

## THE FORGONE LIMERICKS OF LEWIS CARROLL

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For a fact, Lewis Carroll was well acquainted with limericks from an early age onward. We know this because there has come down to us a set of four original limericks (see Note 1) which he “published” when he was only thirteen and still best known as Charles Dodgson. It is also the case that Carroll could hardly have failed to notice the phenomenon when, over the next few decades, Edward Lear’s several books of illustrated limericks met with enormous popular success. And it is certainly true that, over the course of his own writing career, Carroll published a good deal of light verse which could easily have been expressed in limerick form, including some *eight score* five-line verses whose rhyme schemes differ but slightly from the limerick’s.

Given these circumstances, it might reasonably be supposed that Carroll must surely have published at least a few additional limericks during his lifetime, but surprisingly such is not the case. After that one early quartet, *Carroll never again wrote another limerick for publication*. Indeed, with the single exception cited below, he never so much as mentioned limericks again in any of his subsequent published or voluminous private writings. It is almost as if Lear’s tremendous success with the form had for some reason proportionately diminished Carroll’s liking for it.

Why did Carroll publish no limericks as an adult? Did he fear that if he did, he might be seen as trying to emulate Lear? Or had he simply come to regard the limerick as being too hackneyed a verse form to have any artistic currency? The question is an intriguing one, but the focus of this article is upon another speculation of likely interest to limerick devotees, namely this: supposing that the adult Carroll *had* produced limericks for publication, what might they have looked like?

Happily for posterity, Carroll did inadvertently bequeath to it one limerick penned in adulthood. In books and other items given by him as gifts, he was in the habit of inscribing short poems to the recipient, among which may be found this undated verse addressed to a Miss Vera Beringer:

THERE was a young lady of station,  
‘I love man’ was her sole exclamation;  
But when men cried, ‘You flatter,’  
She replied, ‘Oh! no matter,  
Isle of Man is the true explanation.’

What can we learn from this sole surviving limerick from the hand of the mature poet? Most obviously, we might infer that Carroll preferred three-rhyme to two-rhyme limericks. This is hardly surprising; given only five lines in which to exhibit its cleverness, why would an enterprising mind like Carroll’s want to waste one of those lines with the redundant near-repetition of a previous line—especially when the wasted line would be the last one, the natural site for a punch line?

Also evident in this limerick is the generally cerebral cast of Carroll’s humor. Whereas Lear’s humor, by way of contrast, tends to rely upon naively risible ideas—a young lady, e.g., whose chin was so sharp that she played a harp with it—Carroll seemed to see humor as arising from

wit, and this limerick, which ably versifies a longish pun joke, is nothing if not witty. (A complementary view well expressed by an unnamed *WordIQ* author contrasts the two men's concepts of nonsense thusly: "Lewis Carroll's 'nonsense' is a *reversal* or parody of ordinary logic. He plays on the *meaning* of words, and his writing style itself is prosaic. Edward Lear's 'nonsense' is a true *absence* of logic; he plays on the *sound* of words and his writing style is poetic.")

As previously mentioned, Carroll in the course of his literary career published a good many non-limerickal five-line verses (most notably, in his 150-stanza comic poem "Phantasmagoria"), and the thought occurs that it might be possible to fabricate pseudo-authentic Carrollian limericks simply by rearranging the line order of some of these verses. Unfortunately, this turns out not to be the case, as not only do few such reordered verses make much sense, but they are invariably written in the wrong meter for limericks, and so do not scan remotely like them (see Note 2).

This leaves, as probably the best option for anyone attempting to envision the sort of limericks that Carroll might have left us had his early enthusiasm for them persisted, the reconstruction of some of his poems in limerick form, taking care to try to retain as much of the spirit and vocabulary of the originals as possible. To that end, here are Carroll's familiar poems "They Told Me You Had Been to Her..." from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, "Jabberwocky" from *Through the Looking-Glass* and the mad gardener's song from *Sylvie and Bruno* as they might have looked had their author, in some alternate reality (Wonderland, say), written them in limericks:

#### IT'S QUITE SIMPLE, REALLY

See, they *told* me you'd been to see her—  
And betrayed him to *us* like a cur!—  
Then denounced her to *him*,  
Claiming *I* couldn't swim—  
Don't you *know* we hate tattletales, sir?

Next, they sent word to us I had gone,  
Which of course meant that *he'd* carry on,  
Since she'd sworn they'd told you  
(Which was not then untrue)  
That we'd left your accounts overdrawn.

Given one, of course, *she* wanted two—  
Which was all that I'd stolen from you!  
So they fleeced him for four  
(Since he couldn't filch more),  
Which compelled us to cop your canoe.

He must NOT know that she liked them best—  
Keep that secret from her and the rest!  
For this always must be  
'Twixt ourselves, us and we,  
And may never the facts be suppressed!

## THE LAST JABBERWOCK

'Twas brillig, and sleek slithy toves  
Did gimble and gyrate in droves,  
Now ingraving mome raths  
Who'd outgrabe for their baths,  
Now cleaving mim borogoves' cloves.

“Beware, lad, the dire Jabberwock,  
With its scabrous and scurrilous talk,  
And let no beamish word  
Rile the cross Jubjub Bird,  
And no frumious Bandersnatch stalk!”

But a vorpal-class sword he had bought,  
So the manxomest foe he still sought—  
Till the wind whiffling free  
Through a tulge Tuumtum tree  
To his ears vile obscenities brought!

With a tree-wilting fanfaronade,  
Came the Jabber, all rodomontade!  
Then that sword went *snick-snack!*  
In a snuffish attack,  
And no more did foul rant gleet the glade!

“Hallelujah! Callooh and callay!  
The dread midden-mouthed 'Wock I did slay!  
I'm a *hero!*” he said,  
As he hacked off its head,  
And galumphed, all a-chortle, away.

“Oh, *alas*, lad! Callay and callooh!  
'Twas a *frabjous* rare beastie ye slew!  
'Twas the last of its clan,  
Says the King's Forest-Man,  
And he'd fain have a word, lad, with you!”

'Twas brillig, and sleek slithy toves  
Did gyrill and gimbrate in droves,  
Now ingraving mome raths  
All outgrabe at their baths,  
Now cleaving mim borogoves' cloves.

ON CLOSER INSPECTION...

What he'd thought was a clerk on a bus  
Was a hippo, in fact, in a truss;  
    "If *he* shared our bread,"  
    He with keen insight said,  
"There wouldn't be that much for *us!*"

What he'd thought was a whale with a fife  
Was a letter, in fact, from his wife;  
    "And thus is revealed,"  
    He wept as he reeled,  
"The bitter injustice of life!"

And that "buffalo in a chemise"?  
'Twas in fact just his wife's uncle's niece—  
    A surprise so uncouth  
    That in outrage, forsooth,  
He resolved to inform the police!

What he'd thought was a snake hissing Greek  
Was the middle, in fact, of next week;  
    "What a pity," he mused,  
    As he lurched on confused,  
"That it couldn't more lucidly speak!"

What he'd thought was a crocodile's tail  
Was in fact just a sixpenny nail;  
    "Had I thousands of *these*,"  
    He exclaimed in Chinese,  
"I'd *never* need go back to jail!"

What he'd thought was a leprechauns' camp  
Was in fact just a gummed postage stamp;  
    "You'd best get inside,"  
    He concernédly cried,  
"As the nights are exceedingly damp!"

What he'd thought was sure proof he was Pope  
Was a mottled, in fact, bar of soap—  
    "A denouement so dread,"  
    He despairingly said,  
"As to extirpate wholly all hope!"

True, the relatively cramped limerick format is probably not ideal for these particular poems, but perhaps these extrapolations may at least suggest the flavor of hypothetical Carrollian limericks.

## NOTES

### 1. Charles Dodgson's Melodies

In 1845, in the first of his domestic magazines, thirteen-year-old Charles Lutwidge Dodgson “published” the following four limericks, all of them his own compositions. If they are not especially sophisticated, they do at least scan extremely well, which is no slight achievement for such a youthful poet. Note that all of the limericks are of the three-rhyme variety. Dodgson called these verses “melodies”—could this have been a common contemporary name for limericks?

#### MELODIES

##### I

There was an old farmer of Readall,  
Who made holes in his face with a needle,  
    Then went *far* deeper in  
    Than to pierce through the skin,  
And yet strange to say he was made beadle.

##### II

There was an eccentric old draper  
Who wore a hat made of brown paper;  
    It went up to a point,  
    Yet it looked out of joint,  
The cause of which *he* said was ‘vapour’.

##### III

There was once a young man of Oporta,  
Who daily got shorter and shorter,  
    The reason he said  
    Was the hod on his head,  
Which was filled with the *heaviest* mortar.

His sister, named Lucy O’Finner,  
Grew constantly thinner and thinner;  
    The reason was plain,  
    She slept out in the rain,  
And was never allowed any dinner.

### 2. Carroll Rearranged

A handful of Carroll’s many published non-limerickal five-line verses make at least some sense when their lines are reordered to rhyme in limerick fashion, but as the following examples demonstrate, such reordering does not turn them into limericks. Of the four reordered verses below (in which only the line order and some of the punctuation have been changed), the first one is from “Stolen Waters” (1862) and the other three are from “Phantasmagoria” (1869).

They call me mad: I smile, I weep.  
Yea, when one’s heart is laid asleep,  
    What better than to die,  
    Uncaring how or why?  
So that the grave be dark and deep.

“My phantom-life was soon begun:  
I went out with an older one  
    When I was barely six,  
    And learned a lot of tricks—  
And just at first, I thought it fun...

“It means the drilling holes by scores  
In all the skirting-boards and floors  
    To make a thorough draught,”  
    The Ghost replied, and laughed;  
“It means the loosening all the doors...

“To let the wind come whistling through,  
You’ll sometimes find that one or two  
    Are all you really need,”  
    (I faintly gasped “Indeed!”)  
“But *here* there’ll be a *lot* to do...”