

"YOUR AFFECTIONATE FRIEND..."

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's Infatuation with the Weaker and More Aesthetic Sex Re-examined

by Hugues Lebailly

I would like to dedicate this to Karoline Leach, who has pointed out to me most of the factual evidence I am going to base the first part of my demonstration on.

The still more or less universally accepted view of the supposedly extremely limited range of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson's interest in the opposite sex has been wonderfully encapsulated by Karoline Leach as an endless repetition of short-lived "friendships with prepubescent female children" in which he "invariably lost interest when they reached puberty." There is no denying that, not only in the media but in his most authorised biographies, his emotional life is presented, to quote Karoline Leach "as an ultimately sterile and lonely series of repeated rejections as the little ones grew up and inevitably left him behind". This purported obsession is regarded as "evidence of a repressed deviant sexuality", and 'Lewis Carroll' depicted as "a man who struggled to master his differing sexual appetites" in academic papers, and as "the patron saint of paedophiles" in the gutter press and on the internet.

The inviolability of this quasi-unanimous tenet is all the more fascinating as it turns out to be grounded in but half a dozen ever-recurring quotations, taken at face value, often out of context, if not grossly misinterpreted, and belied by a far more considerable body of evidence, which has been there for everyone to see for at least twenty years - both in the original, unedited, text of his manuscript diaries, and the various collections of letters edited and invaluabley annotated by Morton N. Cohen. One such old favourite is the disparaging judgment he passed on thirteen-year-old Alice Pleasance Liddell on the eleventh of May 1865

Alice seems changed a good deal, and hardly for the better, probably going through the usual awkward stage of transition..."

In his 1999 edition of the fifth extent volume of C. L. Dodgson's diaries, Edward Wakeling ascribes that harsh remark to the fact that strong-willed Alice (the only child who ever dared pester him until he wrote down the story whose heroine bore her name) "was becoming more independent in mind and manner" Thus far, most previous commentators had interpreted it as proof of C. L. Dodgson's disgust for the changes induced in her physical appearance by her dawning puberty. This was all the more unfair as he repeatedly gave vent in his diaries to his apprehension that the much sweeter-tempered Lorina would be banned by her mother from their unchaperoned excursions at about the same age, thus demonstrating that he did enjoy her company though she was by then "so tall as to look odd without an escort". 'Tall' being a typical Victorian understatement for a process that might have involved more than vertical growth in the fourteen year old dark-haired daughter of a woman admired for her Spanish beauty ...

Another quotation endlessly rehearsed in support of that simplistic view of 'Lewis Carroll's social life is Ellen Terry's famous remark that he was "as fond of [her] as he could be of any one over the age of ten". Leaving aside the fact that this could be interpreted as a mark of disappointment, if not frustration, from a very sensual and physical actress, who had suffered in her teens from the failure of her premature and presumably never consummated marriage to forty seven year old George Frederic Watts, had had two children out of wedlock with another man, and is thought to have been for many years the mistress of her stage companion and theatre manager, Henry Irving, one

can but wonder at such deliberate self-delusion in a woman who had met Dodgson on numerous occasions accompanied by teen-age girls and young women in their twenties, whom he proudly introduced to her.

The two youngest of these were the first and last mentioned under such circumstances in his diaries, and they were both fourteen : Agnes Hull in 1881 and Dolly Rivington in 1897. In between, Ellen had had opportunities to see him accompanied by seventeen year old Ethel Arnold (to whom she was introduced three times in a single day), then, two months later, by her twenty-five year old sister Julia, as well as to send autographs at his request to eighteen and nineteen year old Charlotte and Edith Rix, which she oddly described as fulfilling the "little desires of little children", so that C. L. Dodgson felt compelled to reassure them he " DIDN'T tell Miss Terry that [they] were 'little children'" and that "that [was] entirely her own idea ". This strangely systematic misconception on Terry's part did not prevent her from introducing him to an actress-friend of hers, Violet Barnes, who was twenty by then, and it was apparently not dispelled when he wrote to her afterwards that

"it ha[d] been a great pleasure to make friends with Violet", nor when he turned up at the Lyceum with the by now twenty-three and twenty-two year old flesh and blood Edith and Charlotte Rix.

Meanwhile, he had taken fifteen year old Muriel Taylor to see Terry perform in *The Merchant of Venice* and fifteen year old Isa Bowman to a performance of *Macbeth* in which Terry played Ophelia - a prelude to many more meetings with the teen-age actress she generously accepted to coach one year later. Though C. L. Dodgson expressed his gratitude for her willingness to teach his "dear little friend" and vouched she had won herself the "rapturous love of one enthusiastic child" (after all, at fifty-eight, he was old enough to have been Isa's grandfather!) , Terry could not but see his protégée was well over ten!

In a letter of December 1892 to his "dear Lottie" (Rix) who was now twenty-five, he quoted Ellen's suggestion that "perhaps little Lottie would like to come and see *King Lear*" and offer to send her her box, so that "she might bring some young friends, and then [Terry] would see them all in [her] room after the play was over." C. L. Dodgson was a most diligent go-between, and Charlotte and her twenty-six year old sister Edith did take advantage of Ellen Terry's offer : in fact Terry was so much pleased with what she saw of these two rather mature 'childfriends' that she asked Dodgson to provide her with likenesses of various members of the Rix family !

In 1894, he introduced Terry to his twenty-six year old cousin Minna Quin, whose career on the stage he took very much to heart, and whom she agreed to hire for a month as a 'super' in *Faust*. Terry also met another of Dodgson's 'child-friends', nineteen-year old Dolly Baird, to whom she "stood talking for five or ten minutes, behind the curtain, while the 'Brocken' scenery was being put up", in presumably too poor a light for Ellen to realise Dolly was twice the age she supposedly would have expected her to be!

The following year, C. L. Dodgson took Agnes Wilson, nineteen, and Ethel Rowell, eighteen, to *The Merchant of Venice*, but nothing in the corresponding diary entry allows us to state that they met Ellen in person, though it had become quite a ritual on such occasions, and the unforgettable crowning of those outings he wanted to make as magic as possible to his young guests.

>Whatever one may think of how far she has stretched her reassessment of C. L. Dodgson's potential sexual activity, no-one can deny Karoline Leach has most convincingly pointed out the unaccountable constancy with which many of C. L. Dodgson's female friends tended to underestimate their age at their first meeting when they wrote, many years later, their recollections of their friendship with him.

One obvious example is that of Isa Bowman, who wrote in her little book *The Story of Lewis Carroll* that she was "only some ten or eleven years of age" when Dodgson, after having violently torn into pieces, then thrown into the fire, a small drawing of him she

had been making on the back of an envelope, "caught [her] up in his arms and kissed [her] passionately." The snag is Isa was *thirteen* when they first met, in 1887, and that, if this scene took place in his rooms at Christ Church, as she seems to imply, she must have been at least fourteen, as indeed she was on the day when they were walking hand in hand in Christ Church meadows and he got quite "disturbed" when a male acquaintance suddenly "came round the corner" - a much more embarrassing situation indeed than if she had really been under ten.

We find an echo of this embarrasment in C. L. Dodgson's uneasy confidence to Mrs Mallalieu that his "little friend Isa Bowman [wa]s rather apt to dress in GAUDY colours, which [he] d[id]n't much like, as it [made them] too conspicuous"

Indeed, whereas Mrs Mallalieu's daughter 'Polly' was only twelve when she came to stay with him at Eastbourne, Isa was eighteen when the above letter was written, and would still cling to his arm as innocently as five years earlier. The previous autumn, he had none the less proudly written to a woman friend :

"Isa has been my guest here for four summers now (now that I am nearly sixty I venture to do VERY unconventional things) and on Monday I come to town to fetch her down for her fifth visit"

The seventeen year old actress was joined for two days by *twenty-four year old* Violet Barnes, for whom an extra bed was put up in Isa's room, a visit that was naturally edited out of C. L. Dodgson's manuscript diaries by the relentless pencil of his nieces.

Isa's inclusion among C. L. Dodgson's 'childfriends' is indeed appropriate to a time that had not yet invented adolescence as a bridge between childhood and adulthood, but it is none the less misleading to most readers, who would hardly imagine that the "millions of hugs and kisses" on which 'Lewis Carroll' joked with relish for a whole page of a letter to "[his] darling Isa", had been sent to him by a sixteen year old actress and not by a child under ten !

And yet even Green's severely censored edition of C. L. Dodgson's diaries is packed with such hints at his "odd habits" like the excerpt from a letter to Mrs Aubrey-Moore in which he asked her whether her daughters were "invitable to tea, or dinner, SINGLY" as he didn't think "anyone knows what girl-nature is, who has only seen them in the presence of their mothers or sisters", and whether they were "kissable", as "nearly all his girl-friends (of all ages, and even married ones !) [were] now on such terms with [him], who [was] now sixty-four. " "*With girls under fourteen*", he went on, "*I don't think it necessary to ask the question : but I guess Margery to be OVER fourteen, and, in such cases, with new friends, I usually ask the mother's leave.*"

Is it necessary to recall that one of the very few occasions on which he got into major trouble with a mother was not when he photographed the pre-pubescent Hatch or Henderson sisters in the nude - a point to which I will come back later on - but when he kissed a girl of seventeen, Atty Owen, in front of her father, expecting her to be just below the above-mentioned age limit ? Mr Owen did not mind much, but his wife did - and yet Dodgson was bold enough to write them a letter four months later, suggesting they might send him Atty to photograph!

Similarly, it is not his much supposed 'fiddling' with underage girls which brought him the often quoted letter of remonstrance he received from his sister Mary, in 1893, but yet another unchaperoned four-day visit from an unmarried woman, the twenty-seven year old Gertrude Chataway.

Indeed he had first met this girl at Sandown when she was nine, and much enjoyed being allowed to draw and photograph in her unconventional "wading attire" - a fisherman's jersey and shorts that left her legs, knees, and even most of her thighs bare - , but she had outgrown them without losing his affection. In his diaries, he described the four days they had spent together as "a really delightful visit", and, in his answer to his sister, he brushed aside other people's opinions of his actions as "worthless as a test

of right and wrong", before perversely passing on to her the additional information that he was simultaneously enjoying the company of twenty-three year-old Edith Miller.

His observation that, in conjunction with his own determination "to be entirely innocent and right, in the eye of God" in acting thus, he always secured "FULL approval" of his plans from the parents of his "girl-friends" has obviously added to the misconception of his "girl-guests" ages for most twentieth century readers who easily forget that Victorian middle and upper-class women were expected to obey their parents up until the very eve of their wedding, even when they were well into their twenties. To us, who receive cellphone calls from our thirteen year old daughters informing us bluntly that they're staying overnight at a (hopefully) female friend, it does take several dives into the index of the Letters, followed by much shuffling of pages to get to the impressive and invaluable biographical notes provided by Morton N. Cohen, and some feverish typing on one's calculator keyboard to realize that C. L. Dodgson did not have ten or twelve year olds in mind when he wrote that sentence, but young ladies twice that age.

This confusion seems to have been mischievously fed and toyed with with great relish by C. L. Dodgson himself, who described another of his protégées, a painter for a change, named Theodosia Laura Heaphy as "a mere child of four or five and twenty" in a letter to Maud Standen - who was twenty-seven herself at the time - or called his "dearest" Edith Rix "a wicked girl" for not returning him one of Isa Bowman's letter and "a good girl" to have sent him Tolstoy's *What Men Live By* in a letter he sent her when she was ... twenty-three!

This odd mark of tender intimacy at least bears witness to the fact that you didn't need to have been noticed by 'Lewis Carroll' as a fascinating prepubescent little girl in order to be loved by him for what you had been and not for what you actually were, as Edith was already a nineteen year old when they started corresponding. Morton N. Cohen, when he reported these circumstances in a note to his 1979 edition of the Letters , felt compelled to present them as unusual, writing that "although Edith was nineteen ..., she and Dodgson became fast friends". This is a highly restrictive view of C. L. Dodgson's ability to strike new friendships that Cohen could hardly free himself from at the time as it was supported by so many of the recollections he was gathering for publication.

Typical of these 'recollections' is the excerpt from Laurence Irving's *The Successors* describing C. L. Dodgson's friendship with Edith Lucy as having "begun, as was usual with him, when she was a child " before adding that "less usually it had survived her transition to adolescence." Just as the many examples quoted above - and many more that could be added to them - belie the second assertion, a quick dip into his own invaluable files would have allowed Morton N. Cohen to add the corrective note that Edith Lucy was sixteen when she first met Dodgson..

Three months later, Dodgson took her to Eastbourne with him, and after a single night there reported "Edith was in such tribulation at being away from her mother that [he] took her back to town by the twelve o'clock train, her visit having lasted exactly seventeen hours. This would indeed infallibly add to that confusion, leaving the reader of Green's edition of the diaries under the impression that she must have been much younger, according to our twentieth century standards of behaviour.

Edith was a pupil of the class he taught logic to at Oxford High School for Girls in 1887, and again in 1894 : though he usually alluded to her and her fellows as "children", and though the only one of them quoted by name in Morton N. Cohen's biography, Dorothy Poole, was only fourteen, most of them were anything from fifteen to nineteen, including Dorothy's best friend, Margery Aubrey Moore, who was sixteen.

Though he shared part of the current anxiety about the possible damage overtaxing might cause to their frailer brains, C. L. Dodgson was not afraid of female university students either : Edith Olivier was a Susan Esther Wordsworth Scholar at St Hugh's and twenty-four when he struck a friendship with her through his old childfriend Evelyn Hatch, (who was twenty-five by then), and "enjoyed the evening [he] had with [that] very nice girl " to the point of regretting that, unlike Evelyn, she was not "on 'Kiss' terms"! Though it is a different point, I cannot resist mentioning in passing that Evelyn

was so little ashamed of and traumatized by her very intimate relationship with C. L. Dodgson as a child nude sitter seventeen years before, that she had just been showing the resulting prints to her cousins, who had been very "envious" - of her appearance as an eight year old odalisque or of the fascinating adventure Evelyn and her elder sisters had been lucky enough to live ?

It is in fact our - in its way - extremely puritan mind that convinces us that, when C. L. Dodgson bitterly reproaches Julia Arnold for kissing Ellen Terry and her sister Ethel goodbye in his rooms, while depriving him of the same pleasure, and likens the frustration it has raised in him to watching someone drink "a large foaming tumbler of delicious cool lemonade" when you are yourself " half fainting with thirst", he must be writing to a ten year old child - whereas Julia was actually twenty-three at the time! Just as Edith Miller was twenty-four when he felt he had to give her "an EXTRA hug and kiss to make all right again between us", and twenty-five when he signed "yours lovingly" a most flirtatious letter in which he complained that her mother would not let her dine in his room unchaperoned, and teased her that, if he went to try his luck at the door of her college, St. Kentigern's, and was not allowed to have her, he "would have to pick out some very nice girl to take instead, and how awfully jealous you would be", and twenty-seven when he again harped on the same subject, professing his inability to understand how her mother could let her "go up to town, for a day, with [him] as her sole escort" but would not let her "come to [his] rooms for an evening" and concluded : "I HOPE it won't occur to her to forbid KISSING ! That will be the next privilege cut off, I fear." I have not been able to trace the letter in which, according to Karoline Leach, he described himself as her "sexagenarian lover", but that bitter postscript, written less than two months before his death, demonstrates as convincingly what an important part physical contact played in his relationships with his woman friends.

If I may have sounded so far a bit too critical of Morton N. Cohen's inability to distance himself enough from the conventional quasi-denial of C. L. Dodgson's interest in post-pubescent females, and to derive from his own biographical material that, among the letters "from childfriends" quoted by Stuart Dodgson Collingwood in his Life and Letters of Lewis Carroll, almost half were received when the girls were over fourteen, and more than a fourth when they were over eighteen. It is therefore high time for me to acknowledge that his 1995 biography of C. L. Dodgson, though it probably still makes too much - in my opinion - of the 'man-with-different-sexual-attractions' aspect of his personality, especially with that awful chapter heading, 'The Pursuit of Innocents', does occasionally attempt to, if I may say so, straighten things up a bit, as when he brings to the reader's notice that, over the last ten years of his life, "Charles cultivated the companionship of mature women more than before"

As Alice would have remarked during the Mad Tea-Party, how can you get more of something when you haven't had any so far ? Morton N. Cohen supports this assertion with a series of very pertinent quotations from letters addressed to mothers of girl friends, pressing them to follow their daughter's example, and, "encouraged by the circumstance that [the latter] ha[d] returned alive, brave the ogre's den, and come and dine with [him]" The recipient of this unconventional invitation, Mrs R. L. Poole, did walk in the steps of her fourteen year old daughter, Dorothy. Three years earlier, Mrs G. J. Burch had done something even bolder for a married woman, staying overnight at Guildford with him (and his sisters, indeed !) after a very busy day in London.

I will leave until my conclusion a comment on the obvious mathematical proportionality of C. L. Dodgson's professed favourite age in a girl to his own age, at which Morton N. Cohen briefly hints in the following paragraph, quoting both a letter written to Macmillan in 1877 in which he claimed that his "views about children [were] changing, [as he] NOW put the nicest age at about seventeen" and another one, sent in 1894 to a Mrs J. C. Egerton, whose two daughters, aged eighteen and sixteen, he was keen on adding to the list of his 'childfriends', provided that she would let them come to his lodgings for dinner unchaperoned and but one at a time, in which he argued : "Much of the brightness of my life, and it has been a wonderfully happy one, has come from the friendship of girl-friends. Twenty or thirty years ago, 'ten' was about my ideal age for such friends : now 'twenty' or 'twenty-five' is nearer the mark. Some of my dearest child-friends are thirty

and more : and I think an old man of sixty-two has the right to regard them as being 'child-friends' still."

Two years later, in the above-mentioned invitation to Mrs Poole, he put it even more bluntly : "Child-society is very delightful to me : but I confess that grown-up society is much more interesting ! In fact, MOST of my 'child'-friends (specially those who come to stay with me at Eastbourne) are now about twenty-five." Some would say that he was overdoing things a bit in order to lure this thirty-six year old happily married woman into his 'den', but why would he have been so intent on achieving his ends if he had not believed every word of it ?

Others would stress that he merely expected from such occasions more refined intellectual intercourse, but stuck to his old guns as regarded the more sensual satisfactions of viewing and maybe touching much younger bodies, the only ones that met his aesthetic standards and could arouse in him some sort of sublimated yet nonetheless perverse sexual excitement.

But, apart from the harsh judgment passed on Alice's evolution at thirteen, which I have quoted in my introduction, and more or less convincingly brushed aside as being more concerned with her temper than her physical appearance, this conviction is essentially grounded in his profession to Arthur Burdett Frost that "a girl of about twelve [was his] ideal of beauty of form" and plea to Emily Gertrude Thomson to get him a child-model to copy, but never to get a grown-up model any time she was expecting him, as "I like drawing a CHILD best" It may not be a coincidence that, each time, this assertion was formulated to an illustrator of his works, in whose eyes the celebrated 'author-for-children' in him had to look immaculately prim and proper, so that his rejection of any connection, however distant, with an adult professional model sitting in the nude - the kind of lower class women hardly deemed by his peers any better than street-walkers - mattered much more to him than any hypothetical suspicion of exaggerated fascination with the prepubescent female body.

Without repeating the whole of my 1998 Roger Lancelyn Green Memorial Lecture, 'C. L. Dodgson and the Victorian Cult of the Child', published in The Carrollian, the journal of the British Lewis Carroll Society, I cannot but remind you of the universality of the Victorian fascination for the female child as embodiment of purity and innocence, quoting but a handful of examples :

John Everett Millais's conviction, expressed in a letter to his fellow painter Charles Collins, that: "the ONLY head you could paint to be considered beautiful by EVERYBODY would be the face of a little girl about eight years old, before humanity is subject to such change"; the photographer's Henry Peach Robinson's assertion, in his personal reminiscences, that "the most delightful sitters are children", which he developed thus : "A glow of happiness runs through me when I think of some of my little friends. I do not know a more charming occupation than photographing little girls, from the age of four to eight or nine. After that they lose their beauty for a time. ... The result, when you get one, is so exquisitely beautiful that it repays you for all your labour"; or, even more to the point, as it straightforwardly points to their bodies and not just to their faces, George Du Maurier's profession that "all beauty is sexless in the eyes of the artist at his work - the beauty of man, the beauty of woman, the heavenly beauty of the child, which is the sweetest and best of all."

C. L. Dodgson whole-heartedly partook of that conviction, just as he shared his friend Du Maurier's view that "nothing is so chaste as nudity", he who wrote to his last illustrator, Emily Gertrude Thomson, that he "objected to all PARTLY clothed figures, altogether, as being unpleasantly suggestive of impropriety" and so would "have none but WHOLLY clothed, or WHOLLY nude (which, to my mind are not improper AT ALL)."

What is far less obvious is where exactly he drew the line between a child's body and a budding or grown woman's. The third most frequently put forward evidence for his disgust in the latter's is not a direct quotation from his diaries or correspondence, but Mrs Edith Shute's recollection of a letter in which he "confessed to having no interest in ... grown-up female models, having the 'bad taste' to find more beauty in the

undeveloped than the mature form" The problem is, he was far from consistent in such matters : for instance, his assertion, in the above-quoted letter to A. B. Frost, that "I would rather not have an adult figure (which always looks to me in need of drapery)" is not only contradicted by his favourable reception of nude paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Frederic Leighton that I will show you in a few minutes, but also by his readiness to "try an adult rather than lose the chance of such splendid practice" when he got an opportunity to sketch in Henry Paget's studio in London. He did, indeed, state beforehand that he "HOPE[D] it would be a child", but this might again be interpreted as a shrinking from the prospect of a confrontation with an unknown adult professional model, akin to the Sartrean nausea that seizes the English painter Little Billy when he suddenly runs into Trilby posing "for the altogether " in front of the French sculptor Carrel in George Du Maurier's novel - and is so shocked at the sight that his Platonic love for her is immediately and irredeemably shattered, "and he ran away and never came back."

It would be, not just dishonest, but obviously preposterous to pretend that C. L. Dodgson did not enjoy watching, photographing, and drawing little girls in various states of dress and undress, and to deny that he eagerly collected as many photographs and sketches of naked female children as he could get. But it is nearly as dishonest to claim that this was the alpha and omega of his fascination for the nude. In her above-quoted recollections, Edith Shute adds that he described twelve as his ideal age because "children are so thin from seven to ten", which can legitimately make us wonder exactly what kind of thinness he had in mind, especially if we notice the relatively large number of fourteen year olds he came to draw in the 1880s and 90s.

Oddly enough, most of these seem to have been provided by Mrs Shute, who regularly stretched the upper age-limit they were supposed to have agreed on, for his apparently great pleasure. Such is the case with Ada Frost, a professional model aged 14, he sketched in her studio in 1888, an opportunity he described as "quite a new experience [as] the only studies of naked children [he had] ever had opportunities for having were ... about five years old" He felt compelled to add that "a spectator would have to be really in SEARCH of evil thought to have any other feeling about her than simply a sense of beauty, as in looking as a statue", a typical mark of self-justification, and did not resent her age at all, describing her figure as "quite lovely ", and concluding that "it was a real enjoyment to have so beautiful an object to copy."

Another instance of acute self-contradiction in such matters is the case of Maud Howard, another fourteen year old model he had met at Mrs Shute's, which he described in his diaries as "not very pretty in face, but certainly beautiful in figure", and in a letter to Emily Gertrude Thomson as having "a beautiful figure", and looking "nice and modest". But he then gives way to some sort of panic, maybe inspired by the reputation of young female models to be prone to an early entry into sexual practice, and adds : "But she is turned fourteen, and I like drawing a child BEST. However, if you ... CANNOT find a child, Maud would be well worth having for an hour."

Three years later, when he discussed with Miss Thomson the elder child in her "bower picture", claiming that it must female, and hence was to be provided with longer hair and thinner wrists and ankles to "make a beautiful girl", he used as his main argument that the artist had "given her breasts just the curvature which [he] noticed in the last child-model (Maud Howard, aged fourteen) whom [he] had the privilege of trying to copy in Mrs Shute's studio." The memory of this great occasion, or maybe the evidence he had sought out and consulted before writing that letter, inspired him the quite lyrical profession that "one hardly sees why the lovely forms of girls should EVER be covered up !"

Do I need to remind you of his incredibly elastic use of the word 'girl' that I hope to have demonstrated earlier in this paper, and that I can further prove by quoting his wish to commission Miss Thomson to do a pastel of the head of "a lovely girl friend" staying with him at Eastbourne : twenty-seven year old May Miller ?

Rather than to have lost interest in girls over ten or twelve, he seems indeed to have been quite anxious to be able to photograph or sketch them as long as he could decently

do it. When he insisted on Miss Thomson's photographing for him ten year old Iris Bell in the nude, in spite of an unsightly "scar" whose exact position we shall never know, he did not press her to do it 'because as she got older, she would be less pleasant for him to look at', but "while it is possible to get it : in two or three years, it will be impossible", which sounds much more like regret and disappointment than disgust. Just as when, in conclusion to his evocation of 14 year old Maud Howard's sitting, after asking Emily Gertrude Thomson whether she has ever got "my little friend Maud Howard", he adds : "(I'm afraid she is SIXTEEN by this time.)"

Is it being prejudiced to suggest that this "afraid" can be interpreted along many different lines, apart from the usual 'What a pity she has now grown too old to be of any interest to me' ? Lines such as 'What a pity she is now too old for a mere amateur to sketch her for his private pleasure without breaking the current code of propriety', or 'What a pity she is now too old for me to be able to pretend in the eye of God and of my own conscience that the pleasure I am taking in looking at her is wholly innocent' or else 'What has become of her ? What if she had entered a sex life and was liable to behave in a provocative way ?'

There is indeed ample proof of C. L. Dodgson's attraction to, rather than disgust in, budding womanhood. Graham Ovenden has provided me with reproductions from some of the drawings by William Stephen Coleman C. L. Dodgson was able to borrow from the artist and to send to be photographed for him by Henry Peach Robinson in 1882. Four out of the five diary entries mentioning Coleman's names are missing from Green's edition : in the earliest one, C. L. Dodgson reported having met "two of his models, girls of about sixteen and fourteen, the younger rather pretty" The second described his second visit to Coleman's place, where he stayed "from eight till about eleven, and had a very enjoyable evening, looking through the drawings." He selected twenty-two of them, among which two were drawn from his child-friend Connie Gilchrist, a pantomime actress and notorious skipping-rope dancer, who also modelled for the painter and President of the Royal Academy, Frederic Leighton. Green's edition leaves out a parenthesis in which C. L. Dodgson describes them as "one dancing, and one with tamborine", as well as the whole of the following sentence : "Two (one crouching on pillow, and one with hands behind) from Frances Mace, and one (picking flower) from Ellen Feldon, who is painted by Dobson in the R. A. this year."

The latter looks quite a young child on the only depiction of a girl picking a flower in the 'Coleman' section of Ovenden's Nymphets and Fairies, but, it is definitely a teen-ager's body that Connie's see-through dress allows us to figure out on the two Christmas cards mentioned - and treasured - by C. L. Dodgson. This is even more blatantly the case with Frances Mace, if it is her indeed who is depicted on these two photographed drawings Graham Ovenden assures me to have been in C. L. Dodgson's collection. I suspect the second one to have surged up again in a letter written by C. L. Dodgson to Emily Gertrude Thomson, fourteen years later and less than two months before his death. In it, he asked her whether she would agree to hire a camera and pose a thirteen year old professional model named Isy Watson "hands behind her back", which he thought « a very pretty arrangement », in imitation of "a lovely photo of a girl (of about fifteen)" he sent her a tracing of, adding that, contrary to the original, "the picture need not include the knees", a requirement probably inspired by his conviction that "plebeian models" all had unsightly "thick ankles".

The third mention of those prints in his diaries is quite insignificant, but the fourth is fascinating, because it offers us a glimpse at the way in which C. L. Dodgson may have attempted to win some of his favourite girl friends to the notion that such pictures were perfectly proper in his eyes, and hence to a readiness to pose in the same way for Miss Thomson's camera or pencil, if that is not too daring an interpretation of the fact that he had sent prints of those photos as gifts to fifteen and eleven year old Agnes and Jessie Hull , a present that was, according to his diary entry, gratefully accepted. Mr Coleman's name last occurs in C. L. Dodgson's diary in reference to one of his models, Nellie May, whom he met and befriended in March 1883, but unexpectedly found too young to be photographed yet in a sentence that is worth quoting in full :

"She is pretty, and no doubt artists can make very pretty pictures of her, but I doubt her being a good photographic subject for a 'nude' study, I should guess her to be too fat, at present, though she is eleven and a half : in another year or two she might be more graceful"

Who said puberty was C. L. Dodgson's nightmare ?

Another even more blatant piece of evidence for his compulsive fascination for the adolescent body and obsessive wish to portray teen-age girls in minimal attire is to be found in a series of letters he exchanged with Xie Kitchin's very understanding mother just before he suddenly gave up photography, which seem to have barely if ever attracted any scholarly attention but Karoline Leach's, almost twenty years after they were published by Morton N. Cohen.

Xie was one of his favourite models, and he went on photographing her until she was fifteen. In a letter dated February 27th 1880, he asked Mrs Kitchin whether she would agree to sell him the bathing dress Xie had been wearing the previous summer rather than have a similar new one made on purpose for him, as "new dresses never photo as well as those that have been worn some time", and he went on thus : "OF COURSE I shall not suggest anything so heartrending to your feelings as a mother, as that XIE herself should come and be done in it : but I shall use it for other young ladies, whose theories of life (crossed out) dress are more (crossed out) less Conservative."

These few lines team with fascinating evidence of his high emotional involvement in the daring open request he is making, as well as the indirect plea that lies behind it : the crossed words, quite infrequent in this highly meticulous man's correspondence, and left more or less on purpose - as he might have started copying again a quite short letter if he had not wanted Mrs Kitchin to feel how hurt he was that Xie should refuse to pose for him in such an unconventional outfit, as well as to guess the reproof implied by the original wording, which would have been something like 'whose theories of life are more open-minded' ; but also the emphasis laid on OF COURSE, making even more obvious that he is dying to get the permission he pretends to rule out, yet cannot resist mentioning just in case Mrs Kitchin might once more side with him and convince her now less pliable daughter to please her dear old friend. And finally, we can notice that, for once, C. L. Dodgson did not resort to his sempiternal and quite vague 'girls', but used the much more direct "young ladies".

A month later, Mrs Kitchin tried to assuage his disappointment by offering him a print of "a photo of three young ladies, friends of theirs, dressed as boys in a sort of acrobat dress, the eldest being about sixteen !" The exclamation point is once more quite telling ... as the fact that when he sent his love to Xie in his next letter, he stipulated that it would have to be "not quite the BEST kind - but a sort of second-best - a good sound Civil Service sort of article", and wondered whether she would not be by now "too proud to write" and concluded that if she did, and was "in any doubt as to how to sign herself, 'yours faithfully' [would] do very well" - a rather bitter way to show this by now sixteen year old "young lady" that he still resented very much her refusal to pose for him in the sort of costume he would have loved to see her in, rather than the black and white long dresses in which she preferred by then to be portrayed, playing the violin !

Mrs Kitchin was obviously far more compliant than her daughter, and he sent her on multiple errands on his account, as he did not dare purchase in person "young ladies' bathing-dresses" or "pairs of stockings" to match his 'acrobatic' dresses, "in four sizes, for about the ages six, nine, twelve and fifteen." A few weeks later, he "mourn[ed] over the non-arrival" of the outfit, adding cruelly : "For though I have accepted with all resignation the fact that Xie won't be taken in one, yet there ARE other damsels in the world, and it is quite possible that I might find one not averse to figure as an acrobat. I must however admit that it is less likely I shall find one as beautiful". If that Machiavellian attempt to arouse Xie's jealousy and win her back through base flattery is not a typical case of desperate sentimental blackmail, then I do not know what is !

Two days later, he could not resist pricking her again by parading he had already "found ONE young lady of fifteen who [was to] come and be done in" the fateful dress. It is no wonder that, after so much harassment (I did not say sexual harassment, but I leave it up to you to decide whether you should provide the adjective or not), he was enjoined to drop the matter altogether. He had no choice but to surrender, and send the line : "Don't stay away for clouds. Let there be no further allusion to Xie and the gymnasium dress." But, like a stubborn livid child, he could not resist adding it merely "diminished [his] happiness by .0001 - not more."

A month later, he sent Mrs Kitchin what was to be the final letter of that series, apparently followed by a ten-year gap In a postscript to it, he had to boast that he had been able to use "one of the 'swimming-dresses' the other day for Gerida Drage, and got a very picturesque result [as] she is rather handsome." In a letter to Julia Arnold, at whose parents Gerida was a boarder, he had already stated his intention to "do Gerida in the Gymnasium-Dress" and to "have a vague hope Miss Dr- 'her sister' [Gertrude] may think herself not too old for the other Gymnasium-dress." I have not been able to check the girls' ages in the Drages' Family Story mentioned by Morton N. Cohen in his note to that letter, but Karoline Leach gives her as sixteen - which means Gertrude would have been even older, hence C. L. Dodgson's doubts about her availability as a model - which might have turned out ungrounded, as both sisters came to his studio unchaperoned, at three o'clock in the afternoon, on the fifteenth of July 1880, and he spent two hours in photographing them. But we shall never know whether both of them did pose in the litigious 'swimming' or 'acrobat' dresses, as the pictures taken on that day have probably softly vanished away forever.

What we do know, is that they were the very last ever taken by C. L. Dodgson. There has been much debate about the reasons why he suddenly stopped photographing after that day. His above-mentioned letter to Mrs Kitchin yet contains an unmistakable clue : its last paragraphs in which he tells her of his recent meeting with Mr Owen, the father of 'unkissable' Attie :

He looked like a thunder-cloud. I fear I am permanently in their black books now : not only by having given fresh offence - apparently - by asking leave to photo Atty (WAS that such an offensive thing to do ?) but also by the photos I have done of OTHER - people's children. -

Misled by C. L. Dodgson's idiosyncratic use of the word 'children', all commentators so far, but Karoline Leach, have taken for granted that the offensive pictures they all had in mind were the nude photographs of nine and eight year old Annie and Frances Henderson he had also taken over the previous month. To us, the context points much more convincingly in a wholly different direction. Photographing 'young little Misses Robinson Crusoe' was perfectly innocent in the eyes of those late Victorians who bought Christmas, New Year and birthday cards depicting naked children by the dozen, and found perfectly proper to display them on the sitting-room mantelpiece or on the piano. The trouble was all about kissing a seventeen year old girl, and compulsively harassing sixteen (and possibly eighteen) year old 'young ladies' until they yielded to pose in 'acrobatic' dresses and dark stockings that clung to their ankles, calves, knees and thighs, and made them look like those vulgar circus artists whose shows C. L. Dodgson was so fond of watching.

Coincidentally indeed, from the mid 1880s on, he became a regular and enthusiastic spectator of the various aquatic or underwater shows performed by winsome young ladies on Brighton's pier or at Eastbourne's Devonshire Baths. Even more than his description of 'Miss L. Saigeman's Swimming Entertainment' as "a very pretty performance", it is the fond satisfaction with which he noted it was "the first year gentlemen ha[d] been admitted" that testifies to the eagerness with which he had taken advantage of this new opportunity to quench his thirst for contemplating as much as he could of the adult female body without compromising himself too much.

Such shows were to hold a considerable place among his seaside entertainments, to the point of attending Miss Louey Webb's on four occasions during the summer of 1887,

giving as his reason that "she is 18, and as she is beautifully formed, the exhibition is worth seeing, if only as a picture." A few months before his death, he was still a devoted patron of 'Miss Saigeman's Swimming Entertainment', and ready to go to the trouble of sailing from Eastbourne to Hastings just to applaud the feats of the Beckwith family, featuring a girl he had indeed admired for the first time when she was 9 in 1888, but who had by then reached the mature age of 18, and must have nevertheless afforded him the same degree of visual pleasure as Louey ten years earlier.

Without repeating the paper I read at the 1998 International Lewis Carroll Conference at Cardiff University, I cannot but briefly remind you of the severe editing by Violet and Frances Menella Dodgson of the contents of the nine remaining volumes of C. L. Dodgson's diaries, when they prepared the typescript they allowed Roger Lancelyn Green to publish. The latter was perforce unable to signal all these omissions, so that for half a century, none but the few scholars admitted into the Manuscript Students' Room at the British Library were able to read the full, unabridged, text. And what the Victorian old ladies were intent on hiding to the general public was not their uncle's so touching interest in cute tiny angels, but his attendance at and enjoyment of what they considered as coarse performances starring young adolescent or adult pert actresses, as well as of the favourable impression various adult female nudes produced on him : proof of such vulgar tastes looked to them far more scandalous, and they suppressed it in a much more consistent and systematic way, unaware that they were thus backing the already too widespread view of 'Lewis Carroll' as a monomaniac pervert.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to list all the favourable judgments he passed on the grace, agility, charm or figures of young adult singers, dancers and actresses that sometimes induced him to attend several performances of the same play, nor all the depictions of women on portraits and genre paintings he admired on his numerous and regular visits to public exhibitions and artists' studios, to concentrate only on those adult female nudes that barely escaped or fell victims to his nieces' censoring of his diaries.

Dodgson was anything but the "prudish and pernickety" average Victorian Virginia Woolf claimed him to be. . His former description as a hermit, a recluse, has long been disproved, but the evidence on which it was based will provide me with a transition to my conclusion. For, if I have so far much backed up my postulate that he found the whole of the female gender more aesthetic than his own, and not just underage little girls, I have not yet justified my use of the adjective 'weaker' in my title.

In November 1881, C. L. Dodgson wrote in his diaries that he "wear[ed] more and more of dinner-parties, and rejoice[d] that people ha[d] almost ceased to invite [him]." In a letter he wrote to Mrs Walford, in 1892, he informed her that she was to "excuse [him] from accepting any DEFINITE invitation, even to tea [... as he] decline[d] ALL invitations without exception." James Playsted Wood seems to me to have been the first to jump to the right conclusion when he wrote that "C. L. Dodgson was never shy, and he was seldom a recluse. He was aloof only when, for reasons of his own, he wished to be."

This emphasis on his unshakeable independence is, to me, the major key to C. L. Dodgson's so often misunderstood relationships with members of the opposite sex. He was neither selfish nor self-centered : he was far too generous for that, and spent his time putting into practice his frequent advocacy that 'nothing is worth doing on this earth that is not done for others'. But his altruism also sprang from the fact that he belonged to that category of people who derive much more pleasure from giving than from receiving - so long as they get plenty of love and gratitude in return. He never wanted anything to be imposed on him, not even a pre-arranged meeting with someone whose company he sought - hence his endless wanderings in London, from locked door to carriage on the leave, especially on the Fridays he hated so much, a displeasure far outbalanced in his eyes by the utter freedom he enjoyed. And it is precisely because, like the cat in Kipling's Just-so-stories, he hated nothing more viscerally than the slightest risk of being led where he did not want to go, that he renounced any deep and lasting emotional involvement that would have made him passive – as the word passion etymologically implies - when he always wanted to be in control of the situations he lived. What is more pliable indeed than a fascinated little girl, and less liable to demand anything from you that you are not willing to do ?

As he was also very considerate, showing much concern for other people's happiness, he considered that a wide age gap between himself and the members of the opposite sex he associated with - and put under heavy emotional demand - was safer both for him and for them. As long as he deemed himself of marriageable age, he kept aloof from 'young ladies', as his presence at their side might have dissuaded any potential lovers with more serious intentions from courting them, or soiled their reputation and severely cut their rating on the marriage market. As soon as he thought he should no longer be mistaken for a possible suitor, he was but to pleased to be able to raise his age-limit, and parade at much older girls' arms. He very clearly described this process in at least two letters he sent to young lady friends, in which we find naïve echoes of his wonderment and delight in seeing new doors open in front of him.

When he invited twenty-four year old Gertrude Chataway to stay with him at Eastbourne, he considered what he could "say in defence of asking a young lady of [her] age to be the guest of a single gentleman" :

First, then, if I live to next January, I shall be fifty-nine years old. So it's not like a man of thirty, or even a man of forty, proposing such a thing. I should hold it quite out of the question in either case. I never thought of such a thing, myself, until five years ago. Then, feeling I really had accumulated a good lot of years, I ventured to invite a little girl of ten, who was lent without the least demur. The next year I had one of twelve staying here for a week. The next year I invited one of fourteen, quite expecting a refusal, THAT time, on the ground of her being too old. To my surprise, AND delight, her mother [agreed]. After taking her back, I boldly invited an elder sister of hers, aged eighteen. SHE came quite readily. I've had another eighteen year old since, and feel quite reckless, now, as to ages.

Do not make me say that, so far, little girls had been, to the younger 'Lewis Carroll', but a stop-gap. But the excitement perceptible in the enumeration of these regularly increasing ages reminds me of the triumphant "it is the first year gentlemen have been admitted» quoted above, regarding Miss Saigeman's Swimming Entertainment : the mirth of partaking of a cup that has for too long been kept away from your lips, and from which you now intend to drink your full as often as possible. Renewing his acquaintance with Mrs Liddell, a year later, C. L. Dodgson relied on the same arguments to convince her to let her daughters Rhoda and Violet - then thirty-three and twenty-seven ! - enter his rooms for the very first time :

"If I were twenty years younger, I should not, I think, be bold enough to give such invitations : but, but, I am close on sixty years old now : and all romantic sentiment has quite died out of my life : so I have become quite hardened as to having lady-visitors of ANY age !"

Shouldn't we rather read that the expectation of the logical outcome of such intimate meetings had died out in his visitors' heads (and in their mothers'), and that he was therefore treading on safer ground ? I personally think that C. L. Dodgson's idiosyncratic form of 'romantic sentiment' never died out of his heart, as his not infrequent impulsive marks of jealousy when he heard of his young friends' engagements showed. To the very eve of his death, he was as susceptible as ever to the charms of both innocent, spontaneous underage girls, always willing to be held by the hand, kissed and hugged, and "stars of perfect womanhood" from whom he dreamed of - and often succeeded in - being granted the same privileges - so long as it did not involve any official engagement that would have restricted his fiercely cherished liberty.

Now, have I actually written here 'a portrait of Lewis Carroll as a Don Giovanni' ? The unmistakable 'catalogues' of names of child-friends that occur several times in his diaries would, by themselves, justify the simile to a certain extent. Should we say "a Platonic Don Giovanni" , taking nevertheless advantage of his ever dominant position with younger and more vulnerable females he so easily hypnotized ? This is where I differ from Karoline Leach, though we all have to admit his constantly reasserted thirst for kisses, and his obsessive collecting of partly or wholly nude depictions of the female body in its youth and early maturity concur to make his constant quest for their actual or pictorial intimacy quite physical and sensual, if not sexual. One issue Karoline Leach regularly

raises in the debates on the Lewis Carroll discussion group on the net is what may have caused in Charles Lutwidge Dodgson that obsessional, unquenchable greed for what I have called 'the weaker and more aesthetic sex'. I only have two quotations to leave you as food for thought. They might point in an interesting direction.

In a letter to Mrs Henderson, written in 1880, he described Annie and Frances's innocent habit of walking naked around the house as "very beautiful, [filling the viewer with] a feeling of reverence, as at the presence of something sacred", but immediately felt compelled to add that "for the sake of their little brother", he found it "desirable to bring such habits to an end after this summer" as "a boy's head soon imbibes precocious ideas, which might be a cause of unhappiness in future years, and it is hard to say how soon the danger may not arise." A warning he reiterated thirteen years later to Emily Gertrude Thomson :

I hope I made it quite clear that it is my distinct wish that, so far as any picture done for ME is concerned, neither Iris nor Cynthia is ever to be drawn again, at their house, in anything but FULL-DRESS. The RISK, for that poor little boy, is too great to be run again.

Was he afraid eight year old Clive Bell and the little Henderson boy might turn into the man he had become ? It seems unbelievable the daughters of the Archdeacon might have been allowed to run around the rectory stark naked, or that Mrs Dodgson would have entrusted to her son the sort of cares that would have led him to behold the nudity of some of his many younger sisters, and yet these very solemn warnings do sound as if they had sprung from some very personal experience.

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