

## LEWIS CARROLL AND THE "ALICE" BOOKS<sup>1</sup>

HARRY MORGAN AYRES

We are told that there was once a professor who dreamed he was giving a lecture—and awoke to find that it was true. But for a professor to dream that he was giving a lecture on Alice, expounding a world down a rabbit-hole peopled with playing cards, and a world behind the looking glass inhabited by chessmen—to dream *this* and to wake up to find it true is so astonishing as to make everything else that happens this afternoon appear by contrast plausible and even commonplace. And then to find that when we are supposed to have waked up, an obviously incredible rumor still runs that Alice herself is present, preparing to tell us, maybe, that we are all nothing but a pack of cards—and "Such cards!" she may say in telling about it afterwards! The shock of discovering what we are suddenly and unexpectedly about quite prepares us, I hope, to acknowledge at the outset that the Oxford that gave birth to Alice and her adventures and the world in which we are now living—where all winter we have been reading in the newspapers reports telling what has happened *tomorrow* at Shanghai, in a war that does not exist, or telling us that there are people going hungry because there is too much food in the world and too many facilities for carrying it to the people that need it—are both no more incredible than those realms in which the fancy of Lewis Carroll has made us all immortal playmates, in which heritage this anniversary of his happy appearance on the planet invites us for the moment heartily to rejoice.

Our present purpose then is unashamedly festive. You do not expect of me great discoveries, new documents, bibliographical minutiae, or psychological probings. You ask me to rejoice with you that in our youth a couple of little books fell in our way, books that turned the world inside out and

<sup>1</sup> A lecture in connection with the Lewis Carroll exhibition in Avery Library (see pages 233-234, 238) and in honor of Mrs. Alice P. Liddell Hargreaves (the original "Alice"), who came from England to Columbia University for the occasion, delivered by Professor Ayres in the University Gymnasium, 4 May, 1932.

stood it on its head that we might learn to laugh at it and love it, furnished us with sharp turns of language that brightened the rather drab pattern of everyday discourse and gave us a whole new and friendly mythology, figures that stand closer to us and in no less number than the divine imaginings of alien and older ages. Our proper business then is to ask what sort of appearance this benefactor of ours made in his world and how he compounded the simple gifts that have so enriched us. Such is the "Snark" we shall hunt this afternoon:

We shall seek it with thimbles—and seek it with care;  
 We shall hunt it with forks and hope;  
 We shall threaten its life with a railway share;  
 We shall charm it with smiles and soap.

If it should turn out that this Snark *is* a Boojum (you know) —and you should all "softly and suddenly vanish away," you are not to be surprised. I shall myself not feel the slightest astonishment at such a turn of events. For it is not certain that we have waked to find ourselves in the midst of this discourse. We may still be sleeping, lapped in the curious dreams of childhood, and I think it quite possible that you may shortly awake to the realization that though you seemed to be listening to the ridiculous remarks of an academic lecturer you really heard in your dream only the purrings of Dinah, the cat, after all.

Now if in this mood anyone goes home from this assembly and begins telling that at a certain point the lecturer began to blow up—like a balloon—and his cravat slipped down somewhere toward his middle—a very beautiful cravat, as you so rightly say—why I hope there will be some of your friends who will not quite believe you. But I should like to suggest that Professor Humpty Dumpty has been of some help to me in the preparation of the remarks that follow. For Humpty Dumpty was, I may say is (for he is immortal), a professor and a philologist, and a professor of literature. Let me remind you of some parts of his colloquy with Alice:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all . . ."

"You seem to be very clever at explaining words, Sir," said Alice. "Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called 'Jabberwocky'?"

"Let's hear it," said Humpty Dumpty. "I can explain all the poems that ever were invented—and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe."

"That's enough to begin with," Humpty Dumpty interrupted: "there are plenty of hard words there. '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner."

"That'll do very well," said Alice: "and '*slithy*'?"

"Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy.'—You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up in one word."

Now I remembered that Professor Humpty Dumpty was very proud of the fact that this expression of his—"portmanteau words"—had been taken up by brother philologists and added to the already luxuriant terminology of their science. So it was altogether natural that I should hunt out the round little gentleman in the library. I confess it was not without some desire of prevailing on him to take my place before you this afternoon, for I thought if we could have one of the *characters* present, we might as well have some of the others—some of the less objectionable ones. But Professor Humpty Dumpty, though commonly accounted a good egg by his students (he has not many), is a little hard boiled.

"Oh, no, no, no," said he. "Yes, I remember Dodgson very well. Mathematical chap. Always messing 'round with photography—the wet kind—in dark-rooms. Wouldn't wear an overcoat—wore cotton gloves, though, summer and winter. Stammered a little. Fellow had housemaid's knee, you know. Used to go to the theatre and loved it, but thought it might be wrong. Something of a quiz we thought him at the 'House.' Awfully fond of little girls, very little ones—told 'em stories. Some of 'em I believe are still read. They liked it."

It began to look as if I was not going to get from Professor

Humpty Dumpty just the kind of sympathetic view of the subject that I required. But I left him with the intention of coming back to him, for there is this about a professor of literature, that while a professor of astronomy knows what there is to know about astronomy and a professor of geology knows what there is to know about geology, you never can tell what a professor of literature knows—you can't tell and he won't—but there is always a chance of picking up something from him sooner or later.

Well, in the interval I found my mind straying to a remote English parsonage, cut off from the world to a degree which it is beyond our powers to conceive, thrown back on itself—there were ten brothers and sisters, chiefly sisters, in the household—for amusement. Now please place in such an environment a sensitive mind peculiarly endowed with a capacity for abstract reasoning, a mind that liked to construct and solve *puzzles*, and I think it needs no psychologist to come from his laboratory to tell us that we shall have to do with a person who will continue to live in whimsically delightful worlds of his own construction, long after he has passed beyond the years of his childhood. Now if you add that the so-called real world in which such a person is invited to live is itself so constructed (and this, I submit, is equal to any six other impossibilities you might be asked to believe before breakfast) that, because he took a prize in his youth in mathematics, he need never do anything all the rest of his life but contemplate mathematics, and the struggle of other youthful minds with it; that he was to have four sitting rooms—no less—where none should disturb his circles, and four bedrooms, on the one only condition, on pain of losing all his sitting rooms, in one of the most beautifully tranquil spots in the world, on the one only condition that he should never marry, but live in the four bedrooms and four sitting rooms all alone; if you will try to imagine that, I think you have all you have any business to want to know in order to explain the creator of Wonderland and of Looking Glass Country. The succession of household magazines that he wrote in his neat, youthful hand contains the substance of it all. There you will find the so-called Anglo-Saxon stanza that opens and closes the later "Jabberwocky"; there you will find