The Snark's Significance

by Henry Holiday

THE SNARK'S SIGNIFICANCE.

I.

MUCH fruitless speculation has been spent over supposed hidden meanings in Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*. The inclination to search for these was strictly natural, though the search was destined to fail.

It is possible that the author was half-consciously laying a trap, so readily did he take to the inventing of puzzles and things enigmatic; but to those who knew the man, or who have divined him correctly through his writings, the explanation is fairly simple.

Mr. Dodgson had a mathematical, a logical, and a philosophical mind; and when these qualities are united to a love of the grotesque, the resultant fancies are sure to have a quite peculiar charm, a charm so much the greater because its source is subtle and eludes all attempts to grasp it. Sometimes he seems to revel in ideas which are not merely illogical but anti-logical, as where the Bellman supplies his crew with charts of the ocean in which the land is omitted for the sake of simplicity, and "north poles and equators, tropics, zones and meridian lines" are rejected because "they are merely conventional signs." Or, as in the Barrister's dream, where the Pig, being charged with deserting his sty, the Snark pleads an *alibi* in mitigation. At other times, when the nonsense seems most exuberant, we find an underlying order, a method in the madness, which makes us feel that even when he gives Fancy the rein the jade knows that the firm hand is there and there is no risk of a spill, such as seems to be the fate of so many nonsense-writers, if we may judge by the average burlesques of the day. Take "Jabberwocky," for instance. The very words are unknown to any language, ancient or modern; but they are so valuable that we have adopted them and translated them into most lan-

guages, ancient and modern. What should we do without "chortle," "uffish," "beamish," "galumphing," and the rest? The page looks, when we open it, like the wanderings of one insane; but as we read we find we have a work of creative genius, and that our language is enriched as to its vocabulary.

Whether the humour consists chiefly in the conscious defiance of logic by a logical mind, or in the half-unconscious control by that logical mind of its lively and grotesque fancies, in either case the charm arises from the author's well-ordered mind; and we need not be surprised if the feeling that this is so leads many to look for some hidden purpose in his writings.

The real origin of *The Hunting of the Snark* is very singular. Mr. Dodgson was walking alone one evening, when the words, "For the Snark was a Boojum, you see," came spontaneously into his head, and the poem was written up to them. I have heard it said that Wagner began "The Ring of the Nibelungs" by writing Siegfried's "Funeral March," which certainly contains the most important motives in the work, and that the rest of the trilogy, or tetralogy, was developed out of it; but as this great work, though finished after the publication of *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876), was certainly begun before it, it is scarcely open to me to maintain that the great German master of musical drama plagiarised in his methods from our distinguished humorist.

Starting in this way, our author wrote three stanzas of his poem (or "fits" of his "agony," as he called them), and asked if I would design three illustrations to them, explaining that the composition would some day be introduced in a book he was contemplating; but as this latter would certainly not be ready for a considerable time, he thought of printing the poem for private circulation in the first instance. While I was making sketches for these illustrations, he sent me a fourth "fit," asking for another drawing; shortly after came a fifth "fit," with a similar request, and this was followed by a sixth, seventh, and eighth. His mind not being occupied with any other book at the time, this theme seemed continually to be suggesting new developments; and having extended the "agony" thus far beyond his original intentions, Mr. Dodgson decided to publish it at once as an independent work, without waiting for *Sylvie and Bruno*, of which it was to have formed a feature.

I rather regretted the extension, as it seemed to me to involve a disproportion between the scale of the work and its substance; and I doubted if the expansion were not greater than so slight a structure would bear. The "Walrus and Carpenter" appeared to be happier in its proportion, and it mattered little whether or not it could establish a claim to be classified among literary vertebrata. However, on re-reading the *Snark* now I feel it to be unquestionably funny throughout, and I cannot wish any part cut out; so I suppose my fears were unfounded.

I remember a clever undergraduate at Oxford, who knew the *Snark* by heart, telling me that on all sorts of occasions, in all the daily incidents of life, some line from the poem was sure to occur to him that exactly fitted. Most people will have noticed this peculiarity of Lewis Carroll's writings. In the thick of the great miners' strike of 1893 I sent to the *Westminster Gazette* a quotation from *Alice in Wonderland* about a mine; not a coal-mine, it is true, but a mustard-mine. Alice having hazarded the suggestion that mustard is a mineral, the Duchess tells her that she has a large mustard-mine on her estate, and adds, "The moral of that is—the more there is of mine the less there is of yours"; which goes to the root of the whole system of commercial competition, and was marvellously apt when landowners were struggling for their royalties, mine-owners for their profits, railway companies for cheap fuel, and miners for wages; each for "meum" against "tuum."

In our correspondence about the illustrations, the coherence and consistency of the nonsense on its own nonsensical understanding often became prominent. One of the first three I had to do was the disappearance of the Baker, and I not unnaturally invented a Boojum. Mr. Dodgson wrote that it was a delightful monster, but that it was inadmissible. All his descriptions of the Boojum were quite unimaginable, and he wanted the creature to remain so. I assented, of course, though reluctant to dismiss what I am still confident is an accurate representation. I hope that some future Darwin, in a new *Beagle*, will find the beast, or its remains; if he does, I know he will confirm my drawing.

When I sent Mr. Dodgson the sketch of the hunting, in which I had personified Hope and Care—

> "They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care,
> They pursued it with forks and hope"—

he wrote that he admired the figures, but that they interfered with the point, which consisted in the mixing up of two meanings of the word "with." I replied, "Precisely, and I intended to add a third—'in company with'—and so develop the point." This view he cordially accepted, and the ladies were admitted.

In the copy bound in vellum which he gave me the dedication runs: "Presented to Henry Holiday, most patient of artists, by Charles L. Dodgson, most exacting, but not most ungrateful of authors, March 29, 1876."

The above instance will show that though he justly desired to see his meanings preserved, he was not exacting in any unreasonable spirit. The accompanying letter, written after the work was complete, will sufficiently show the friendly tone which had characterised our correspondence.

HENRY HOLIDAY.

Jan. 26, 1898.

[COPY.]

"MY DEAR HOLIDAY,—I finished off my letter at Brighton yesterday in a hurry, and omitted to say how pleased I am with the proofs you sent me. They seem to me *most* successfully cut, and I agree with you in thinking the head of 'Hope' a great success; it is quite lovely.

On my return here last night, I found the charming chess-boards, for which accept my best thanks. My sister and I have played several games of 'Go-bang' on them already. (I need hardly remark that they serve just as well for that, or for draughts, as they do for chess.)

Now for another bit of designing, if you don't mind undertaking it. Macmillan writes me word that the gorgeous cover will cost 1s 4d. a copy! Whereas we can't really afford more than 5d. or 6d., as we must not charge more than 3s. for the book. My idea is this, to have a simpler cover for the 3s. copies, which will, no doubt, be the ones usually sold, but to offer the gorgeous covers also at 4s., which will be bought by the rich and those who wish to give them as presents. What I want you to do is to take 'Alice' as a guide, and design covers requiring about the same amount of gold, or, better, a little less. As 'Alice' and the 'Looking-Glass' have both got grotesque faces outside, I should like *these* to be pretty, as a contrast, and I don't think we can do better than to take the head of 'Hope' for the first side, and 'Care' for the second; and, as these are associated with 'forks' and 'thimbles' in the poem, what do you think of surrounding them, one with a border of interlaced forks, the other with a shower of thimbles? And what do you think of putting a bell at each corner of the cover, instead of a single line? The only thing to secure is that the total amount of gold required shall be rather less than on the cover of 'Alice.'

All these are merely suggestions: *you* will be a far better judge of the matter than I can be, and perhaps may think of some quite different, and better, design.—Yours ever truly,

L. DODGSON.

The Chestnuts, Guildford, Jan. 15, 1876."

II.

HUMAN perversity has identified the Snark with everything possible and impossible. There exist people who, led away by the exquisite demonstration given to the Butcher by the Beaver, have seen in it a treatise on pure mathematics. Others will have it that the Bellman is only an Arctic explorer and the Snark the North Pole; while a few, basing their conjecture on the fact that the Barrister bears, in his portrait, an extraordinary resemblance to the late Dr. Kenealy, maintain that the Snark is the Tichborne Claimant. In fact, each reader finds the Snark that he deserves. My own is Fortune, and I am always lost in astonishment at the people who think it can be anything else. Observe the things with which its capture was attempted. Why, the mere mention of railway shares and soap is sufficient of itself to establish my thesis. And then look at the *dramatis personæ* and their actions. The Butcher, perceiving that novelty is the secret of success, announces himself as the only beaver-butcher in this or any other country, and the Baker aims at interest by specialising in bride-cakes. Even the Banker, whose celebrated interview with the Bandersnatch gave him so great a fright "that his waistcoat turned white," abandons his legitimate business in favour of the issue of insurance policies against fire and damage from hail. The Barrister dreams of points of the utmost nicety and rarity, and the influence of luck in the court is prettily emphasised by the Snark's assumption of the prerogatives of the Judge. The Bellman is a truly pathetic figure. He is the type of the man

who pursues fortune without any sufficient consideration of the facts of practical life, and I fancy that he must, at one time or another, have lost a good deal of money on the Stock Exchange. His sorrowful remark that "he had hoped, when the wind was due East, that the ship would *not* travel due West," is just what one could expect from a disappointed speculator. Of the Billiard-marker nothing is recorded, save that "his skill was immense"; but that of itself was more than sufficient justification for his joining in the search for Fortune, and he may well have been the most successful in the end of all the crew. The dichotomy of Snarks into those which have "feathers and bite" and those which have "whiskers and scratch" does not, I think, indicate anything more than a belief that there is more than one sort of good fortune, and that all are somewhat to be feared. The habit—common, apparently, to all Snarks—of breakfasting at five o'clock tea and dining the day afterwards, so obviously typifies the tendency of Fortune not to come to a man until it is too late to give him any pleasure that it is unnecessary to labour the point. The taste—"meagre and hollow, but crisp"—I regard as finally settling the question. All varieties of Snark have them, and the most fortunate of mankind freely admit that this is the real flavour of success. On my hypothesis the Bandersnatch would be Scandal. In *Through the Looking-Glass* this creature is more than once referred to as extraordinarily difficult to stop or to catch, and the judicious reader will remember how the Banker entirely failed to divert its attacks by the offer of large discount or even bearer cheques. But what, then, is the Boojum? It is a kind of Snark—that is clear from twenty passages. But if a sort of good fortune, how could it have so distressing an effect upon the man they called Ho? Well, I think a Boojum is that sort of sudden, unexpected luck which puts a man "above his boots," carries him into a sphere in which he is miserable, and makes his wife cut the greengrocer's lady. It is a very dangerous creature, and the warning of the Baker's Uncle is more than justified.

M. H. T.

III.

AN ingenious friend of mine once maintained, with considerable speciousness, that *The Hunting of the Snark* was written as a satire on the craving for what is called "social advancement." According to his view, the people who hunt the Snark are the people who try to "get into Society," the bankers, bakers, butchers, billiard-markers, and barristers of our day. They are headed by an individual who rings a bell because their endeavour is to attract attention. They never do get into Society, these good people. The Snark is never caught. They only find a Boojum, which my friend interpreted as a kind of suburban set, where they "never are heard of again"—in the *Morning Post*. The theory, on the face of it, has much to be said in its favour, and I trust to get further details from my informant. Why, for instance, did the Bellman always repeat everything three times:

> "What I say three times is true,"

he says, with marked emphasis?

"Ah," said my friend, "the Bellman was one of those tedious people who always repeat themselves, and who believe that a thing is proved if it is only asserted sufficiently often. I have met loads of them. Can you wonder that they never get into Society? The suburban Boojum (which I take to be a kind of Browning Society) is the only place for them."

This seemed convincing, and I next inquired why it was the Baker who found the Boojum, and not one of the others. My friend's reply was oracular. "Bakers," he said, "*never* get into Society. Barristers and bankers sometimes; bakers never. The Baker, therefore, was very rightly put out in the first round." No further information could I extract from my friend, and when my questions grew pertinacious, he yawned and went away. For myself, I am tempted to accept his view, and to believe that the whole poem is a prophetic satire on the career of the late Barney Barnato. Students of the poem will remember that all the Snark-hunters' names begin with a "B," which is, I think, strong evidence of my theory.

ST. J. E. C. H.
