One of the earliest, pre-clerical photographs shows a decidedly dandyish youth with a large cravat, a checked waistcoat and a jacket which contemporary fashion plates confirm was in the very latest style.

4

'This strange wild man from other lands'

Love and Sex

> '… against the door of the room three strong men were leaning, vainly trying to shut it – for some great animal inside was constantly bursting it half open, and we had a glimpse, before the men could push it back again, of the head of a furious wild beast, with great fiery eyes and gnashing teeth …'
>
> *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*

Lewis Carroll, living in a secretive age, was considered reticent even by his friends. He belonged to a private, self-contained family, and after his death many personal documents that had been in his family's keeping mysteriously disappeared. His diary does not mention his romantic yearnings or needs. Yet even though most of the material about his personal life has been destroyed, this does not mean that he had none. Is it possible, so long after his death, to get a glimpse of it?

In the earlier part of the 20th century, Carroll was often presented as virginal, sexless or, at the least, highly repressed. In 1932, the biographer Langford Reed made a good deal of Carroll's 'split personality' although he was genteel enough not to speculate about Carroll's sexual life in print. After interviewing several of those who had been Carroll's child-friends, he

concluded that Carroll must have been one of those 'super-sensitive and over-refined people to whom the very idea of physical familiarity was abhorrent', and he compared Carroll with an old maid or a nun.[1] Some years later, Carroll's niece, Menella Dodgson, told an acquaintance that, from her memories of him, she could not imagine Carroll married because no woman could have dealt with his exact and fastidious ways.[2]

In later life, he was, indeed, a quaint old bachelor, and there are numerous tales of his gentle eccentricities. One of his grown-up child-friends recalled how delighted he was with a special kettle he had designed for making tea in the best possible way, which he boasted of to her 'in the most ingenuous manner' every single time she visited.[3] Yet in truth, Carroll was far from being a maidenly nun-figure who was ignorant of sexual matters. He may have given that impression to the casual observer, but, on closer examination, one of the most nun-like aspects of his life was the number of women who surrounded him.

His views on physical life were better informed, even more outré, than those that many men of his background held in his own day. He strongly disapproved of pornography, and yet he owned books that covered sexual and physical matters as frankly as was then legally possible. These included Alexander Walker's *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce*, which includes discussion of polygamy, infidelity, concubinage, and prostitution, and William Acton's famous treatise on prostitution, the standard 19th-century work on the subject. He also owned medical texts covering many aspects of sexuality, such as Dr Paget's book (described in Chapter 3), and books that considered social aspects of sexuality, such as William Dixon's startling observations on free-thinking religious sects, *Spiritual Wives*, which includes events that would seem noteworthy even by modern-day cult standards.[4]

Carroll also read about polygamy and unconventional types

of marriage; he owned a copy of *Plain Home Talk* by Dr Foote, whose frank ideas on free love as well as birth control, dress reform and Utopianism, were way ahead of their time. In fact, some of the material Carroll sought, such as Michael Ryan's *The Philosophy of Marriage and its Social, Moral and Physical Relations*, although certainly not pornographic, was extremely candid. He asked his American illustrator Arthur Burdett Frost if he could obtain this and a couple of Ryan's other titles in America, obviously being under the impression that they were not available in England.[5]

Carroll would sometimes visit his artist friends in their studios and see them at work, but his diary is so laconic about them that his liberal-mindedness has often gone unremarked. In April 1865, for instance, he recorded a visit to Dante Gabriel Rossetti thus: 'We went … to call on Rossetti. We found him at home, and his friend Swinburne also in the room, whom I had not met before. He showed us many beautiful pictures, two quite new, the bride going to meet the bride-groom (from Solomon's Song), and Venus with a back-ground of roses.' The critic Hugues Lebailly has pointed out that one of the pictures Carroll admired during the visit was Rossetti's *Venus Verticordia*, the eroticism of which made it difficult for Rossetti to sell.[6] Carroll does not tell us what he made of the scandalous Swinburne, but he did go out and buy a first edition of his notorious *Poems and Ballads*.[7]

As his bank account shows, Carroll could be almost reckless in private, even though he kept up an impenetrably prudent front in public. His friend Gertrude Thomson described how his donnish manner would utterly disappear when he was in informal surroundings; and his scornful comments about 'Mrs Grundy', the fictitious moralizer, show how little he cared what conventional people thought of the way he was obliged to live his life. 'Oh, Edith, I wish you could come and stay here a bit!' he wrote to Edith Rix in 1888, when she was in her twenties.

> I believe the "Mrs. Grundy" risk might be altogether avoided by simply arranging 2 or 3 visits to be paid consecutively, Eastbourne to be one. Then, when Mrs. Grundy calls, and asks for you, she will simply be told, "She is away, paying a round of visits." The miserable old gossip will hardly be inquisitive enough to say "and what particular house is she at just now?" or, at any rate, if she *is*, she will deserve to be snubbed![8]

So, despite the apparent emptiness of his emotional life from this distance in time, closer examination suggests that he did manage to fill the spaces after all. What is more, during his moralistic later years, he demonstrated a well-honed and effective knowledge of how to win over girls in their teens and grown-up women, as well as children. Several descriptions exist of his technique, which was based on presenting the potential friend with interesting aspects of himself that he wished her to see, and allowing her to respond if she wanted to do so. It was a gentle, skilful extension of his storytelling or dramatic technique. If she did not wish to get involved, nothing was lost; if she did react, a friendship usually developed. The start of his lifelong friendship with a Mrs Bennie (described in full in Chapter 8) demonstrates how he used this technique, intriguing her sufficiently to make her put in the effort to pursue his company. The account of his first meeting with Gertrude Thomson shows the same mind at work.

Miss Thomson was a respectable and independent young lady artist of a type starting to emerge towards the end of the century. She produced charming pictures of children, fairies and cherubs. An early photograph of her depicts a bright, untidy young woman, ornamentally clad in fur, feathers, embroidery and jewellery. A later, more sedate photograph has her with an elaborately elegant hairstyle and dressed in dark ruffles. She was talented, unconventional and scatty.

Miss Thomson first met Carroll in June 1879 when she was in her late twenties and he was 47. He had seen her pictures, liked them, and wanted her to draw for him. He suggested they meet in the South Kensington Museum to discuss the matter. Miss Thomson forgot, however, to tell Carroll what she looked like, and, since it would have been unseemly for her to approach an unknown man, when she reached the museum she wondered what to do. However, punctually at the appointed time, she saw a 'tall, slim figure' with a 'clean-shaven, delicate, refined face' arriving with two little girls (the well-dressed child chaperones showing, to Victorian eyes, that he was a respectable man). The man glanced swiftly about, and then 'bending down, [he] whispered something to one of the children; she, without a moment's pause, pointed straight at me. Dropping their hands, he came forward with that winning smile of his … and said simply "I am Mr. Dodgson; I was to meet you I think?"' Astonished, Miss Thomson asked him how he had recognized her. '"My little friend found you," Carroll replied. "I told her I had come to meet a young lady who knew fairies, and she fixed on you at once." Then he added: "But, I knew you, before she spoke."'[9]

Miss Thomson, the fairy painter, was delighted by this charming story, which flatteringly emphasized her fairy-like credentials. Closer examination of her tale, though, suggests that there was more to it. No child could have instantly and unaided picked her out of the crowd. But Carroll knew that she had not asked how she should recognize him – though since she was waiting with a portfolio at the appointed time, he could easily spot who *she* was. Rather than approaching her directly, he had spun the unusual idea of asking the child to spot a 'young lady who knew fairies'.

He had (as he said) already recognized Miss Thomson. So the child, having no idea what a 'lady who liked fairies' looked like, would have automatically pointed out the woman at

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