked with snow.

"How sorry you must be to see us, Mr. Ruskin!" said Mrs. Liddell.

"I was never more so," Ruskin replied.

The dean suggested that they go back to their tea. "And so we did," Ruskin continues, "but we couldn't keep papa and mamma out of the drawing-room when they had done dinner, and I went back to Corpus, disconsolate."

And now for the most significant part of the story. Ruskin *thinks* that Alice's sisters, Edith and Rhoda, were also present, but he isn't sure. "It is all so like a dream now," he writes. Yes, Alice must have been quite an attractive little girl.

There has been much argumentation about whether Carroll was in love with Alice Liddell. If this is taken to mean that he wanted to marry her or make love to her, there is not the slightest evidence for it. On the other hand, his attitude toward her was the attitude of a man in love. We do know that Mrs. Liddell sensed something unusual, took steps to discourage Carroll's attention, and later burned all of his early letters to Alice. There is a cryptic reference in Carroll's diary

on October 28, 1862, to his being out of Mrs. Liddell's good graces "ever since Lord Newry's business." What business Lord Newry has in Carroll's diary remains to this day a tantalizing mystery.

There is no indication that Carroll was conscious of anything but the purest innocence in his relations with little girls, nor is there a hint of impropriety in any of the fond recollections that dozens of them later wrote about him. There was a tendency in Victorian England, reflected in the literature of the time, to idealize the beauty and virginal purity of little girls. No doubt this made it easier for Carroll to suppose that his fondness for them was on a high spiritual level, though of course this hardly is a sufficient explanation for that fondness. Of late Carroll has been compared with Humbert Humbert, the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. It is true that both had a passion for little girls, but their goals were exactly opposite. Humbert Humbert's "nymphets" were creatures to be used carnally. Carroll's little girls appealed to him precisely because he felt sexually safe with them. The thing that distinguishes Carroll from other writers who lived sexless lives (Thoreau, Henry James . . .) and from writers who were strongly drawn to little girls (Poe, Ernest Dowson . . .) was his curious combination, almost unique in literary history, of complete sexual innocence with a passion that can only be described as thoroughly heterosexual.

Carroll enjoyed kissing his child-friends and closing letters by sending them 10,000,000 kisses, or 4¾, or a two-millionth part of a kiss. He would have been horrified at the suggestion that a sexual element might be involved. There is one amusing record in his diary of his having kissed one little girl, only to discover later that she was seventeen. Carroll promptly wrote a mock apology to her mother, assuring her that it would never happen again, but the mother was not amused.

On one occasion a pretty fifteen-year-old actress named Irene Barnes (she later played the roles of White Queen and Knave of Hearts in the stage musical of ALICE) spent a week with Charles Dodgson at a seaside resort. "As I remember him now," Irene recalls in her autobiography, *To Tell My Story* (the passage is quoted by Roger Green in Vol. 2, page 454, of Carroll's *Diary*), "he was very slight, a little under six foot, with a fresh, youngish face, white hair, and an impression of extreme cleanliness. . . . He had a deep love for children, though I am inclined to think not such a great understanding of them. . . . His great delight was to teach me his Game of Logic [this was a method of solving syllogisms by placing black and red counters on a diagram of Carroll's own invention]. Dare I say this made the evening

rather long, when the band was playing outside on the parade, and the moon shining on the sea?"

It is easy to say that Carroll found an outlet for his repressions in the unrestrained, whimsically violent visions of his ALICE books. Victorian children no doubt enjoyed similar release. They were delighted to have at last some books without a pious moral, but Carroll grew more and more restive with the thought that he had not yet written a book for youngsters that would convey some sort of evangelistic Christian message. His effort in this direction was *Sylvie and Bruno,* a long, fantastic novel that appeared in two separately published parts. It contains some splendid comic scenes, and the Gardener's song, which runs like a demented fugue through the tale, is Carroll at his best. Here is the final verse, sung by the Gardener with tears streaming down his cheeks.

He thought he saw an Argument
  That proved he was the Pope:
He looked again, and found it was
  A Bar of Mottled Soap.
"A fact so dread," he faintly said,
  "Extinguishes all hope!"

But the superb nonsense songs were not the features Carroll most admired about this story. He preferred a song sung by the two fairy children, Sylvie and her brother Bruno, the refrain of which went:

For I think it is Love,
For I feel it is Love,
For I'm sure it is nothing but Love!

Carroll considered this the finest poem he had ever written. Even those who may agree with the sentiment behind it, and behind other portions of the novel that are heavily sugared with piety, find it difficult to read these portions today without embarrassment for the author. They seem to have been written at the bottom of treacle wells. Sadly one must conclude that, on the whole, *Sylvie and Bruno* is both an artistic and rhetorical failure. Surely few Victorian children, for whom the story was intended, were ever moved, amused, or elevated by it.

Ironically, it is Carroll's earlier and pagan nonsense that has, at least for a few modern readers, a more effective religious message than *Sylvie and Bruno.* For nonsense, as Chesterton liked to tell us, is a way of looking at existence that is akin to religious humility and wonder. The Unicorn thought Alice a fabulous monster. It is part of the philosophic dullness of our time that there are millions of rational

monsters walking about on their hind legs, observing the world through pairs of flexible little lenses, periodically supplying themselves with energy by pushing organic substances through holes in their faces, who see nothing fabulous whatever about themselves. Occasionally the noses of these creatures are shaken by momentary paroxysms. Kierkegaard once imagined a philosopher sneezing while recording one of his profound sentences. How could such a man, Kierkegaard wondered, take his metaphysics seriously?

The last level of metaphor in the ALICE books is this: that life, viewed rationally and without illusion, appears to be a nonsense tale told by an idiot mathematician. At the heart of things science finds only a mad, never-ending quadrille of Mock Turtle Waves and Gryphon Particles. For a moment the waves and particles dance in grotesque, inconceivably complex patterns capable of reflecting on their own absurdity. We all live slapstick lives, under an inexplicable sentence of death, and when we try to find out what the Castle authorities want us to do, we are shifted from one bumbling bureaucrat to another. We are not even sure that Count West-West, the owner of the Castle, really exists. More than one critic has commented on the similarities between Kafka's *Trial* and the trial of the Jack of Hearts; between Kafka's *Castle* and a chess game in which living pieces are ignorant of the game's plan and cannot tell if they move of their own wills or are being pushed by invisible fingers.

This vision of the monstrous mindlessness of the cosmos ("Off with its head!") can be grim and disturbing, as it is in Kafka and the Book of Job, or lighthearted comedy, as in ALICE or Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*. When Sunday, the symbol of God in Chesterton's metaphysical nightmare, flings little messages to his pursuers, they turn out to be nonsense messages. One of them is even signed Snowdrop, the name of Alice's White Kitten. It is a vision that can lead to despair and suicide, to the laughter that closes Jean Paul Sartre's story "The Wall," to the humanist's resolve to carry on bravely in the face of ultimate darkness. Curiously, it can also suggest the wild hypothesis that there may be a light behind the darkness.

Laughter, declares Reinhold Niebuhr in one of his finest sermons, is a kind of no man's land between faith and despair. We preserve our sanity by laughing at life's surface absurdities, but the laughter turns to bitterness and derision if directed toward the deeper irrationalities of evil and death. "That is why," he concludes, "there is laughter in the vestibule of the temple, the echo of laughter in the temple itself, but only faith and prayer, and no laughter, in the holy of holies."

Lord Dunsany said the same thing this way in *The Gods of Pagana.* The speaker is Limpang-Tung, the god of mirth and melodious minstrels.

"I will send jests into the world and a little mirth. And while Death seems to thee as far away as the purple rim of hills, or sorrow as far off as rain in the blue days of summer, then pray to Limpang-Tung. But when thou growest old, or ere thou diest, pray not to Limpang-Tung, for thou becomest part of a scheme that he doth not understand.

"Go out into the starry night, and Limpang-Tung will dance with thee . . . Or offer up a jest to Limpang-Tung; only pray not in thy sorrow to Limpang-Tung, for he saith of sorrow: 'It may be very clever of the gods, but he doth not understand.' "

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND and THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS are two incomparable jests that the Reverend C. L. Dodgson, on a mental holiday from Christ Church chores, once offered up to Limpang-Tung.