



Authorgraph No.71: Lewis Carroll

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Lewis Carroll by **Naomi Lewis**.

Interview supplied by **Naomi Lewis**

This manuscript, found in an Oxford attic and published now for the first time, is the only known account of an interview with Lewis Carroll.

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My name is Rhoda Raven. I am 24 years of age. At the time of writing (July 1885) I am working as a governess to the little daughter of Mr and Mrs???? Now I have long had a wish to meet and speak with the author of **Alice** and the later books of fantasy by Mr Carroll, all of which I have carefully read.

Fortune gave me two cards. Firstly, it happened that my little charge, a sweet and biddable child, with the currently popular name of Alice, has a close resemblance to the little Alice Liddell whose photograph ends the recently published facsimile edition of the first draft of the tale, **Alice's Adventures under Ground**. Her hair, which is dark brown (unlike the fair-haired girl of Mr Tenniel's pictures) is cut in the same way, fairly short with a fringe over her forehead. Secondly, I lately acquired a sympathetic friend, a Miss Gertrude Thomson, whose drawings of children have made her both friend and assistant to Mr Carroll, as I shall call him here. She informed me where he usually took his afternoon walk, and so it chanced that he came face to face with little Alice and myself, also taking a stroll. Seeing us, he stood transfixed. Questions were asked; names were given; I mentioned Miss Thomson; even my own name Rhoda pleased him ('Ah, little Rhoda Liddell') - finally, there was an invitation to take tea in his rooms.

I must reveal that I had with me a small notebook which I held on my lap beneath the table. In a 'shorthand' of my own devising, I wrote down all that was said. On returning home, before my memory blurred, I made sense of the web of notes. This is the exact fair copy.

First I will set down this circumstance. On the tea-table, with the cake and fine bread and butter, was a plate of strawberry tarts. The little girl turned to me.

Alice: May I ask a question'?

Rhoda: You may indeed.

Alice: Did the Queen of Hearts make these tarts?

Mr Carroll: That is a valuable question. I shall certainly make enquiries. All I know at present is that they appeared on this table half an hour ago, and we have not even been introduced. Would you care to be introduced?

Alice: No, no - for how then could I eat one?

Mr Carroll: I see that you have another question in your mind. Now questions are far more interesting than answers, and much cleverer. So I am going to tell you the answer to what is in your mind, and you tell me if I have the right question. Yes'? You wish to ask if the Knave of Hearts has been invited to this tea-party? No, he has not; the tarts are quite safe. Was that the question?

Alice: Yes, Mr Wonderland.

After tea he placed her on the sofa with a little puzzle to solve. It was, I think about red and white roses. But the day had been tiring, and in a few minutes our five-year-old had fallen asleep. Mr Carroll refused to let me wake her.

Mr Carroll: I would really like to sketch her, but I begin to doubt my powers. We must invite Miss Thomson one of these days. But seeing this little girl, on this particular date moreover, July 4th, has taken me back many years.

Rhoda: You show great kindness and understanding to this dear child, and to others, I believe.

Mr Carroll: Oh, that is easy enough to explain. I was the oldest boy in a family of eleven - seven girls and four boys. Only two girls were older than myself, and not by many years. In our remote Rectory at Daresbury in Cheshire we had to make our own diversions. I was full of ideas and invention and it was a pleasure to me to entertain and amuse these little ones. I was surrounded by their admiration and love. Conjuring tricks, a marionette theatre, a railway game with strict rules, family magazines - these were among my devisings. All this did not prepare me for the harshness of Rugby School.

Rhoda: You were unhappy there'?

Mr Carroll: No earthly consideration would induce me to go through my three years there again. But I worked hard, and gained my place at Christ Church College, and did sufficiently well, especially in Mathematics, to be recommended for a Studentship - usually called a Fellowship in other colleges. This award was for life - so long as the holder did not marry. My dear father, who also gained a Studentship, relinquished it for marriage, but I have never felt tempted to do likewise. Children of very large families often choose to remain single, I have noted. Mathematically speaking, this is just as well! I see children when I wish and not otherwise, and only those of my choice. That excludes boys. To me they are not an attractive race of beings. Even in the case of girls, childhood passes quickly enough. About nine out of ten of my child-friendships get shipwrecked at the critical point 'where the stream and river meet'. The experience of many years has taught me that there are few things in the world more evanescent than a child's love. Therefore I continue to make new little friends. But this little girl - she is sleeping still - affects me strangely. She recalls both my little sisters and Alice Liddell as I knew her first.

Rhoda: How did you come to meet her?

Mr Carroll: Without one thing **Alice** might never have been written. That was my camera. And I owe my start in photography to my uncle Skeffington Lutwidge. It was he who showed me the workings of the telescope and the microscope, and other such marvels. But when he demonstrated the camera, I was wholly captivated. I knew that I must acquire my own machine. 'I want some other occupation than mere reading and writing,' I told my uncle. By the beginning of 1856, as well as my Studentship I had been appointed College Lecturer in Mathematics, and felt sufficiently in funds to buy a camera. I went to London with a friend and bought the machine. It cost £15 - without the numerous extras. It was heavy, cumbrous, terrible to move around with all the glass and chemicals; it needed summer daylight for results - but it was my passport everywhere. It was enough of a novelty to give me access to the eminent (Tennyson, Rossetti, many another), to beautiful children, and to the family at the Deanery. The Liddell children soon became close friends and regular subjects.

Rhoda: You say that all your child-friends change. But Alice herself, the real original Alice - was she different?

Mr Carroll: Alice Liddell ... Why does one human affect us beyond any other? There is no reason, and yet it is so. In Euclidean terms, we must take it as an axiom. Without it, much of poetry and fiction would vanish I suppose. The

strange thing is that, though little Alice stirred my imagination more than any child I have known, yet I have to admit to myself that she was not, herself, deeply imaginative. All the Liddell children were delightful; their good looks were exceptional; they were wonderful companions. Alice was not quite five when I first saw her; Edith was two years younger; Lorina three years older. Whenever the parents were absent (there was a long holiday in Madeira) or more than usually occupied. - a royal visit, another birth, the three would beg me to come and tell stories. Though in the book Alice is seven or eight, in life she was ten on that July day in 1862 when we went up river to Godstow, and the Wonderland story began. My colleague, Robinson Duckworth, who helped to row, and to entertain with his singing, was also a listener. 'Are you inventing this just now?' he asked. I said that this was so. Alice especially begged me to write it down and the rest is well enough known. My publishers, Messrs Macmillan, and my artists, suffered greatly, I am well aware, from my exigences - but their skill remains part of the whole - an essential part.

Rhoda: As a governess, I know parents can sometimes be difficult ...

Mr Carroll: Mrs Liddell was always a problem. She was proud of her aristocratic connections, ambitious, temperamental, and determined that her daughters should marry well. She liked the camera, but she did not care for the insistent young Mr Nobody who operated it. There were long periods when I had no contact with the Deanery at all. There was a fondness, I believe, between Alice at 17 or so and Prince Leopold, the Queen's youngest son, who was studying at the University. He was a serious, very likeable young man, but his health was uncertain, for he suffered from haemophilia. But neither the Palace nor the Deanery found this acceptable, and both married other partners. I write at times to a Mrs Hargreaves, sending her some new edition of **Alice** maybe; she replies with the same civil formality, and only memory and a name link her with the enchanting little girl at the Godstow picnic. I have to say that, when Lorina and Alice were married, - sadly, Edith died on the eve of her wedding - Mrs Liddell attempted to renew the old connection. I was now, to be sure, somewhat known as an author.

Rhoda: The Alice books are full of private reference, I believe?

Mr Carroll: That is true. Dinah was one of two tabby kittens owned by the Liddell children; they were named Villikins and Dinah after the popular song. Poor Villikins died, it was thought of poisoning, but Dinah lives a tenth life on the printed page. Elsie, Lacie and Tillie are the girls, disguised a lot by anagram or initial. Speaking of cats, I recently took on the task of finding the kindest way of ending the sufferings of our aged college cat. I am beginning to be aware of many aspects of cruelty that did not touch me earlier. The animals in my books are really humanized fantasies. My sister Henrietta, who takes in many stray cats, has drawn my attention to the ill-use of horse, aptly described she tells me, in a recent book by a Miss Anna Sewell. But what rouses me most is the terrible practice of vivisection. I have written to Lord Salisbury, to the **Fortnightly Review** and to the **Pall Mall Gazette**, pointing out the harmful effect on the vivisector as well as on the tortured animal.

Rhoda: Mr Browning thinks exactly as you do. He would forbid it completely.

Mr Carroll: In a hundred years time, will it seem an unbelievable barbarism? Or not? I begin to fear that the growing Wonderland of science has no sane Alice to give it order and moderation. But now let me tell you something quaint. I had a number of Alice books printed on cheaper paper with plain bindings to distribute to poor sick children in hospitals and convalescent homes, where books have hard wear and a short life. Reading of this offer, a 'Lady Superior', as she called herself, wrote to ask to see a copy first, as she had to be very careful, all the children being Roman Catholics, as to what 'religious reading' they were given. I wrote to say, you may certainly see it first if you wish, but I can guarantee that the books have no religious teaching whatever in them. In fact, they do not teach anything at all. Another hospital manager wrote that he knew of a place where there were a number of sick children, but he was afraid that I would like to give them books - 'because they are Jews!' I wrote to say, 'why in the world shouldn't little Israelites read **Alice** as well as other children?'

Rhoda: The absence of the usual moral adds to the pleasure of the book for all young readers. But there is something to be learnt. Alice has courage and independence, and she knows how to behave in all circumstances.

Mr Carroll: You are right, Miss Rhoda. Manners are of the first importance. But if the books do hold a lesson, it is that words should be used with the utmost care and thought. They hold the key of logic, and logic governs every turn in the story. The word 'nonsense' has often been used of my children's books and verses. There is no absence of sense in **Alice**. It is, rather, a journey through a garden of reason, with unusual plants, perhaps, and growing rather wild.

Rhoda: Is it not true that you have been thought over-bold in making fun of the improving songs and verses that children - in my childhood at least-were forced to learn and recite?

Mr Carroll: I am told that my parodies are rather better known today than the originals. Yet sometimes the original has recurred to me with a new interest. 'Tis the voice of the sluggard' for instance. How easily this might be one's self. There is a line: 'He told me his dreams' - But what were his dreams? The line teases and perplexes me. Dreams are important to me. Much of my writing has come to me in a kind of waking dream - almost the whole of *Wonderland*, though I later added some persons and episodes. The design of **Through the Looking-Glass** was more deliberate, yet that too took its own course. Both books are dream situations. **The Hunting of the Snark** grew from a single line - the last. 'For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.' It came to me as I walked in a serious mood on the Downs one morning. I had spent the night at the bedside of a sick young cousin, soon to die. I knew not what it meant then; I know not what it means now, but I wrote it down. Some time afterwards the rest of the stanza occurred to me. The rest followed quite naturally. I am told that the poem gave pleasure to Cardinal Newman. It is a strange and haunting piece; even I continue to find it so. In the case of *Jabberwocky*, the first verse was the starting point. I had written it in 1855, I think, as a mock-stanza of Anglo-Saxon poetry. I have since learnt, to my shame, that it in no way resembles Anglo-Saxon verse or language - but let that pass. When I used the term Anglo-Saxon attitudes, I was, I think, less in error. Look for yourself at the pictures in the history books.

Rhoda: Would you tell me a little about **Sylvie and Bruno**?

Mr Carroll: Now that is the most *conscious* story I have written. Though it moves through dream country - Outland, Fairyland and the modern human world, though its characters can be both fairy and human, adult and young in one person, I have left little to wayward chance or 'dream'. I wished to avoid any likeness to the *Alice* tales - except perhaps in the occasional verses within. My hope was for more gravitas; to suggest some thoughts not wholly out of harmony with the graver cadences of life. Years of writing, and many of my preoccupations - secular, theological, scientific, human, are contained in it. Mr Furniss has illustrated it superbly. So far, it has not had the success that I hoped, but I think that this will come.

At this point there was a sound. Little Alice slid from the sofa with the paper in her hand.

Alice: I think I have done the puzzle ...

Mr Carroll: I shall mark this day with a white stone.

This was, I think, meant as praise.

Information

Illustrations on this Authorgraph are taken from Macmillan's **Alice**. The photographs are from **Lewis Carroll and his world** by John Pudney, from Thames & Hudson now, sadly, out-of-print.

Almost every publisher has an edition of the **Alice** books on their list: Collins, Dent, Dover, Everyman, Firefly, Gollancz, Heinemann, Hippo, Hutchinson, Julia MacRae, Methuen, O'Mara, Oxford, Puffin and Purnell. Our front cover features Macmillan's edition of **Through the Looking-Glass**, (0 333 29037 2, £9.99) with Sir John Tenniel's original illustrations.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, ill. Sir John Tenniel, Macmillan, 0 333 29038 0, £9.99

The Hunting of the Snark, ill. Helen Oxenbury, Heinemann, 0 434 96680 0, £6.95

Sylvie and Bruno, Dover, 0 486 25588 3, £5.95

Alice's Adventures under Ground, 1 85145 471 3, is published by Pavilion in association with The British Library at £9.99.

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