

She buzzed, yes, like a firework more than a fly,
like a squib she whizzed off with a loud
bang among the bare legs and bustles
of the crowd.

Then, as she struck the gibbet with a smack,
a nail caught her girdle at the back.
Round and round she spun with a whirring
sound,

a whirliwitch, then dropped to the ground up-
right

as a roman candle, fizzing fire so bright
she turned the glare of day to dismal night.

'Ho, here's my chance!' ('twas the hangman
spoke).

And slipping the noose about her neck,
to prison the billowy smoke and make her
choke

he jerked it tight.

Pfuzzzzzz . . .

Hark, d'you hear the shouting? D'you hear
the bells a-ringing?

See, the hangman's hoisted her—
the wicked witch is swinging!

At once a search was made for Belinda's babes.
They were found
hid in a dingy dungeon underground,

a-swoon, half-dead. But they rallied soon,
as tenderly in turn she fondled them
and pressed each faded cheek and frozen hand
to her breast. They drew
life from their mother's love and grew
to be the best and bravest in the land.
Next she sent for the aged King, her father,
who ('twas said) in his far-off lonely kingdom
lay a-dying.

Hot-foot over land and ocean he came flying—
and arrived, but not too out of breath
to say goodbye to cold and mouldy death.
Hello, Belinda! What joy to be with her,
to romp with the boys again, to cherish the
babes!

Oh golden family! Long as they lived,
unbroken happiness was theirs—to what
shall I compare it?—

to a city of green gardens, gallant walks
where, as you wander, all fret and care
melt as summer clouds melt
in the rich sun-blazoned air.

Such was their happiness, would all men
might share it!—

a giant river rolling onward, ever onward,
strong and steadfast to the sea.

Lewis Carroll and the Kitten on the Hearth

By KATHLEEN TILLOTSON

IN 1846, in the November number of *Blackwood's Magazine*, appeared 'Advice to an intending Serialist. A letter to T. Smith, Esq., Scene-Painter and Tragedian at the Amphitheatre', an article in which 'Maga's' usual sarcasm is directed at several contemporary fashions in fiction. The critic sets out both to advise T. Smith what to avoid, and also to praise him ironically for the merits of what he has already written; and in pursuit of the latter method he first describes some episodes and then launches into lengthy 'quotation', thus introduced:

'But your best scene is the opening one, in which you introduce us to the aerial dwelling of Estrella di Canterini, in Lambeth . . . a perfect piece of composition, and I cannot resist the temptation of transcribing a very few sentences.'

The immediate object of satire in the quotations is obviously Dickens (to whom *Blackwood's* was generally hostile), and especially the cosy, leisurely opening, and the 'low' material, of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, his most recent and most popular 'Christmas Book'. But the passage has another and unexpected interest, and for many readers the recognition of the kettle and the cricket at Mrs. Peerybingle's fireside in the distorting mirror of burlesque will be less clear and immediate than another 'looking-glass'.

'It was the kitten that began it, and not the cat. It isn't any use saying it was the cat, because I was there, and I saw it and know it; and if I don't know it, how should anybody else be able to tell you about it, if you please? So I say again it was the kitten that began it, and the way it all happened was this.

'There was a little bit, a small tiny string of blue worsted—no! I am wrong, for when I think again the string was pink—which was hanging down from a little ball that lay on the lap of a tall dark girl with lustrous eyes, who was looking into the fire as intently as if she expected to see a salamander in the middle of it. [Meanwhile Huggs the old cat is watching through half-shut eyes] the movements of a smart little kitten [playing with a roll of paper, which pricks it]. And then the kitten put on a look of importance, as if its feelings had been injured in the nicest points, and then walked up demurely to Huggs, and began to pat her whiskers, as if it wanted, which it probably did, to tell her all about it.'

[There follows a long game with the worsted, the tall girl's annoyance, and the intervention, in defence of the cat and against the kitten, of 'a little child' sitting on the other side of the fire.]

There is no need to quote in full; it should already be clear that 'Lewis Carroll' had this passage at the back of his mind when he wrote the opening paragraphs of *Through the Looking-Glass* about 1868.

'One thing was certain, that the *white* kitten had had nothing to do with it:—it was the black kitten's fault entirely. For the white kitten had been having its face washed by the old cat for the last quarter of an hour (and bearing it pretty well, considering); so you see that it *couldn't* have had any hand in the mischief.

'The way Dinah washed her children's faces was this. . . . But the black kitten had been finished with earlier in the afternoon, and so, while Alice was sitting curled up in a corner of the great arm-chair, half talking to herself and half asleep, the kitten had been having a grand game of romps with the ball of worsted Alice had been trying to wind up. . . . Kitty sat very demurely on her knee, pretending to watch the progress of the winding, and now and then putting out one paw and gently touching the ball, as if it would be glad to help if it might.'

The mere substance common to the two passages (fireside scene, girl, cat, kitten, ball of

worsted) may (though I doubt it) be commonplace enough for coincidence; even 'demurely' is stock cat-description since Gray's *Selima*. What is not commonplace is the half-mocking gravity of the debate over the responsibility of one cat or kitten rather than another, and the promise, conveyed by the rhetorical emphasis, that these trivial domestic events will lead eventually, if the reader's patience lasts out, to something of the greatest importance. Both writers assume the reader's intense interest in each detail of his snail-slow exposition; but *Blackwood's* is of course laughing at the assumption (especially in so 'low' a scene). Carroll, so often a parodist, is not one here, but is writing seriously for the serious child, and, allowing for that audience, he is justified; more so perhaps than Dickens. Moreover, *Blackwood's* kitten and cat are, unmistakably, creaking machines of exposition there to introduce us to the human characters. Carroll's black kitten, as the Red Queen, will be second in importance only to Alice herself.

There is not, I think, any conscious recollection in Carroll's passage either of *The Cricket on the Hearth*, or of *Blackwood's* parody of it; but the fact that *Blackwood's* did parody Dickens probably gave the passage its original hold on Carroll's attention, and explains why it should lie long dormant in his mind, to revive when he was troubled (as we are told by his biographer) over the problem of *how* to get Alice through the looking-glass, and when his mind was necessarily partly in the past, in his own childhood. He has said something of the way he wrote:

'Whenever or however [an idea] comes *it comes of itself*, I cannot set invention going like a clock, by any voluntary winding up. . . . *Alice* and the *Looking-Glass* are made up almost wholly of bits and scraps, single ideas which came of themselves.' (*The Theatre*, 1887.)

What 'comes of itself' comes mainly from different kinds of recollection; much of the *Alice* books is from the purest sources of memory in early childhood; but the opening illustrates another and less valuable kind of recollection, to which the academic mind in a relaxed state is perhaps peculiarly prone (compare the echoes in Housman's poetry)—that of a passage

once read, long ago, and to all consciousness forgotten.

I suspect that Carroll read the article soon after it came out; it is not rash to assume that Croft Rectory (like Haworth Parsonage) took in *Blackwood's*. At fourteen he was already the editor of two or more family magazines of his own, already precociously fascinated (like yet another clergyman's child, Jane Austen) by the possibilities of literary parody. Only part of his schoolboy journalism survives, and only part of what survives is available; but his satiric bent is clearly suggested by such verses as 'Brother and Sister', one of the few that have been printed from his home magazine of *Useful and Instructive Poetry* (1845). (See 'Early Verse' in the Nonesuch *Complete Works*.) By 1849 he was parodying novel-fashions himself (see 'The Walking Stick of Destiny' in *The Rectory Umbrella*) and in 1851 and 1854 had sighted that favourite satirist's target, G. P. R. James; to the fifties belong two pieces that found their lodgement in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the opening stanza of 'Jabberwocky' (originally called an 'Anglo-Saxon poem'), and the 'Aged, aged man' (directed at Wordsworth's *Leech-Gatherer*). That he was at least as interested in literary parody at thirty-six as he had been fifteen and twenty years before, the *Looking-Glass* and its contemporary *Phantasmagoria* amply attest; with this continuity of interest and practice, the lines are open for just such an unconscious recollection of someone else's parody, once read and, very likely, admired.

This little parallel is in itself hardly more important than the kitten's ball of worsted. But it might help to explain the inferiority of this opening to that of *Wonderland*—indisputable, even when we allow for the extra difficulty of the transition from the everyday to the magical in an *indoor* scene. The mere length of the nar-

rator's confidences, the kitten's gambols, and Alice's long speech before climbing on the mantelpiece are in sharp contrast—as probably almost every child has felt—with those miraculous three sentences that land her down the rabbit-hole. In *Wonderland* there is the gay confidence of the improviser, who (he said) 'had sent [Alice] straight down the rabbit-hole . . . without the least idea what was to happen afterwards'. In the *Looking-Glass*, the problem was to get started; 'how to get her through . . . exercised his ingenuity for some time'.

Finally—('and the moral of *that* is')—this parallel can be seen as a small instance of a large and growing responsibility for the modern critic of Carroll's work; that of replacing the writer in his full context of Victorian literature. Other settings and relations—Oxford, mathematics, logic, child-friends and his own childhood—have yielded much; but no critic seems to have yet given enough attention to the Carroll who parodied Tennyson and Sydney Dobell, who read *David Copperfield* in 'numbers' as it came out when he was a boy at Rugby, and made a favourite of Mrs. Gummidge (an early Mock Turtle?), who himself remarked on the close resemblance ('might have been twin sisters') between his White Queen and that other great Victorian grotesque, Mrs. Wragg in Wilkie Collins's *No Name*. Carroll ought now to be taking his place among the novelists. Henry Kingsley, a novelist himself, was not speaking at random when he called the *Looking-Glass* 'the finest book since *Martin Chuzzlewit*'. It may be mere chance that the opening paragraphs recall a twenty-years-old parody of Dickens; it is not chance that the *Looking-Glass* characters are defined and memorable in the same way as those of Dickens, and of no other novelist.