ALICE JOINS THE IMMORTALS

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"NOBODY," says *Truth*, "reads *Alice in Wonderland* to-day; it is too prosaic and rational, in comparison with the political news." The argument is plausible, but the statement is not true, even though it is made by *Truth*.

There was a time when the most quoted books in English were the Bible and *Shakespeare*, though some popular sayings attributed to one or the other would be found in neither. Laurence Sterne's "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb" has been often credited to the Bible by those who have been misled by a certain Biblical atmosphere; and Cosgreve's "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned," usually misquoted as "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," is sometimes attributed to Shakespeare. On the other hand, only real students of the Bible remember that such an apparently modern figure of speech as "escaped with the skin of his teeth" was first used in the *Book of Job*.

Be this as it may, I would be willing to wager a modest sum that now the most widely quoted books, and perhaps also the most widely read books, are Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Oddly enough his other books, *The Hunting of the Snark*, *Phantasmagoria*, *Sylvie and Bruno*, and the rest (I am thinking only of his lighter books) seem to be, like the second part of *Robinson Crusoe*, as little known among modern writers as among their readers, although they are not only very entertaining but full of good, quotable stuff.

Some little time ago it occurred to me that I had in the course of my casual reading come across a number of quotations from the books of Lewis Carroll, and I decided to make a note of any that might turn up in the future. This evening I dumped the result out of a large brown envelope, and as I shuffled the odds and ends of notes about on the table, I was first impressed by the number of them, and then by the curious variety of sources from which they came. It did seem to me as I looked them over, and remembered how there had been nothing even remotely systematic or purposeful about my reading, that they offered fairly conclusive evidence of the popularity of the *Alice*

books among present-day writers of every description, from detective novelists up (or down) to statisticians.

And it is a not unreasonable assumption that if the sayings and doings of the Red Queen and the Duchess and the Cheshire Cat, Father William, Humpty Dumpty, the Mock Turtle, the Mad Hatter, the Gryphon, Tweedledee and the Jabberwock, not to mention Alice herself, have so entered into the thought of the writers of books and articles that they provide apt illustration for all sorts of situations, they must be almost equally familiar to those who read what others have written. At any rate a number of contemporary authors evidently believe that their readers are, like themselves, Alice fans, for in many cases they do not think it necessary to put an identifying tag to a Lewis Carroll quotation.

While it is quite possible that the present generation of children may turn up their sophisticated little noses at the adventures of *Alice in Wonderland* and in *Looking Glass Land*, I am convinced that the exquisite humour of these tales, their satire that is keen but never venomous, their undying charm, have made a steadily increasing appeal to grown-ups, from the day when the young mathematical lecturer Charles Lutwidge Dodgson began to tell fairy tales to the small daughter of the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and afterwards was persuaded to put them into print. And that almost universal appeal certainly has had in it nothing at all of the artificial vogue skillfully fostered by enterprising and resourceful publishers for certain books of the present day.

I looked over my notes with a vague idea of arranging them in some orderly fashion, but as they did not appear to fall into any particular pattern, or suggest any of those mysterious cross-sections of intellectual achievement of which we hear so much, or, indeed, any conclusion other than the ever-increasing popularity of Lewis Carroll, I did not see that I had any choice but to put them before the reader more or less at random, as evidence of the truth of my thesis.

Here, then, in the first place, is an extract from one of the entertaining novels of Daniele Varé, an Italian diplomat who writes as charmingly and effectively in English as in his native tongue, and seems to have been equally at home in London, Rome, Paris, Vienna or Berlin, but most of all in Pekin.

"I compared them", says one of the characters in *The Temple of Costly Experience* (and I am ashamed to say I have forgotten who the "them" were), "to Alice in Wonderland asking

questions of the caterpillar, as he sat upon the mushroom, smoking a hookah."

And again, in the same novel: "I found that, as in the Mad Hatter's tea-party, everyone had moved around." You remember how the March Hare, the Mad Hatter and the Dormouse kept moving around the table, leaving their dirty dishes for Alice, who unfortunately was the last of the party.

In his equally delightful reminiscences, *Laughing Diplomat*, Daniele Varé leaves no doubt whatever of his devotion to the Alice books. "Since I was young and studied music in Berlin," he says, "it has always been a habit of mine to set popular music to little tunes of my own composition. As I walked up the Leipziger Strasse, I hummed to myself the verses of Lewis Carroll:

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right"?

"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure my brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again".

Elsewhere in the book, Varé is describing an incident in the far north:

"The never-ending light gets on people's nerves. The Italian delegate to the millenary celebrations of the Icelandic Althing was one of these. The absence of any relief made him ill. It does not affect my nerves, but I feel as if I were living in *Alice in Wonderland*:

The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might,
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.

Clemence Dane also weaves the fascinating though improbable idea of the sun shining with all its might in the middle of the night into *The Arrogant History of White Ben*.

Varé's recollection of the story of *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, as told by Tweedledee, is quite correct, except that he has telescoped the first stanza by omitting the two middle lines.

Once more, in the same book, he returns to the subject: "It may be the air, which is like nothing I ever breathed before,

or merely the fact of being away from offices and telegrams and despatches, but I feel as Alice must have felt when she passed through the looking-glass into a world beyond."

Returning to the field of fiction, we find Hugh Walpole in *John Cornelius* adding his testimony. "He sat down beside them on a bench looking out to the sea and proceeded to eat, like the King in *Alice*, a large sandwich out of a paper bag."

And again:

"I had never been *inside* England before, *right* inside, as Wonderland Alice would say."

The hot-tempered Red Queen has an appeal of her own. E. F. Benson, in *Lucia in London*, says of one of the engaging characters in his never-to-be-forgotten stories of small-town life in England:

"Mrs. Quantock hurried by with averted face, and naturally everybody wanted to know how the Red Queen from *Alice in Wonderland* was."

And Agatha Christie, in *The Seven Dials Mystery*—and what could be more remote from the Lucia books, though also very good of its kind?—makes this contribution:

" 'Well,' said Jimmy, 'I'm not yet like the Red Queen. I can't believe six impossible things before breakfast.' "

"Magnolia," says Edna Ferber in *Show Boat*, "looking down at herself, was surprised, like Alice in Wonderland after she had eaten the magic currant cake, to discover how far away from her head her feet were."

The reader will, of course, not have forgotten that, while the magic cake made Alice grow faster and farther than even the most efficient of present-day glands, and the magic fan had such an alarming influence in the other direction that she presently found herself in the awkward and unusual predicament of swimming in her own tears, it remained for the sensitive Caterpillar to teach her how to regulate her height to meet the varying conditions of Wonderland.

Dr. Robert H. Coats, the Dominion Statistician in Canada, had this incident in mind when he was delivering his presidential address to the American Statistical Association in 1938. "We are," he said—I do not at the moment remember in what connection—"like Alice when she nibbled the mushroom and her chin got tangled with her toes."

And as we have been reminded of the Red Queen, so we sometimes stumble upon reminders of members of her court. "Don't you remember your *Alice in Wonderland*"? asks Bernard

Newman in *Maginot Line Murder*: "The Duchess beat the baby when he did this." That, you will remember, was the baby that turned into a pig:

> Speak roughly to your little boy,
> And beat him when he sneezes:
> He only does it to annoy,
> Because he knows it teases.

I was put in mind of these adventures by reading an editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor*:

"Yes," says the writer of the editorial, "and how can they hide their blushes when it comes to *Alice in Wonderland*, with its thinly veiled references to the proper treatment of subject races, in such lines as these," and he quotes the above stanza.

Alice and her companions seem to be prime favorites with the editorial staff of the *Monitor*, for one finds this: "Oysters may grow voluble, as they did on a famous excursion with the Walrus and the Carpenter," in one number of the newspaper; and on another occasion an editorial under the title "Walrus in Wonderland:"

> "The time has come," the walrus said, "to move into the zoo." So four of them did. There must have been cheering in the Bronx, where the zoo is, for this is the largest herd, the papers say, ever to be exhibited in any United States zoo. The importance of the walrus's arrival must be estimated from the reception committee that went to meet them at New York's City Island, where presumably
>
> . . . all the big committeemen stood
> And waited in a row.
>
> As well they might. There was the director of the New York Zoological Park; the assistant director; the curator of mammals and reptiles; and the park veterinarian.
>
> But where was the carpenter? He is not mentioned in the despatches. Nor is it stated that the members of the reception committee, having had "a pleasant walk, a pleasant talk," saw fit to celebrate by dining on oysters. One can only hope the occasion was not missed.

Bill and Ruth Albee, who have put into their book *Alaska Challenge* a very readable account of a tramp through northwestern Canada and Alaska, found something about the fantastic walrus to remind them of the creatures of Lewis Carroll. "Finally," they say, "one tusked head emerged not two hundred feet away. He looked like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*."

And, in a letter, an old-timer in Alaska says to me: "I could fill several pages with the tragically stupid but absurdly

amusing *Alice in Wonderland* effects of the tariff and labor restrictions in a frontier country needing both goods and men for its development."

Arthur Mills in *Intrigue Island* asks: "Who was it used to say things were 'curiouser and curiouser'? Did it come into *Alice in Wonderland?*"

Dorothy Sayers undoubtedly remembered that it did, when she put into *In the Teeth of the Evidence*: "Dear Egg, Curiouser and curiouser", for elsewhere in the same admirable detective yarn she says: "He was like the Queen of Hearts in *Alice*—he never executed nobody, you know." She knows her *Alice*.

Edward Hope, in a short story in the December, 1940, number of the *Cosmopolitan*, introduces another well-known companion of Alice. "What's happened?" someone asks. "What's the meaning of this Cheshire Cat imitation?"

In a book review in *Saturday Night*, Hector Charlesworth says: "It was while she was still awake, and staggered at the dullness of some people's chosen reading, that Alice in Wonderland made one of her most sapient observations. 'What is the use,' she asks herself, 'of books without pictures or conversations?' "

I find I have made a note that in *The Joyful Delaneys* Hugh Walpole has this: "He understood thoroughly . . the Walrus and the Carpenter," but I have quite forgotten the circumstances, and particularly why it should be thought worthy of note that anybody should understand that plain unvarnished tale, or the character of those single-minded epicures. Now, if Mr. Walpole had boasted that one of his characters understood Jabberwocky, even with Humpty Dumpty's interpretation, that might be something to brag about.

And that reminds me that Jack Alexander, in an article on James H. R. Cromwell, lately United States Minister to Canada, in the *Saturday Evening Post*, says of Mr. Cromwell's economic theories, "A few have condemned them as pure jabberwocky." A good, descriptive word that, comprehensible to those who know that remarkable poem. And they will appreciate the significance of a remark in P. G. Wodehouse's *Quick Service*, "She stood awhile in thought." You will remember the gallant young adventurer who goes out to slay the Jabberwock:

> So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
> And stood awhile in thought.

Margery Sharp also knows her Lewis Carroll. Someone says, in *The Nutmeg Tree*, "It was the very *best* butter." That was in the incident of the Tea Party. The Mad Hatter's watch has stopped and the March Hare's well-intentioned effort to lubricate it with butter has not proved successful. "I told you," said the Mad Hatter, "butter wouldn't suit the works." "It was the *best* butter," the March Hare meekly replied.

And T. W. L. MacDermot, in a recently published pamphlet, says: "The German Mad Hatter would oil his watch with the best guns, not the best butter."

"If you can read English," someone says in John Dickson Carr's *It Walks by Night*, "this will interest you. You might psychoanalyse the mock turtle or the dormouse."

And Bartimeus puts this into *The Green Door*: "It was the kind of door through which you passed to incredible adventures, like Alice's looking-glass."

Another writer of detective stories, Alice Campbell, also finds inspiration in the same book. In her *The Click of the Gate* she uses this illustration: "They made him think of the King's Messenger in *Through the Looking Glass*." That unfortunate inhabitant of the White Queen's upside-down world!

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked.

"What sort of thing do *you* remember best?" Alice ventured to ask.

"Oh, things that happened the week after next," the Queen replied in a careless tone.

"For instance, now," she went on, sticking a large piece of plaster on her finger as she spoke (that was the finger she was presently to prick with her brooch), "there's the King's Messenger. He's in prison now, being punished; and the trial doesn't even begin until next Wednesday; and of course the crime comes last of all."

This, somehow, reminds one of the limerick on relativity sent to *Punch* by Reginald Buller, formerly of the University of Manitoba, and perhaps better known as an authority on mushrooms and other fungi:

> There was a young woman named Bright,
> Whose pace was far faster than light;
> She set out one day,
> In a relative way,
> And returned the previous night.

Alice also has become a model for political satire. One of the new books is entitled *Adolph in Blunderland*, by James Dyrenforth and Max Kesler, described as "a political parody of Lewis Carroll."

Even the advertisers have gone to this extraordinary spring for refreshment and inspiration. One of them opens his commendation of a new product in this way: "The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. 'Where shall I begin, shall it please Your Majesty?' he asked. 'Begin at the beginning,' said the King."

Dorothy Hosmer, in an article on Caviar Fishermen of Romania, in the *National Geographic Magazine*, says she "seemed to be drifting through a mirror, like Alice in Wonderland."

In an article by S. F. Porter, in the *Baltimore Sunday Sun*, condensed in the *Reader's Digest*, he describes as "Mad Hatter arithmetic" the United States Government's policy of buying silver to bring it to a certain ratio to the gold reserves, and, again, as "America's *Alice in Wonderland* silver folly."

D. E. Stevenson, in a very charming recent novel *The English Air*, makes one of her characters say: "What do you mean by filling my head with your Mad Hatter allusions?"; and again, "You were so damned careful to give nothing away that your letter read like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*."

To refer again to the *Saturday Evening Post*—William L. Lawrence, in an article "The Atom Gives Up," says: "Professor Fermi observed strange Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass phenomena that did not seem possible."

And to cap that with a quotation from a Canadian newspaper, the *Brantford Expositor*, in a recent editorial on Daylight Saving, said: "Just why the Ottawa Administration should have decided upon the *Alice in Wonderland* method of application at present decreed, is difficult to understand."

This seems to be about the last of my notes. Dorothy Thompson, in *Let the Record Speak*, offers this comment: " 'It all sounds a little mad.' 'It does, indeed,' said the Grouse. And the Mad Hatter was an Englishman, the March Hare, an English beast, and *Alice in Wonderland* remains the favorite English classic." But not alone to the English.

Now if these books and articles are accepted as fair samples of contemporary literature, it may, I think, be taken as proved that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are more widely quoted now than any other books, and

it is not an unreasonable assumption that they are also more widely read, by all classes of people, of all ages, than any other book with the possible exception of the Bible. But, as I have already said, that extraordinary popularity is not extended to the other books of Lewis Carroll; or at any rate there does not appear to be any evidence of it.

As a casual test, I asked a number of friends and acquaintance if they had happened to read several apparently isolated fragments of verse that are found printed at the end of some editions of *Wonderland*, and if they knew anything about their origin. Most of them had neither seen nor heard of the verses; a few remembered seeing them at the back of *Wonderland*; not one knew that they formed part of the song of the carpenter, that is scattered, like raisins in a pudding, through the pages of *Sylvie and Bruno* and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. Here are some of them:

He thought he saw a Banker's Clerk
Descending from the bus:
He looked again, and found it was
A Hippopotamus:
"If this should stay to dine," he said,
"There won't be much for us."

* * *

He thought he saw an Albatross
That fluttered round the lamp:
He looked again, and found it was
A Penny-Postage-Stamp.
"You'd best be getting home," he said:
"The nights are very damp."

* * *

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."

* * *

He thought he saw a Rattlesnake
That questioned him in Greek:
He looked again, and found it was
The Middle of Next Week.
"The one thing I regret," he said,
"Is that it cannot speak!"

There is much engaging nonsense in *Phantasmagoria*, notably in "The Three Voices":

"The world is but a Thought," said he:
"The vast unfathomable sea
Is but a Notion—unto me."

And darkly fell her answer dread
Upon his unresisting head,
Like half a hundredweight of lead:

"The Good and Great must ever shun
That reckless and abandoned one
Who stoops to perpetrate a pun."

* * *

Still from each fact, with skill uncouth
And savage rapture, like a tooth
She wrenched some slow reluctant truth.

Here is a characteristic parody of Alfred Bunn's song:

I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls,
And each damp thing that creeps and crawls
Went wobble-wobble on the walls.

Faint odours of departed cheese,
Blown on the dank, unwholesome breeze,
Awoke the never-ending sneeze.

The Hunting of the Snark is full of the odd words Lewis Carroll invented for "Jabberwocky." "But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day," "The Beaver went simply galumphing about," "'Tis the voice of the Jubjub," "It fairly lost heart and outgrabe in despair," "A Bandersnatch swiftly drew nigh," "Without rest or pause while those frumious jaws" "chanted in mimsiest tones."

Having got so far, and concluded that there was nothing more to be said, I picked up a copy of Jan Struther's *Mrs. Miniver*, and was chuckling over its delicious humour, when I came upon this: "Exactly, she thought, 'what I say three times is true.' But the trouble was, it still had to be said in three different languages." She was speaking about that notice found printed in French, German and Italian, on or below the windows of continental railway carriages, "*Ne pas se pencher en dehors*," and so forth. Now, as you probably remember, (I'm becoming wary of assuming that any of the pathways of Lewis Carroll are untravelled to-day), it is in the opening stanzas of *The Hunting of the Snark* that the Bellman says:

Just the place for a Snark! I have said it twice:
That alone should encourage the crew.

> Just the place for a Snark! I have said it thrice:
> What I tell you three times is true.

And I had said that there did not appear to be any evidence of the extraordinary popularity of the Alice books extending to *The Hunting of the Snark* and *Phantasmagoria*!

To rub in the lesson that one should not try to draw conclusions either from the writings of Lewis Carroll or from evidence as to their influence upon these times, D. E. Stevenson, whom I have already quoted, has Wynne say to Dane in *The English Air*, "Don't be snarky. It doesn't suit you a bit." And Kathleen Conyngham Greene, in the Canadian *Bulletin of the Bureau of Public Information*, mentions that "People whose daily existence seemed to follow a course as ordered as that of the sun (she is speaking of the present-day habits of Londoners), now, like the Snark of Lewis Carroll's poem, 'frequently breakfast at five o'clock tea and dine on the following day':"

> Its habit of getting up late you'll agree
> That it carries too far, when I say
> That it frequently breakfasts at five o'clock tea,
> And dines on the following day.

Alexander Woollcott has reminded us, in his Introduction to the Lewis Carroll omnibus, that there is humour even in the contrast between Charles L. Dodgson the Mathematical Lecturer and Lewis Carroll the contriver of fairy tales, as there is between Stephen Leacock the economist and Stephen Leacock the author of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. Most of us remember the incident with Queen Victoria, when Her Majesty was so pleased with *Alice* that she sent word that she would be glad to have the next work of Mr. Dodgson dedicated to her, and was puzzled and a little inclined to think that she was being made the subject of an obscure joke when Dodgson sent her a copy of *An Elementary Treatise on Determinants*. Less well known I am sure is the incident described by Woollcott, when Dodgson was asked to contribute to a philosophical symposium, and Carroll replied:

> And what mean all these mysteries to me
> Whose life is full of indices and surds?

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