

A PERFECT LIKENESS

Carroll Photographs Dickens

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“A PERFECT LIKENESS” was first performed on April 18, 2013 by Paper Lantern Theatre in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, with the following cast:

Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson)... Ben Baker

Charles Dickens... Michael Kamtman

This fictitious encounter between authors Charles Dickens and Charles Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll) takes place at Dodgson’s residence at Christ Church, Oxford in 1866. It is performed without intermission and runs approximately 80 minutes.

This 2015 version is considerably revised from the version published in 2013.

A PERFECT LIKENESS

(LIGHTS UP on Dodgson’s Drawing Room: a 19th-Century chamber with tall windows and tall bookcases, crowded with books, papers, art and quirky ornaments, including a modestly-sized bust of celebrity novelist Charles Dickens. There are two Upstage doors: Left, leading outside, and Right, to a closet that is being used as a photographic darkroom. Stage Left there is a lectern; Stage Right, a box camera on a tripod is focused on an Upstage Center sofa, armchair, and side tables, in an area that is obviously a makeshift photographic studio. A short drape made of black fabric blocks daylight from shining onto some low shelves stocked with bottles, chemicals, glass plates, rags and trays. There’s a lot of detail in this room but it’s well organized and shows the mind of a very creative and busy man. It’s afternoon: SUNSHINE streams in through the windows on the Right.)

(SOUND: Mantle clock chimes 2:00 p.m.)

(CHARLES DODGSON, 34, a mild-mannered, soft-spoken, upright, clean-shaven fellow in a black suit, recites a tongue-twister while polishing the lens of his camera with a handkerchief.)

DODGSON *(slowly)*: “Round... and round... the ragged rock the rugged rascal ran.” *(Again, a little faster, while fluffing the sofa cushion)* “Round... and round the ragged rock... the rugged rascal ran.” *(He smiles, pleased. Glancing into a mirror, he straightens his cravat while reciting with full confidence)* “Round and round the ragged rock the rugged rascal ran; if I should dye my whiskers green, I’d use a purple fan...” *(He stops in mild alarm; he improvised that last phrase, and has no idea what he has just said. Confused, he goes to the lectern, where he reads from his exercise book.)* “Sarah saw a shot-silk sash shop full of shot-silk sashes.” *(Pleased, he continues...)* “I slit the sheet, the sheet I slit, upon the slitted sheet I shit.” *(Horried, he pops his hand over his mouth.)* Well I daresay that’s not fair! *(Picks up a pen, dips it in ink and strikes the offending rhyme from his book. Picking up a piece of notepaper, he scribbles a note.)* “Dear Sir, I strongly recommend... that you delete the poem entitled ‘I Slit the Sheet’... from future editions of your book... *Fun Exercises For Stammerers*. The offensive utterance... inevitably made by the speaker... is hardly suitable for... civilized... people. Sincerely yours... C. L. Dodgson.” *[NOTE: the ‘g’ is silent, pronounced ‘Dodson.’]* *(He composes himself, looking at the camera on its tripod, and approaches as if meeting someone)* “Good day Mr. Dickens. I trust you had a p—” *(DODGSON doesn’t stutter; it’s more of a hesitation. He’s having a hard time saying “pleasant journey” so he changes his tack)* “I trust you had no trou—” *(He sighs. Starts again)* “Good day Mr. Dickens!” *(There is a loud KNOCK at the door. It startles him and he shrieks.)* “GOODDAYMRDICKENS!” *(He recovers his composure and opens the U.L. door. He starts to say)* Good d—

(CHARLES DICKENS, 54, strides boldly into the room, albeit with a slight limp caused by a painful left foot suffering from gout. His attire is formal but colorful compared to DODGSON's somber blacks. He is breathlessly excited; DODGSON can't get a word in edgewise.)

DICKENS: Dodgson, I presume? Well well, look at this! I've never been inside Christ Church before. Looks like a cracking set of rooms! Good lord, are they making busts of me already? I'm not dead yet! A flattering improvement on the ol' nose, don't you think?

DODGSON (*overwhelmed*): I – don't – think –

DICKENS (*quickly inspecting the rest of the room*): Your letter didn't mention what a photographer is doing at an Oxford university. You're too old to be a student, and too young to be a professor. And you signed your name “Reverend,” that was a tad confusing. And this book you sent me! (*He pulls a little red book from his pocket and waves it about.*) What devilish nonsense is this! Little girl tumbles down a rabbit-hole into a land of talking animals and mad people! Did you write this? Eh? Lewis Carroll? Is that you? Eh? Speak up!

DODGSON (*with careful effort*): I am Charles Dodgson.

(DODGSON extends his hand. DICKENS tries to hand him his hat. To be polite, DODGSON instead reaches for the hat, as DICKENS puts the hat back on his head and extends his hand. Awkward moment – followed by a repeat of the same mistaken gestures. Finally DICKENS grabs DODGSON's right wrist with his left hand and delivers his hat into it, quite deliberately. DODGSON stows the hat.)

DICKENS: Pleased to meet you, Dodgson. “Reverend” Dodgson, I mean – hang it, may I just call you “Dodgson”?

DODGSON: Yes. That is the correct form of address.

DICKENS: There was a character called “Dodson” in *Pickwick Papers*.

DODGSON (*overlapping*): ...In *Pickwick Papers*. Yes, I know. An unscrupulous lawyer. (*Beat.*) My family was slightly embarrassed.

DICKENS: An unfortunate coincidence.

DODGSON: I didn't mind. I thought it was funny. I was eight.

DICKENS: Eight what?

DODGSON: Eight years old when I read “Pickwick Papers.”

DICKENS: Egad.

DODGSON: I used to delight my sisters by reciting:

“Can I view thee panting, lying
On thy stomach, without sighing;
Can I unmov-ed see thee dying
On a log
Expiring frog!”

DICKENS: Well I—

DODGSON: “Say, have fiends in shape of boys,
With wild halloo, and brutal noise,
Hunted thee from marshy joys,
With a dog,
Expiring frog!” *(He laughs merrily for a moment. His inner ‘geek’ is showing.)*

DICKENS: I think I was twenty-three when I wrote that, during a night-long drunken flare.

DODGSON: A what?

DICKENS: And you remember it after all these years!

DODGSON: I think the things we learn as youths stay with us all our days, don’t they?

DICKENS: Oh, Dodgson, that sounded very precious. I hope you haven’t memorized a list of clever things to say to impress me – you’ll bore me to tears. I have just an hour before I meet the manager at the Oxford Town Hall to discuss tonight’s reading. I hope you have your ticket.

DODGSON: The box office was sold out when I enquired.

DICKENS: Ah, bad luck. You can listen in at the windows, then, with the rest of the rabble, eh? Haha!

DODGSON *(wounded)*: We had better begin to make the photograph, since time is short. *(Takes off his coat and crosses to the shelves adjacent to the camera where he’ll prepare the first photographic plate.)*

DICKENS: Just a joke, Dodgson. No offense intended.

DODGSON (*begins wiping a piece of glass [5" x 6"] with a cloth*): None taken, sir.

DICKENS: No, I've offended, I can tell. Please, accept my apology or I'll feel like a damned fool. (*Extends his hand.*)

DODGSON (*bristles, but shakes hands*): And please, may I ask that you refrain from cursing.

DICKENS: Cursing? Eh? What did I say?

DODGSON: Please, take a seat whilst I prepare the first plate.

DICKENS (*quietly reviewing his last remarks*): “Accept my apology... feel like a fool... a damned fool...” Ah, that was it! “A damned fool!” Well you are indeed a sensitive chap, my good Reverend. I shall do my best to refrain from uttering anything blasphemous. By the by, I don't care much for sitting for photographs.

DODGSON: Why?

DICKENS: Piles.

DODGSON: I beg your pardon?

DICKENS: I've been sitting on my arse writing books for the past thirty years. I think I've worn it out.

DODGSON: Perhaps a cushion would make you comfortable?

DICKENS: It's not just that. It's difficult for me to keep still. I've always had a tremendous engine burning inside me... driving me, pushing me on. The last time I sat for a photograph, we were at it half the day. One picture after another... most of them blurry beyond human recognition.

DODGSON: Then why did you accept my invitation?

DICKENS (*waves the book*): It's this damned book of yours. That grinning Cheshire Cat hiding in the trees... a caterpillar blowing smoke rings... I had to meet the man who made this stuff up, because, frankly, there's a lot going on inbetween the lines... Some hidden message... waiting to be revealed, eh?!

DODGSON: Could you please lower your voice? I don't want my neighbours to know that Charles Dickens is here.

DICKENS: Or that Lewis Carroll is also here, eh? What fit of imagination manifested this outrageous hokum? Did it pop into your head after a binge of opium and hallucinogenic mushrooms? Eh?

DODGSON: Hardly. I’ve never touched those things.

DICKENS: No? Opium is a very popular... medicine. Never taken it for a headache?

DODGSON: No. Have you?

DICKENS: Of course! I use laudanum regularly. It calms the brain, dulls the pain, and lulls you off down Slumber Lane; but it does have the unfortunate effect of... (*thinking of a polite way to say it, gestures around his abdomen*) ... slowing everything down to a full stop.

DODGSON: And you’ve had hallucinations as a result?

DICKENS: As a result of constricted bowels?

DODGSON: I meant, do you use opium for inspiration?

DICKENS: Ho ho! Not I. My doctor allows me measured amounts that do not induce visions of sentient decks of cards that want to chop off my head. Speaking of which... (*He opens his copy of Alice and thumbs through till he finds a certain page*) ... explain this, if you would be so kind. (*Reads*) “‘Which side will make me grow larger?’ Alice said to herself, and nibbled a little of the mushroom in her right hand to try the effect: the next moment she felt a violent blow underneath her chin; it had struck her foot!”

DODGSON: Which bit of that would you like explained?

DICKENS: She shrinks so rapidly that her chin strikes her foot? And a moment later, grows hundreds of feet high, with a long neck like a serpent? What am I supposed to make of this?

DODGSON: Every time Alice eats or drinks something, it changes her size. The effects of the mushroom are quite... unpredictable.

DICKENS: But surely you know what happens when one eats certain wild mushrooms. Apparently you think you really *are* in a fairy-tale, where the animals *do* walk up to you and start a conversation...

DODGSON: Yes, I’ve read all about wild mushrooms; but you’d be foolish to eat them. They’re certain to disagree with you sooner or later. (*DICKENS stares at DODGSON, taking a long, slow walk around him.*) What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?

DICKENS: “A king may look at a cat.”

DODGSON: I beg your pardon?

DICKENS: You’re not at all what I expected.

DODGSON: Oh dear.

DICKENS: I was looking at your book on the train. A woman looked at it and said, “Isn’t it a shame?” “What’s a shame?” I asked her. “It’s that Mr. Lewis Carroll,” she replied. “They say he’s gone completely mad.”

DODGSON: Completely sane, I’m afraid. Are you disappointed?

DICKENS: On the contrary! I’m astounded that such an outlandish tale was conjured up by someone as sober as you! What inspired it? I’m dying to know.

DODGSON: I suppose I can blame... my camera. I was experimenting with taking photographs in the open air when I met the new Dean’s children playing near the Cathedral. I’m fond of children, but it’s rare to see any at Christ Church. At any rate, they were curious about the camera. I showed them how it worked and I asked them to sit for some pictures. It wasn’t easy to get them to sit still, so I began telling them stories, to keep their attention. We became friends.

DICKENS: And one of them is called Alice?

DODGSON: Yes. Alice Liddell. (*NOTE: rhymes with ‘fiddle.’*) That’s her. And there. (*Opens an album of photographic prints, and points to framed ones that hang on the wall.*)

DICKENS: Well, well! You made these fine pictures?

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: She has an air of mystery to her gaze. Those dark eyes... they penetrate... into the soul.

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: She must have been very dear to you – to have made her the leading lady of your little fairy-tale.

DODGSON: Very dear... Shall we proceed with the photograph?

DICKENS: Not yet. You must tell me more. (*DODGSON hesitates.*) Is this too personal, Dodgson?

DODGSON: Not at all. Let me see... I was a fixture at the Deanery for a few years – as if I were a favorite uncle. One day when Alice was ten, we took a boat out for a picnic on the river, along with her two sisters. They begged for a story, and I made one up. I must have gone on for more than an hour. Afterwards, Alice begged me to write it all down for her.

DICKENS: Well that hardly seems fair. It takes me many months, several quarts of ink and a few gallons of wine to achieve the same success you’ve had by merely entertaining some toddlers at a picnic. Hrmph! So it just spewed out of you like molten lava?

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: Hm. Your publisher Macmillan tells me you’re on your way to fame and fortune.

DODGSON: Good heavens, I hope not! I mean, the income would be a blessing, but I hope no one ever finds out that Lewis Carroll and I are the same person.

DICKENS: What, no interest in meeting your lionizers?

DODGSON: I have nightmares in which I’m pursued by people I don’t know, asking me questions, pounding on my door... pulling me open like a watch to see what makes me tick.

DICKENS: It’s nothing to fear, Dodgson. I thrive on all the attention I receive. In fact, I don’t think I could live without it.

DODGSON: You’re welcome to it, sir. But I beg you to never tell anyone who Lewis Carroll really is.

DICKENS: Whyever not? Your admirers would be friendly, no doubt, and—

DODGSON (*forcefully*): I have my reasons, Mr. Dickens!

DICKENS: I solemnly swear to keep your little secret, Mr. Carroll. So: you make photographs and write fairy-tales. Anything else?

DODGSON: I’m the mathematics lecturer here.

DICKENS: You jest.

DODGSON: I am in dead earnest, sir.

DICKENS: You are a curious mixture of things, like a mug of Christmas wassail. And you are... a man of the cloth?

DODGSON: I'm a Fellow of Christ Church. We are obliged to remain bachelors and take holy orders. I was ordained a deacon several years ago.

DICKENS: And next, the priesthood?

DODGSON (*smiles, shakes his head; then*): The priesthood is a sacred calling, but not for me... for reasons I'd rather not discuss. Besides, I haven't time for writing sermons and tending the flock. Also... I have a stammer that makes reading the service difficult.

DICKENS: A stammer? Nonsense! You sound like a perfectly capable speaker.

DODGSON: I am at my ease now, but I assure you that when reading from the pulpit, my tongue refuses to cooperate.

DICKENS: But not when you're lecturing on Euclidian geometry?

DODGSON: No. I can speak on that subject without hesitation.

DICKENS: But you hesitate when speaking to the flock about sin and the afterlife? Do you have doubts about your faith, sir?

DODGSON: Why, n-no, I—I—

DICKENS: Aha! I've got you there!

DODGSON: How dare you, sir! How d-dare you imply that I am anything but a devout Christian with nothing but the strongest faith in God and the Church of England! The hesitation in my speech is a purely mechanical defect brought on by certain combinations of consonants—!

DICKENS: Steady, Dodgson, I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers. When I was a young reporter at the courts I made a study of lawyers examining people in the witness box, and it's given me some bad habits. Please, I promise I'll not offend you again.

(There's a tense silence for a moment, followed by the clearly heard, unmistakable sound of a fart.)

DICKENS: Oh! I do beg your pardon.

DODGSON (*massively uncomfortable*): N... Not at all.

DICKENS (*casting about, at a rare loss for words*): Eh... Nature at work!

DODGSON (*blushing with embarrassment*): Please, you needn't— (*He gasps and presses his handkerchief to his face as a vile smell fills the air.*)

DICKENS: Oh, I'm so dreadfully sorry. (*DODGSON waves his hanky around.*) That reminds me of a funny story—

DODGSON: No! Please don't! (*DODGSON'S nausea gives way to giggles as he is overcome by the humor of the situation. Still embarrassed, he laughs in spite of himself. DICKENS laughs heartily as well.*)

DICKENS: If I'd known that's what it took to break the ice, I'd have done so the moment I walked in the door.

DODGSON: You are... a bit rougher than I expected, Mr. Dickens. I'm sorry if that makes me nervous. Will you take something to drink?

DICKENS: A bit of gin punch would be nice.

DODGSON (*after a beat*): Sorry, I don't have such a thing.

DICKENS: Brandy? Champagne?

DODGSON: Sherry.

DICKENS: That will do! Bring in the bottled lightning, a clean tumbler, and a corkscrew! (*DODGSON pours two small glasses of wine. DICKENS is disappointed at the tiny amount but DODGSON doesn't notice the reaction.*) And perhaps a cigar?

DODGSON (*bristling*): I abhor the smell of tobacco; but I understand it may have beneficial uses, so you may step outside if you wish to smoke.

DICKENS: Perhaps later. It's a regrettable habit. You would be astonished by the way Americans chew their tobacco. The floors and pavement in the United States are awash in a sea of brown, slimy spittle.

DODGSON: I read your *American Notes*. It sounds like a dreadful place.

DICKENS: Indeed it is. To your health, sir!

DODGSON: And yours, sir. *(They drink. DODGSON offers a tin of biscuits.)* Biscuit?

DICKENS: My throat's so dry I'm afraid they would choke me. Any oysters?

DODGSON: I suggest we proceed with the photograph while we're fortunate to have such strong sunlight. *(Gestures to the armchair; DICKENS goes to sit.)*

DICKENS: Yes. Very brave of you to attempt a “perfect likeness” of me. Such an odd phrase. The notion of any image of me achieving perfection seems as likely as horse dung on a dinner plate.

DODGSON *(repulsed but ignoring it)*: Perfection is my aspiration: if one does not aim high, one's arrow inevitably lands in a ditch. Sorry, was that too precious?

DICKENS: I'll allow it. I love the word “ditch.”

DODGSON: Here's a cushion for your... your... condition.

DICKENS: Thank you. *(He sits gingerly, trying unsuccessfully to hide his discomfort.)* And may I trouble you for a stool and a cushion for my foot?

DODGSON: Of course. *(Fetches a footstool, but with only one cushion at hand, he pulls it out from behind DICKENS' back and places it on the footstool.)*

DICKENS: Ah, just what I needed! A stool softener! *(Laughs.)*

DODGSON: I beg your pardon?

DICKENS: Never mind. Sometimes I find my jokes in the gutter. Or a ditch. There's that word again! Ditch, ditch, ditch! *(Winces as he sets his left foot on the stool.)*

DODGSON: I fear you're troubled by the gout?

DICKENS: Poppycock! Never felt better. So what is it about photography that fascinates you? Seems a cold replacement to painting in oils.

DODGSON *(wiping a glass plate carefully and thoroughly with a rag)*: Photography is nothing short of miraculous – allowing artists to use technology and science rather than paints and brushes. The lens is a polished piece of glass that distorts the subject into an abstract collection of light and shade. It makes an artistic impression, an illusion of life. *(DODGSON holds the plate over a shallow tray and pours some syrupy collodion on it, expertly tilting the glass so that it covers evenly; the excess collodion pours off the edges into the tray.)*

DICKENS: You look like a chemist practicing some sinister alchemy.

DODGSON: I’m applying collodion, which adds a sticky skin to the glass. Next the plate needs to soak in silver nitrate for a few minutes to make it sensitive to light. (*Drops plate carefully in the bath tray.*)

DICKENS: Seems an odd choice, glass. Why not use something less fragile?

DODGSON: The glass plate becomes a negative. You shine light through it to make an infinite number of prints. There’s nothing better.

DICKENS: Yet all your work could be dashed to pieces on a clumsy day. And you don’t wear gloves? One would think those concoctions would be poisonous.

DODGSON: Collodion does blacken the skin, but it’s harmless; in fact, doctors have started using it to seal up wounds. Still I wouldn’t advise drinking it. If you’re thirsty, I’d recommend the sherry.

DICKENS: Good, I’ll just help myself. (*DICKENS rises and refills his tiny glass with wine, drinks it down, and fills the glass up again.*) So I’m to just sit there and relax?

DODGSON: Yes. (*He whisks the full glass of wine out of DICKENS’ hand just as he’s about to drink, then steers him back to his seat.*) Look directly into the lens. Breathe slowly. Don’t move. Don’t blink. Don’t talk... until I’ve finished covering the lens. If I may, sir? (*DODGSON makes a few careful adjustments to DICKENS’ pose, hair, and to the folds of his clothing. He takes his time; he’s a perfectionist.*) Your clothing is remarkably... colorful.

DICKENS: Thank you. The waistcoat is from a production of “Ticket-of-Leave Man” at the Lyceum. Tom Taylor owes me more than a waistcoat for all the plots he’s stolen off me. How long will this take?

DODGSON: About a minute.

DICKENS: A minute! I shall need to be mesmerized, I think.

DODGSON: Mesmerized? What do you mean?

DICKENS: Hypnotized. Placed in a trance.

DODGSON: Would that help?

DICKENS: Certainly. I am quite adept at it. I could teach you, Dodgson. That way you can guarantee that your subjects will remain steady.

DODGSON: Perhaps you’d like to mesmerize yourself.

DICKENS: Haha! I knew I’d like you, Dodgson.

DODGSON: What’s your favorite poem in *Alice’s Adventures*?

DICKENS: That’s easy: your parody of “’Tis the Voice of the Sluggard.” I had to recite that awful poem when I was a child.

DODGSON: Then it will be my pleasure to distract you with my version. (*DODGSON loads the glass plate into a slide frame, then slides the frame into the back of the camera.*) Are you quite ready sir?

DICKENS (*fidgiting*): Ready as I’ll ever be.

DODGSON: Remember, don’t change your expression. Take a deep breath. Relax. Ready, steady, go. (*Removes the lens cap.*)

“’Tis the voice of the lobster: I heard him declare
‘You have baked me too brown, I must sugar my hair.’
As a duck with his eyelids, so he with his nose
Trims his belt and his buttons, and turns out his toes.
When the sands are all dry, he is gay as a lark,
And will talk in contemptuous tones of the shark:
But when the tide rises and sharks are around,
His voice has a timid and tremulous sound.” Done!

(*Replaces the lens cap. DICKENS has, in fact, had a slight uncontrolled twitching of the face and head during the exposure.*) I believe you moved a little. (*DODGSON removes the slide frame from the camera.*)

DICKENS: Did I? I was trying very hard not to.

DODGSON: Well, we shall find out in a moment. Excuse me while I develop the plate. If it’s a success, I’ll fix it with potassium cyanide.

DICKENS: And if it’s ruined, you can fix ME with potassium cyanide.

DODGSON (*handing DICKENS a magazine*): Here: I found the issue of “All the Year Round” with my poem in it; I thought you might enjoy seeing it again. (*He goes into the darkroom, which dimly glows with an orange-tinted lantern, and shuts the door.*)

DICKENS (*finds DODGSON’s poem in the magazine and reads it aloud*):

“‘Faces in the Fire’....

The night creeps onward, sad and slow...”

(Grumbles and skips ahead)

“...Those locks of jet are turned to gray,

And she is strange and far away

That might have been mine own today...

The race is o’er I might have run:

The deeds are past I might have done...

And I am left alone with none.”

(Sotto voce) Ugh... Can’t imagine what possessed me to publish that! (He puts the magazine down, rises, goes to the lectern, and begins to snoop through DODGSON’s loose papers. One catches his attention; he holds it up, puzzling over it. He looks for a mirror and finds one. When he holds the writing to the mirror, he can read the words in the reflection.) Aha! “‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves... mome raths outgrabe... He chortled in his joy...” Dodgson! What is this? (DODGSON emerges from the darkroom with the developed glass plate, drying it with a rag.)

DODGSON: What is what?

DICKENS: This marvelous bit of nonsense called “Jabberwocky.”

DODGSON: I’m making notes for another “Alice” book.

DICKENS: Another fairy-tale?

DODGSON: Yes. I have a notion of Alice passing through a looking-glass, into a world where everything is backwards.

DICKENS: You invented these words? “Chortle!” “Outgrabe!” Is there a glossary?

DODGSON: “Chortle” is sort of a combination of chuckle and snort. But I didn’t intend any particular meanings. You can invent your own.

DICKENS: How do you dream up this stuff?

DODGSON *(holding the glass plate up to the light)*: Sometimes life is very like a dream, don’t you think?

DICKENS *(squinting to see the image)*: Is it any good?

DODGSON: I seem to have photographed some monster with two noses and three eyes. *(DICKENS doesn’t understand.)* You turned your head. *(He tosses the plate into a dustbin.)*

DICKENS: Damn me for a fidgety fool! (*Irritated, DODGSON picks up a jar and holds it in front of DICKENS.*) What’s that for?

DODGSON: Put sixpence in it.

DICKENS (*digging a coin from his pocket*): Why?

DODGSON: Every time you swear.

DICKENS (*laughing, drops the coin in the jar*): I’m afraid that won’t stop me.

DODGSON: The forfeit is doubled every time. The next one will cost you a shilling.

DICKENS (*outraged*): A shilling? God’s teeth—oh! (*Digs out a shilling and drops it in.*) This will be an expensive afternoon. Come on then. Let’s get this over with. I hope you don’t mind if I move the chair a little. (*Starts to push the armchair*)

DODGSON (*panicked*): Don’t touch it!

DICKENS (*stopping*): Why not?

DODGSON: The picture has been composed with precise measurements with regard to focus and angle of light.

DICKENS: But it’s too close to the table. It looks crowded.

DODGSON: No, it doesn’t.

DICKENS: It’s making me uncomfortable.

DODGSON: Don’t... move... the furniture, I beg you!

DICKENS (*backing down*): Yes, ma’am. (*Sits.*)

(*An uncomfortable pause... DODGSON starts polishing a fresh plate. The LIGHT coming in through the window suddenly dims.*)

DODGSON: Oh dear, there goes the light!

DICKENS: Bloody clouds.

DODGSON (*outraged*): Mr. Dickens!

DICKENS: Oh, sorry. Two shillings. (*Donates to the swear jar.*) What will you do with all this ill-gotten silver?

DODGSON: I'll donate it to the Orphan's Home.

DICKENS: Excellent. Here's half-a-crown, payment in advance. (*Donates another coin.*)

DODGSON: That's not funny.

DICKENS: Oh, don't be a frumpfudgit, Dodgson.

DODGSON: A what?!

DICKENS: I can make up words too. It's a combination of... frump and... fudgit. You can invent your own meaning.

(*SOUND/LIGHTS: thunderclap and falling rain. The room darkens.*)

DODGSON: I'm afraid our day is a failure. (*He picks up a pencil and a device made of cardboard.*) Pardon me a moment. (*Jots down a note.*)

(*SOUND: Thunder*)

DICKENS: What's that you're doing?

DODGSON: I invented a device for making notes in the dark, so that when you wake up with an idea, you don't have to light a candle to write it down. You see.... You place your pencil against the edge of the openings, and make a mark to represent each letter. I had to invent my own alphabet, of course; it's all lines and dots, you see? I call it a Nictograph.

DICKENS: Wouldn't it be easier to strike a light?

DODGSON: Perhaps, but what if you've run out of candles, or matches? What if it's windy? What if you've gone blind?

DICKENS: I would call that a very unfortunate day! (*Melodramatically*) "Help, help! I've gone blind, I've got no candles or matches... and... it's windy!"

DODGSON (*unamused*): You're having fun at my expense. (*He puts the Nictograph away and lights the gas chandelier, giving the room a warm glow.*)

DICKENS: I have a sense of humor, Dodgson, and sometimes I use it. I like your Nictography. Where can I pick one up?

DODGSON: Nowhere, just yet. I took it round the stationers but they weren't the slightest bit interested.

DICKENS: Don't be discouraged. I'd wager you've got more inventions bouncing round that busy brain of yours.

DODGSON: Ideas come to me so quickly I can hardly organize them.

DICKENS: So... what fresh idea did you make note of just now?

DODGSON: When?

DICKENS (*fetching the Nictograph*): On your Nictogram. In your secret language. Which I'll bet that I can decipher!

DODGSON: No!

(They struggle over it; DICKENS finally relents and hands the Nictograph back to DODGSON, who is very flustered by DICKENS' bullying. Long, awkward pause. SOUND of thunder.)

DODGSON: I have no reason to detain you further.

DICKENS: Don't worry, Dodgson! These summer cloudbursts don't last long. Tell me: what's that lectern doing in here? Do you practice preaching to an invisible multitude?

DODGSON: That's my writing-desk. I prefer to stand.

DICKENS: You write standing up?

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: How original. That would have saved me from the malady I endure from sitting all day. As it is, I take fortifying perambulations to counteract the long hours at my desk.

DODGSON: I am a great believer in the daily constitutional.

DICKENS: If I couldn't walk fast and far, I should explode and perish.

DODGSON: I imagine a strong, invisible cord attached to the crown of my head – a heavenly force pulling me along!

DICKENS: Invisible cord! Heavenly force! (*Reaches into his pocket for his notebook*)
Would you mind if I made a note of those marvelous phrases?

DODGSON: Certainly, sir. Oh! I – I – On second thoughts, I’d rather you didn’t.

DICKENS: Why not? Ah, you’d rather use them yourself.

DODGSON: No, it would be an honor to have the Great Novelist enjoy a phrase of mine enough to quote it. Heaven knows how many times your prose has inspired *me*. It’s just that... I feel as if you’re studying me. I’d rather not suddenly discover myself as a character in your next book.

DICKENS (*embarrassed, puts his notebook away*): Ah. You must think me very rude.

DODGSON: You must understand that I am a very... private person.

DICKENS: You certainly are, Dodgson. I can’t decipher you at all.

DODGSON: Am I a puzzle to decipher?

DICKENS: You are; a scientific genius with a streak of whimsy is a rare thing.

DODGSON: “Genius,” ha! I am but an ‘umble mathematics lecturer.

DICKENS: And a happy one?

DODGSON: At this moment? Quite content, yes.

DICKENS: That’s not what I meant. In general, when you wake up in the morning, and you look out the window and contemplate the day ahead... do you feel a surge of pleasure?

DODGSON: I’m afraid I find the question perplexing. I’m not an idler who spends his days in the pursuit of pleasure. I have lectures to prepare. Letters to write. Family obligations. A long list of writing projects. Photography is my chief recreation and I believe it should be done well, as to not waste time and resources.

DICKENS: And all those things bring you joy?

DODGSON (*still rather confused*): I try to be worthy of God’s trust in me, to be productive and deserving of His love.

DICKENS (*skeptically*): God’s love, yes. But if you were to choose one activity that makes you happier than anything else, what would it be?

DODGSON (*after a moment's reflection*): It is when I am in the company of a delightful child.

DICKENS: Eh?

DODGSON: My ideal day would be in the company of a well-behaved young girl. I would entertain her with tea, and stories, and teach her some logic-puzzles. She would be a perfect subject for photography: a patient sitter and good at following instructions. I would dress her in any number of theatrical costumes – I have a small collection of such – or perhaps, without any costume at all.

DICKENS: What's that? None at all?

DODGSON: Girls are so naturally beautiful that I think there is no more ideal subject to photograph. The female child seems to me to be a divine creation sent from Heaven in a state of grace; their outer beauty a manifestation of inner goodness. I've seen such pictures displayed at exhibitions, and I hope to produce some good examples of my own.

DICKENS: That sounds like a highly unusual pursuit for an Oxford don.

DODGSON: But there's nothing unseemly about it. The subject has provoked some controversy in the papers, but the Queen herself has expressed approval of such art. The child's mother would grant her permission and accompany the girl for such a sitting, of course. And in order to protect the young lady from any future embarrassment, the negatives become her property to keep or destroy as she wishes.

DICKENS: And you don't fear the wagging tongues of people who might criticize or condemn, regardless of the propriety you maintain?

DODGSON (*sighs*): Mr. Dickens, anybody, who is spoken about at all, is sure to be spoken against by somebody; and any action, however innocent, is liable to be blamed by somebody. If you limit your actions in life to things that nobody can possibly find fault with, you will not do much.

DICKENS: Be careful, Dodgson. Your motives may be pure but not everyone has the enlightened mind of the artist or the poet.

DODGSON: Have you ever observed a group of children playing, when they are unconscious of the watchful eyes of parents? Have you gone to the seaside, and watched little ones laughing and splashing, with and without clothing, in the waves? Their loveliness is so natural that it is very healthy, indeed beneficial, to one's spirit; and

humbling, too, to come into contact with souls so much purer and nearer to God, than one feels oneself to be. You have daughters, I believe?

DICKENS: Grown daughters, yes.

DODGSON: If I had written to you, when they were, say, seven or eight years old, asking permission to make a portrait of them, playing in a natural state of undress, to forever preserve their sweetness of form, would you have said No?

DICKENS: I'd certainly appreciate such a picture, but might not want it exhibited in a gallery.

DODGSON: But you allow that such works may be exhibited – you wouldn't censure great works of art simply for the sake of their nudity? Are they immoral or indecent, simply by showing the human form that God created?

DICKENS: But do these forms symbolize some deeper passion that you're driven to express?

DODGSON: Why, no... they are simply pictures of unaffected innocence!

DICKENS: You are a persuasive speaker, sir. (*DICKENS rises, removes his coat and unties his cravat.*) You may photograph me in my altogether, if you wish.

DODGSON: Good lord, no, Mr. Dickens! I beg you, keep your clothes on!

DICKENS: Did I hear you use the Lord's name in vain, Dodgson? That will cost you sixpence. (*Embarrassed, DODGSON donates a coin to the swear jar.*) So you have some objection to *my* nudity, eh?

DODGSON: I – I do not care to see you naked, I must confess.

DICKENS: And yet you argue so compellingly for the display of the human form in art! Curiouser and curiouser. I'll grant you, I'm not the striking beauty I once was. I doubt there's *anyone* who wants to see me naked. But why would you advocate for nudity when the thought of *mine* repulses you? There's a mystery.

DODGSON: Not at all. I don't see anything innocently beautiful about adults.

DICKENS: Adult men, you mean?

DODGSON: Men *or* women.

DICKENS: How about... boys?

DODGSON (*annoyed*): NO.

DICKENS: Well, your interests certainly are specific! I admire your bold artistry, Dodgson – outrageous fairy tales *and* nude child photography! You risk your reputation with such pursuits.

DODGSON: Which is why I work diligently to maintain my anonymity. Lewis Carroll must never jeopardize the life of Charles Dodgson. My photography is already causing enough of a... (*pauses*)

DICKENS: What? What, what?

DODGSON: Never mind.

DICKENS: No, please! I wish you'd pull that poker out' yer arse and relax a bit. (*DODGSON gasps in disgust.*) I paid for that one in advance!

DODGSON: I can't tolerate rudeness. I believe our business here is finished.

DICKENS: Don't throw me out. I ain't got wot I come for yet.

DODGSON: The photograph?

DICKENS: No, hang the photograph! Nasty bits of work, photographs – unfairly examining every wrinkle and pimple and... regret.

DODGSON: You came here under false pretenses?

DICKENS: I came because I felt obliged to do you a favour.

DODGSON: Why?

DICKENS: I'd heard about your little publishing sensation, Mr. Carroll. Everyone in London is talking about it – and about YOU, you'll be dismayed to learn. "Who is this mysterious Mr. Carroll?" they all want to know. "Do you know him? Does anyone know him?" Then one day, like a conjuring trick, poof! Your little book dropped into my lap. I laughed till I thought I'd burst. I haven't laughed like that in... well I... I haven't had much cause to laugh this past year. But your gift brought quite a welcome change. I had to come, if for no other reason, than to thank you.

DODGSON: Surely posting a letter would have sufficed?

DICKENS: I could tell you weren't an ordinary admirer hoping for an audience with "the Inimitable." I sensed something intriguing about you, so I asked Macmillan what sort of person you were.

DODGSON: What did he say, may I ask?

DICKENS: He said you were clever, pleasant, exacting, and... a little odd.

DODGSON: Odd? Really?

DICKENS: Or eccentric. Something like that. But be honest – you ARE a little odd.

DODGSON: And that's why you came here today, to meet the eccentric Lewis Carroll, and laugh at how odd he is?

DICKENS: I'm attracted to interesting characters! Don't be insulted.

DODGSON: You said you felt obliged to do me a favour.

DICKENS: It's the other way round, actually. (*After a beat*) I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. I think I've made an embarrassing mistake. (*Turns to leave.*)

DODGSON: No, please, Mr. Dickens! If there's something I can do for you, please tell me what it is.

DICKENS: Thank you, Reverend.

DODGSON: Please, don't call me that.

DICKENS: Can we sit down?

DODGSON: Of course. (*They do.*)

DICKENS: I... I don't know if you saw in the papers... any mention of... Mrs. Dickens.

DODGSON: Yes. You and your wife are... separated. I know. But I respect your privacy, sir. I would never pry into the details of your personal life.

DICKENS: Oh, can't you set aside your good manners for one moment so that we can have a *real* conversation?

DODGSON: How can I help? Do you and your wife need counsel on restoring your marriage? You needn't have come all the way to Oxford. I can recommend someone at a church closer to your home—

DICKENS: No no. I thought that you and I could discuss this as one artist to another.

DODGSON: I... don't understand.

DICKENS: Listen: my dear friend John Forster... I tell him everything, to a point. He is the official keeper of my stories, and he will, upon my death, disclose my history to the world. But I can't tell him *everything*, do you understand? There's no one in my life to whom I can reveal... certain... private matters.

DODGSON: Why me?

DICKENS: Your book... I can't stop thinking about it. It's clearly an allegory about the consequences of imprudent actions. Alice is tempted by something unusual. She decides to break the rules and follow her passion. She tumbles headlong into chaos. She feels completely changed... and unsure if she can ever be the person she was before!

DODGSON: It was a joke, a trifle to make children laugh! I can't help it if people see unintended meanings in it.

DICKENS: I refuse to believe you could possibly be so oblivious. There is truth concealed deep inside every man – unwanted, painful truth smothered under heavy blankets of manners and morality and fear. Whether we intend or not, these truths can and will creep into our lives. Have you noticed how easily mad people shed those layers, and reveal their inner natures?

DODGSON: And we lock them up! Madmen are dangerous when unable to repress or control the devils within.

DICKENS: Quite right! And yet your Wonderland is populated with all sorts of lunatics frolicking about until fierce little Alice stomps her foot and makes them all disappear. Alice is *you*, Dodgson, *you* – keeping your madness at a safe distance.

DODGSON: Is there a point to these ridiculous analogies?

DICKENS: Yes! I was hoping to meet Lewis Carroll, eccentric adventurer, with his imagination poised on that knife's edge between giddy tea-parties and the abyss of insanity. He's so talented that the world is eagerly awaiting to hear what fantastic adventure he'll conjure up next. But alas, Mr. Carroll seems to be unavailable. Reverend Dodgson prefers his world safely ordered and his madness neatly tucked away. What a shame! You're writing silly sequels when you could be telling passionate stories, from the heart. Look at me! My passions pour out of me like a fountain. I love to travel, and eat, and drink, and smoke, and tell stories, and sing, and procreate. I am

so hungry for adventure that sometimes I feel I could devour the entire world, to have it within me, and to feel it flowing out when I write, or perform upon the stage. I have felt the profound embarrassment of poverty; the intensity of pain and illness so agonizing I would have welcomed death; the desire for all the privileges usually denied a person of my humble origins; the desire to be loved.

DODGSON: Your life’s experience surely affects your writing.

DICKENS: Exactly so. You’re too sheltered here in Oxford, looking at the world through your little camera lens. Have you traveled outside of England?

DODGSON: No.

DICKENS: Have you lived amongst the poor? Fathered children? Felt someone’s life slip away as you held them in your arms?

DODGSON: No.

DICKENS: Have you fallen in love?

(DODGSON hesitates. He chokes, and takes out his handkerchief.)

DODGSON *(finally)*: May I have some wine, please? *(DICKENS refills DODGSON’s glass, and hands it to him. DODGSON drinks it all.)*

DICKENS: You must allow me to mesmerize you.

DODGSON: You’ll do no such thing! *(Beat.)* What is it like?

DICKENS: You relax; you close your eyes; you fall into a trance. I ask you questions.

DODGSON: And I reveal the inner secrets of my heart?

DICKENS: Perhaps.

DODGSON: That sounds very unnatural. Suppose I should go mad, running about the room clucking like a chicken?

DICKENS: I’ve performed it many times, with great success. You awake from a refreshing nap, none the worse. You needn’t worry.

DODGSON: I would never submit to such a thing. Have *you* been mesmerized?

DICKENS: No. But I think it would help.

DODGSON: How? With... your marriage?

DICKENS: No, with... something else. You heard of the terrific train accident at Staplehurst last year?

DODGSON: Of course, a great tragedy. Many were killed or injured.

DICKENS: I was on that train.

DODGSON: You were? But I read every word in the papers about it. I never saw your name.

DICKENS: No. I went to a great effort to suppress that information.

DODGSON: I don't understand.

DICKENS (*after a thoughtful pause*): There was someone else on that train; a certain... actress-friend of mine, that you will pardon me if I do not name. I was accompanying her home after a long stay in France, where she was recovering from... a serious illness. There are a good many gossip-mongers who persist in spreading pernicious libel about me. So... I had to keep our presence on that train a secret.

DODGSON: Your friend, sir – I hope she survived as well?

DICKENS: She did.

DODGSON: How fortunate that the hand of God spared you both that day!

DICKENS: It wasn't good fortune or the hand of God. It was privilege. I was traveling first-class, and therefore seated in the first carriage – the only carriage that didn't plunge off the rails.

DODGSON: Surely you can't deny that it was God's will that saved you?

DICKENS: Why should God save me and not the scores of third-class passengers that perished that day, just because I could afford a more expensive ticket? I climbed down the embankment and worked for hours among the dead and dying, but there was little I could do. A gnawing guilt clawed its way into my soul. I have been a different man since that day, and extremely unwell. Plagued with nightmares in my sleep. By day I am nervous and dizzy, with an ever-changing list of medical complaints. My face has grown shadowed and careworn. Today was my first railway journey since the accident. It took an extraordinary effort to take that first step into the carriage. Every train I see traveling at the slightest speed is inexpressibly distressing.

DODGSON: I am surprised you took the trouble to come to Oxford.

DICKENS: I was hoping to meet a kindred spirit. I'm afraid I've made some rather bad decisions these past few years, and was beginning to feel the weight of Marley's chains. Thank you for hearing me out.

DODGSON: “No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another.”

DICKENS: That sounds familiar.

DODGSON: It's one of yours.

DICKENS: Well then, allow me to return the favor. I can tell your heart is heavy. You can confide in me.

DODGSON: I don't want to be mesmerized.

DICKENS: Then tell me plainly. Someone has broken your heart?

DODGSON (*crosses, thoughtfully, towards the window*): Three years ago Mrs. Liddell banished me from the Deanery. It was only for a few months, but nothing's been the same since.

DICKENS: Banished? Whatever for?

DODGSON: There was talk. She was told that I had another motive for my visits; that I must have been paying court to one of her daughters.

DICKENS: Was this true?

DODGSON: Of course not, but Mrs. Liddell assumed the worst. She must have found my affections for Alice and her sisters to be too strong. We were all so close. Picnics and long walks, posing for photographs, sending letters sealed with kisses... She must have thought the girls were getting too old for that sort of attention.

DICKENS: How old was she?

DODGSON: Alice was eleven.

DICKENS: A tad too old, perhaps, to sit on Uncle Dodgson's knee.

DODGSON: A tad too old? How much is a tad? Is there some exact number that has somehow escaped my attention?

DICKENS: Not exactly. I have two daughters. Receiving affection from a gentleman was fine when they were small, but there came a time when it would have appeared – well – unseemly.

DODGSON: Ah. I suppose this is a new concept I have yet to grasp: that a sacred friendship with a child must, on a given date, stop – and change from affectionate to keeping a polite distance. “Happy tenth birthday, my dear! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be over in the far corner. Do let me know if I can be of any assistance!”

DICKENS: I know it sounds unreasonable, but you must understand how protective parents are of the moral welfare of their children.

DODGSON: I find it hard to believe that a trusted, loving friend is such a cheap commodity that he can be tossed away like a rotten apple.

DICKENS: Dodgson, no one is tossing you away. Imagine that you had a daughter! What if she were ten, or twelve, bouncing on her uncle’s knee, with his hands on her body, both of them laughing and kissing?

DODGSON: Monster!

DICKENS: Exactly!

DODGSON: No, you! Do you insinuate that I would ever do anything as... improper as that?

DICKENS: I didn’t mean to insinuate anything. Forgive me.

DODGSON: I would rather die than violate the sanctity of a young woman.

DICKENS: But you realize that such men do exist in the world, and that is why you must accept the propriety that parents maintain. I’m sure you’ve done nothing wrong. Even if you *had* been paying court to one of them, what could have been Mrs. Liddell’s objection? It’s not unusual for a gentleman to court a young lady.

DODGSON: Mrs. Liddell is gentry, and I come from humbler stock – the son of a Cheshire clergyman. No doubt she is seeking suitors for her daughters from a higher class of gentlemen.

DICKENS: So marriage *was* your hope!

DODGSON: I wasn't thinking of marriage! At least, not yet. That would have been a good many years off, seven or eight at least. But marriage would mean giving up my life here: resigning the lectureship and my residency.

DICKENS: So you'd find work as a teacher, and write more books! Live in a little cottage with your bride, happily ever after. Isn't that your fondest hope?

DODGSON: I – I don't know! Life at Christ Church suits me.

DICKENS: Truly? Undergraduates hosting loud parties at all hours, and sleeping through your lectures? Is that the life you want?

DODGSON: It's a great honor to be a Fellow of Christ Church!

DICKENS: Even if it means forfeiting the love of your life?

DODGSON (*with rising frustration*): Yes! I mean, I don't know! Alice is just a child. I've worked hard to get where I am, and I'm not going to throw all that aside. I don't have time to think about marriage, and I certainly won't allow my life to be ruined by the gossip of stupid, wicked people who don't know what they're talking about!

(*DODGSON has worked himself into a panic attack and, suddenly feeling faint, he loses his balance. DICKENS leaps to catch him and steers him onto the sofa.*)

DICKENS: Steady now, Dodgson. Sit down, there's a good fellow. What's the matter?

DODGSON: Too much wine.

DICKENS: You barely touched it.

DODGSON: Heart thundering like a kettledrum. The walls looked like they were... moving.

DICKENS: Let me make you more comfortable. (*He adjusts the woozy DODGSON so that he's sitting erect, with hands on thighs.*) Take a deep breath.

DODGSON: I don't know what came over me...

DICKENS: Keep your eyes closed, please. Hands down. You see that staircase there, leading down?

DODGSON (*his eyelids fluttering slightly*): ...Staircase?

DICKENS: Let's go down the stairs together. Count the steps with me. One, two, three...

DODGSON: ...four, five, six... seven... oh! (*Rises, opens his eyes, disoriented*): What’s happened to me? I don’t recognize anything. I wonder where I am? Perhaps I’ll see the latitude or longitude drawn up somewhere. Pardon me, sir, is this New Zealand? Or Australia?

DICKENS (*adjusting down the LIGHT from the chandelier*): You’d be better served asking not “where are you” but “who are you.”

DODGSON: Who am I? Let me see; I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I seem to have forgotten.

DICKENS: Why?

DODGSON: I can’t think clearly. Something’s happened. I think I’m... lost.

DICKENS: What’s your name?

DODGSON: It’s so hard to remember. My name... it starts with the letter “chah.” Charles! That can’t be right. It sounds so strange.

DICKENS: That’s because you’re not used to hearing it, Charles.

DODGSON: And who... are you?

DICKENS: I am your confidant. I am a blank book into which you might scribble your most private thoughts. I am a strongbox, where you might lock up those thoughts where no one will see them, or discuss them, or pass any judgment thereon.

DODGSON: You hear my deepest prayers?

DICKENS: Yes.

DODGSON: Then you are...my Heavenly Father?

DICKENS: Eh... Indeed, my son.

DODGSON (*kneels*): Oh! I should kneel in thy presence, o Lord.

DICKENS: You needn’t be afraid, Charles.

DODGSON: I am terrified.

DICKENS: Why?

DODGSON: Because I am a humble sinner, and You are omnipotent, and... Your voice sounds so strange, and hoarse.

DICKENS: I've had a cold... Charles, something's gone wrong, and we're going to find it out. Tell me what happened. Don't be nervous.

DODGSON: I'm always a bit nervous – sensing that You are watching me – worried that I might anger or disappoint You. I want so much to please You. Oh God, help me to be thy servant.

DICKENS: You have always been a good boy, Charles. Can you remember your childhood? Picture your home...?

DODGSON (*rises, seeing it, wistfully*): A fine old house. Fields of waving corn. Church bells ringing. Girls laughing. News of the railway coming.

DICKENS: Good. Are you happy?

DODGSON: Very happy indeed. All my brothers and sisters together in the big drawing-room. “Lessons are over,” says Mother. Off we run to the garden. We take turns pulling everyone round in a train I made out of little wagons. I even built a station, and wrote a timetable, and gave everyone a ticket, and sold treats to the passengers.

DICKENS: What else?

DODGSON: My puppet theatre, conjuring, charades... Let's have a contest to see who can write the funniest poem! I've got one.

“A woman 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!” (*Giggles.*)

DICKENS: Is there no secret strife at home?

DODGSON: We're all strangely well behaved, as if some weird enchantment has fallen over the house. I wish it could last forever. I pray that it will. I don't want us to grow up, or to ever leave this fine old place. Look, everyone! I stopped all the clocks in the house to see if Time, and everything else, will stop with them.

DICKENS: Your parents must have been angry!

DODGSON: “Father, a stopped clock is still correct exactly twice a day!” (*Receives something into his hand, and looks at with joy.*)

DICKENS: What happened?

DODGSON: He called me a genius and gave me a gold sovereign.

DICKENS (*sighs, changes his tack*): But – a boy must grow up, Charles. Now you’re an Oxford scholar and a Fellow of Christ Church. A man with serious responsibilities.

DODGSON: Serious indeed.

DICKENS: But you distract yourself... photography, writing verses, entertaining your child-friends.

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: One child-friend in particular?

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: There is a strong feeling betwixt you, a feeling that she reciprocates?

DODGSON: Very much.

DICKENS: Yet her feelings about you have changed?

DODGSON: No, I don’t believe she’s changed at all.

DICKENS: Explain yourself.

DODGSON: I believe others are telling her how to behave, and what to think; that it’s not proper to give your uncle a kiss on the cheek after you’ve reached a certain age; that it’s not decent for a young lady to have tea alone with a gentleman. As if I were some sort of monster; as if she were in some sort of danger!

DICKENS: Has she told you exactly how she feels?

DODGSON: No.

DICKENS: Has she written such expressions, in letters?

DODGSON: No.

DICKENS: Then how do you know how she feels?

DODGSON: The last time I saw her was when it was raining so hard last week. I was late so I was running across Tom Quad. I couldn't see much, with the heavy rain and my umbrella so close to my head. I almost ran into Alice and her mother coming the other way, also hiding under their umbrella. Alice and I laughed at our near collision; a laugh that reminded me of the scores of happy days we'd spent together. But then I saw the little spark in Alice's eyes disappear. She dropped her head and looked at her shoes. I made a joke about it raining cats and dogs and kangaroos, but she did not look up. Mrs. Liddell suddenly said they must be getting out of the rain... and off they went. I watched them go, frozen to the spot as if I had taken root like an old willow tree.

DICKENS: That doesn't sound like an uncle's love for a niece. That sounds like a man's heartbreak over the loss of a lover.

DODGSON: She's only a child.

DICKENS: But on the brink of womanhood. I imagine it must be exciting to see her mature.

DODGSON: No! I suggested she find a book of rules for how to leave off growing older, and remain a child forever.

DICKENS: Why wouldn't you want to see her blossom into a lovely young woman?

DODGSON: Because I hate how people change when they grow up. Why must we lose our innocence, our heavenly purity? Why must we be tempted by worldly sin?

DICKENS: Are you tempted, Charles?

DODGSON: I have sleepless nights. I pray to banish all unholy thoughts.

DICKENS: What unholy thoughts?

DODGSON: I never give words to my darkest fears, because you already know what's in my heart.

DICKENS: NO, I DON'T! (*Collects himself.*) Are you desirous of physical love?

DODGSON: I'm afraid to speak it.

DICKENS: Speak!

DODGSON: I'm afraid that I can never be a husband. My desire is to be worthy, to be clean! To be free of sin! I cannot desire to love a woman if it leads me to fornication!

DICKENS: You think loving a woman might bar your entry into Heaven? Aren't your parents in Heaven?

DODGSON: My mother awaits there for the arrival of my father. Father always preaches against the sin of temptation: the easy road to eternal punishment.

DICKENS: Your parents weren't fornicators; they'll receive their heavenly reward. So will you.

DODGSON: But I'm weak. I work in vain to discipline myself. I'm vile, selfish and worthless!

DICKENS: In action? In deed?

DODGSON: Never!

DICKENS: If no one was about, and you could behave however you liked, without parents, or gossip, or laws, or even God to restrict you, wouldn't it be your fondest desire to bed these pretty little angels you photograph?

DODGSON: No, no no!!

DICKENS: Then why do you call yourself vile and weak?

DODGSON (*uncontrollably passionate*): Because I do love them! I love them all, with all my heart! But it's not an evil love, it's good, and it's pure. I can't help but admire well-made children, with their bright, eager eyes, their wandering hair, unblemished skin, their delicate feet and perfect limbs! There is nothing in the world more beautiful!

DICKENS: Don't you dream of them at night, and then waken, feeling them still cradled in your arms, naked, warm, wanting to be kissed?

DODGSON: Yes.

DICKENS: Aren't you aroused?

DODGSON: No! My love is without sin!

DICKENS: You said you had unholy thoughts!

DODGSON: Yes! Yes! (*Cries*) But I don't want to. I don't want to lust. That's my confusion. A pure love *must* be possible! An angel deserves to be cherished and worshipped, as parents dote on their own children. If I never father a child, how will I know the unique joy that comes from holding and kissing and cherishing a perfect child

of one's own? Is that a sin? Can't a man's love for a young lady be unceasing, regardless of her age, if the love is pure?

DICKENS: It's never pure! Men are lustful creatures. We can never completely suppress what is truly present in every man. You say you are weak and vile; what makes you think you can love without sin?

DODGSON: I don't know. Please, stop tormenting me. I am a miserable sinner. What is to be my fate, O Lord?

DICKENS: I regret that you may never escape from the world's disapproval.

DODGSON: I wish I could make the world understand. It's so unfair. Why must I suffer the baseless gossip of grandees? Mrs. Liddell has no right to—

DICKENS: Mrs. Liddell has no power over you, Charles. If you're angry, speak your mind.

DODGSON: Speak my mind?

DICKENS: She's standing right here.

DODGSON: She's here?

DICKENS: Right before you. Don't be nervous. Let her have it!

DODGSON: Mrs. Liddell, I hope you're feeling quite well today...

DICKENS: Blast it! Don't coat it with sugar! Speak your mind!

DODGSON: You had no right to banish me for the crime of being a dear friend.

DICKENS: Go on.

DODGSON: What if I were to court Miss Alice in a few years? She can marry whomever she likes. Your husband is many years older than you, so I can't imagine that would be grounds for objection.

DICKENS: *Touché*. What else?

DODGSON: Nothing...

DICKENS: I think there is. Say it!

DODGSON: Mrs. Liddell, I am a hardworking man of good character. I would make an excellent husband to any one of your daughters. Your stooping to believe unsubstantiated gossip makes you a... a weak-minded flibbertigibbet.

DICKENS: Well done, Dodgs—

DODGSON: And if you ever foist some aristocratic suitor upon those girls that is the smallest bit disrespectful or cruel to them, I shall march forth like a crusader, rescuing fair damsel from her oppressor, and then come for you, with lance extended! “One, two! And through and through, the vorpal blade went snicker-snack! I left her dead, and with her head I went galumphing back.”

Dear Alice in distress no more, alight my noble steed!

We’ll gallop to our castle’s door, from horrid monster freed.

O frabjous day, calloo, callay! You are my own, indeed!

DICKENS: You’re sugar-coating your *own* feelings now. “Vorpal blade... snicker-snack!” Can you hear yourself? You’re hiding under an avalanche of nonsense. Why can’t you admit the real truth?

DODGSON: I can’t say it! I can’t risk an eternity of damnation!

DICKENS: You can hide nothing from me, Charles! I see your most inner self, deep in the darkest pit of your most paralyzing fears! I am the Lord thy God! I see all and know all! Speak and be forgiven!

DODGSON: Please, rid me of this confusion, my Lord! I need to know if I am indeed a shameful man who should be tried, convicted, and punished for the curse that maligns his nature! If not, please tell me! Tell me that I am a good man; that this curse is in fact a blessing; that I deserve happiness. Tell me, that this painful shadow may pass!

DICKENS: And if I cannot tell you?

DODGSON: Thy will be done. But every day I will pray for the judgment of the world to melt away! To be able to love, and be loved, deeply, truly, without sin. To be loved without censure... able to laugh and sing and be silly and affectionate all day, every day... Able to finally be... myself.

DICKENS (*after a beat*): That’s enough. (*Gently steers DODGSON back to the sofa.*) When you hear a little bell, you will awaken. (*DICKENS turns the LIGHT back up, produces a small bell from his pocket, and rings it gently. DODGSON blinks as he regains consciousness. For a moment, he is calm and disoriented.*) Commendable, Mr. Dodgson.

DODGSON: Did you—? (*Leaps to his feet, furious*) Damn you, Dickens! And damn mesmerism! (*DICKENS rattles the swear jar. DODGSON knocks it away violently and it crashes to the floor.*) And damn the swear jar. You’ve taken unfair advantage, sir!

DICKENS: Don’t be upset.

DODGSON: I’m sure I must have babbled perfectly ridiculous nonsense!

DICKENS: Do you remember anything?

DODGSON: No. (*Grabs a closed umbrella and wields it like a sword.*) What did I say? What did you make me say? (*DICKENS backs away – and slowly around the room – as DODGSON advances.*)

DICKENS: I didn’t make you say anything!

DODGSON (*his anger climaxing*): Tell me what I said! (*He swings the umbrella with real intent to harm, but DICKENS ducks behind the sofa, and the umbrella hits the furniture.*)

DICKENS: Dodgson, please! You’ve no reason to be angry with me.

DODGSON (*shaking with passion*): I’ve never struck at anyone before.

DICKENS: Satisfying, isn’t it?

DODGSON: NO. You moved me to violence – a thoroughly repugnant act! I won’t have you here.

DICKENS: I won’t leave yet.

DODGSON: Why not? This whole day has been a complete waste of time. I wish I could mesmerize *you*!

DICKENS: Thus far no one has successfully done so.

DODGSON: So no one will ever know the truth about your secret actress-friend?

DICKENS: What—how dare you!

DODGSON: Why else would you go to such lengths to suppress the fact that you were traveling with her on that train? I’m sure if it were innocent, there would have been no need to keep it secret.

DICKENS (*raising his voice, almost threatening*): Gossip, as you well know, can be tremendously damaging. I am a *national treasure* and as such, I’m frequently a fundraiser for charities. I cannot allow my character to be brought down by malicious attackers. It would ruin me and the foundations I support!

DODGSON: Gossip is not the same thing as scandal. Don’t pretend you don’t know the difference. They’re not lying about you. Those rumors are true. Aren’t they!

DICKENS: Yes! Yes! My wife is a pleasant woman and an adequate mother. She is simply, inexorably dull. Never an interesting word to say about anything. I met... Nelly... when she was seventeen. Every moment I spend in her company pulls me deeper into Love’s confounded machinations. Nelly’s passionate about everything: art, and literature, and food, and politics, and... life! The reason I had to take her away to Paris last year was... because... for...

DODGSON: Why?

DICKENS: Because she was going to have a secret child.

DODGSON: Yours?

DICKENS: Of course.

DODGSON: What happened?

DICKENS (*deeply saddened*): The child did not... survive. Like you, Dodgson, I have a close relationship with God and I pray that I will be forgiven. (*beat*) Have you no words of comfort for me, Reverend?

DODGSON: I don’t know what to say. The man I admired most in the world is damning himself with sins which he not only attempts to justify, but for which he prays that he will be forgiven. It makes a mockery of my faith.

DICKENS: You think my lifetime of good works won’t save me from an eternity in Hell?

DODGSON: It’s not my place to judge. But this is why I can never rise to the priesthood. How can I advise men on assuring themselves a place in Heaven if they can simply manipulate God’s laws to suit their sinful deeds? Salvation isn’t won by negotiation.

DICKENS: I see now what a dreadful mistake I’ve made coming here. You’ll excuse me. (*DICKENS turns to go but instead finds the Nictograph.*)

DODGSON: Don’t touch that.

DICKENS: I can read your secret alphabet, you know. It’s easy.

DODGSON: What does it say?

DICKENS: “Dickens... failed.”

DODGSON: I make note of every exposure, including failures.

DICKENS: How very... accurate. (*He loses his self-control; his eyes fill with tears.*) You’re right. There is something wrong with me! I mesmerized you against your wishes. I deliberately tricked you into confessing secrets to me. Well then, Reverend, in the name of absolution, it’s my turn to confess. (*Kneels.*) I’ve been unspeakably cruel to my undeserving wife. I’ve ruined the life of a charming young actress by forcing her to keep our relationship secret for the sake of my career – but at the expense of her own. Behind my pathetic mask of arrogance hides a bombastic coward, wishing he had one-tenth of your decency. Dodgson, listen to me... I burn like a firework: bright and blazing and quickly reduced to ash. I don’t imagine I’ll last much longer. I’m sick; I’m exhausted. I collapse backstage after every one my readings. My publisher put a clause in my new contract to determine what should happen if I should perish and leave my next book half-finished. I was devastated. Death terrifies me. Damnation terrifies me more!

DODGSON: As it should. You’re an adulterer, Mr. Dickens, and a hypocrite – exploring the confidential regions of my mind while bristling at my discovery of your affairs! You’re despicable. You’re the worst villain from your wickedest melodrama. And you came here in hopes of absolution? It sickens me.

DICKENS (*begging*): It was my hope, sir, that you would understand... would see that like your love for Alice, my love for Nelly was pure in God’s eyes.

DODGSON: Don’t compare your sin to my divine love of a child! They aren’t remotely the same thing.

DICKENS: Aren’t they? I’m not so sure.

DODGSON: Get out! (*DICKENS rises in despair and dons his coat. DAYLIGHT streams back in through the windows. DICKENS has a change of mind, and sits in the armchair.*) What are you doing?

DICKENS: I want you to photograph me. Go ahead. Capture my repentant soul. My eyes will reveal everything: follies, regrets, warts and all. Publish it if you like. I know that every time you look at it, you’ll remember what a crashing disappointment I turned out to be. But – how satisfying for you to be able to show the world what a despicable character I’ve become... A perfect likeness of an unforgivable sinner.

(DODGSON considers, then coldly fetches a fresh glass plate and polishes it with a rag. He pours collodion on the plate, methodically coating it as usual. He sets the plate in the bath tray and wipes his hands with a rag.)

DODGSON: Are you ready?

DICKENS: I promise you, if ever I have focused all of my energies upon remaining absolutely still, that effort has never been more substantial than at this very moment.

DODGSON: Ever the master of the overlong sentence. *(He studies the pose, then decides to retie DICKENS' undone cravat – a strangely intimate act. DICKENS wonders if DODGSON is about to strangle him, yet he passively consents, even if the knot is tied a bit too tightly. DODGSON fetches the plate from its bath, encases it in the slide frame and loads it into the camera.)* Look directly into the lens. DO... NOT... MOVE. Breathe gently. Go! *(He uncovers the lens and looks at his pocket-watch. DICKENS holds the pose. After 15 seconds we hear the SOUND of the mantle clock striking 3:00 pm.)* DO... NOT... MOVE! *(DICKENS holds the pose for 15 more agonizing seconds. Finally, DODGSON replaces the lens cap.)* Done! *(DICKENS rises and fetches his hat, but stops when he notices that DODGSON is choking back a sob with one hand across his eyes. The catharsis of the completed exposure has overwhelmed him.)*

DICKENS: I'm sorry if our meeting didn't go *precisely* as you'd hoped.

DODGSON: I had hoped we might be friends.

DICKENS: Yes... I buggered that up pretty well, didn't I? But two men weathering a storm together form an iron bond that can never be broken. Be assured that I shall never breathe a word of what happened here to another living soul, and I expect you shall do the same. "To err is human."

DODGSON: "To forgive, divine." Did you find what you were digging for? Is some evil stain lurking in my soul?

DICKENS: Your demon is locked away in a cage... at the bottom of a well, under a mountain of granite. I've never seen a man strive so ardently to contain something that's in no danger of escaping. Besides, that little book of yours will forever be a shining ray of light in a cruel world. That'll tip the scales pretty heavily in *your* favour.

DODGSON: But what's to be my fate? Loneliness? Condemnation?

DICKENS: A writer learns to pick up his broken heart and wrap some mending plaster round it and then place it, bruised but beating, back into his chest. Then that heartache

fuels the passion of his next poem. Don’t despair. There’s an endless supply of delightful children out there, waiting for Uncle Dodgson to tell another funny story.

DODGSON: They are my muses – my real inspiration. Without their love, I am lost.

DICKENS (*placing a card on a table*): Perhaps you’ll come to my performance tonight. (*Beat.*) I look forward to reading your next book.

(DICKENS bows slightly, and staggers out of the room. DODGSON fetches the slide frame from the camera. He stares at the slide frame for a moment, reflecting on the events of the past hour; he wants to smash it to the floor, but stops just short and pauses, considering his next action.)

(BLACKOUT. LIGHTS UP for bows. CURTAIN.)