

COMPLETE NONSENSE



Lear drawn by himself showing a doubting stranger his name in his hat to prove that Edward Lear was a man and not merely a name.

Complete Nonsense

EDWARD LEAR



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

This edition published 1994 by
Wordsworth Editions Limited
Cumberland House, Crib Street
Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9ET

ISBN 1 85326 144 0

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Typeset by Antony Gray
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

PREFACE

Edward Lear must always be regarded as one of the most curious figures in English literature. He secured a permanent niche in the Temple of Fame by what he regarded as a mere pastime, till the literary world of the nineteenth century proclaimed its delight in it. He is known as the father of English 'Nonsense', but his serious ambition and what he regarded as his serious work was landscape painting.

Born in 1812, Lear was not twenty years of age when he was invited by the Earl of Derby to stay at Knowsley to paint the collection of birds there. He remained at Knowsley four years, and it was during that period that he wrote the nonsensical limericks, illustrated with pen drawings, to amuse the juvenile members of the Earl's family. They were dashed off at odd moments, and so little did he think of them that they were not published till ten years later - 1846. Then the reception accorded to them was extraordinary. All sorts of rumours got about as to their authorship, this being ascribed to Lord Brougham, Lord Derby and others, and attempts were made to read into them political and personal references. But Lear's fantastic absurdities are as void of symbolic meaning as they are of vulgarity and cynicism; they are nonsense pure and simple, and that is their charm.

In later years Lear issued several additional volumes, forsaking the limerick for songs and lyrics, and even prose, but never losing the whimsicality that was new in English letters.

He died in 1888, and in his long life had several striking tributes paid to him. He was placed by Ruskin at the head of his list of the hundred best authors, and Tennyson, while Poet Laureate, wrote

verses 'To E.L.' He spent much time travelling in the Near East and published several volumes of landscape paintings, the result of his travels. At one time he was drawing-master to Queen Victoria.

The stories, alphabets and other items in this volume are taken from *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets*.

THE WORKS OF EDWARD LEAR

The following is a list of Edward Lear's principal works. Much of his early work in animal drawing was done as illustration for other authors.

Illustrations of the Family of the Psittacidae, 1832

Tortoises, Terrapins and Turtles by J. E. Gray, drawn from life by Sowerby and Lear

Views in Rome and its Environs, 1841

Gleanings from the Menagerie at Knowsley Hall, 1846

Illustrated Excursions in Italy, 1846

A Book of Nonsense, 1846

Journal of a Landscape Painter in Greece and Albania, 1851

Journal of a Landscape Painter in Southern Calabria, 1852

A Book of Nonsense and More Nonsense, 1862

Views in the Seven Ionian Islands, 1863

Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica, 1870

Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany and Alphabets, 1871

More Nonsense Songs, Pictures, etc., 1872

Laughable Lyrics, 1877

Nonsense Botany, 1888

Tennyson's Poems illustrated by Lear, 1889

Facsimile of a Nonsense Alphabet, done in 1849 but published for the first time in a limited edition, 1926

INTRODUCTION

What is Nonsense? I know when you do not ask me. I know that in infancy it is as the very air we breathe; that it cheers and strengthens us in the long weary working days of manhood; and brightens and gladdens our old age. But how can I bring it within the words of a definition? If the question is pressed, I must answer it with another. What is Sense? Sense is the recognition, adjustment and maintenance of the proper and fitting relations of the affairs of ordinary life. It is a constitutional tact, a keeping touch with all around it, rather than a conscious and deliberate action of the intellect. It almost seems the mental outcome and expression of our five senses; and perhaps it is for this reason, as well as because the sense of the individual always aims at keeping itself on the average level of his fellows, that we usually talk of sense as Common Sense. If we call it Good Sense, it is to remind ourselves that there is a right and a wrong in this as in everything human. But it is not Bad Sense but Nonsense which is the proper contrary of Sense. In contradiction to the relations and harmonies of life, Nonsense sets itself to discover and bring forward the incongruities of all things within and without us. For while Sense is, and must remain, essentially prosaic and commonplace, Nonsense has proved not to be an equally prosaic and commonplace negative of Sense, not a mere putting forward of incongruities and absurdities, but the bringing out of a new and deeper harmony of life in and through its contradictions. Nonsense, in fact, in this use of the word, has shown itself to be a true work of the imagination, a child of genius, and its writing one of the Fine Arts.

From the days when Aristotle investigated the philosophy of laughter, and Aristophanes gave laughter its fullest – I might say its maddest – expression on the stage at Athens, down to this week's issue of *Punch*, Nonsense has asserted and made good its claim to a

place among the Arts. It has indeed pressed each of them in turn into its service. Nonsense has found the highest expression of itself in music, painting, sculpture and every form of poetry and prose. The so-called Nonsense Club, which could count Hogarth and Cowper among its members, must have been worthy of the name, for so we have the 'March to Finchley' and 'John Gilpin' to testify; but, as far as I know, Edward Lear first openly gave Nonsense its due place and honour when he called what he wrote pure and absolute Nonsense, and gave the affix of 'Nonsense' to every kind of subject; and while we may say, as Johnson did of Goldsmith, that there was hardly a subject which he did not handle, we may add, with Johnson, that there was none that he did not adorn by his handling. His pen and pencil vied with each other in pouring forth new kinds of Nonsense Songs, Nonsense Stories, Nonsense Alphabets and Nonsense Botany. His visit to India supplied him with matter for what I might call Nonsense Philology and Nonsense Politics; and even since his death I have been able to add two new forms of his Nonsense, an eclogue with the true classical ring, and the heraldic blazon of his cat Foss; the music to which he set the 'Pelican Chorus' and the 'Yonghy Bonghy Bo' is worthy of the words to which it is wedded; and those who remember the humorous melancholy with which the old man sat down at the piano to play and sing those songs, will give his Nonsense Music a place too.

But 'pure and absolute' as Edward Lear declared his Nonsense to be, he was no mere buffoon. His own sketch of his life, given in another part of this volume, and fully confirmed by all that he has left behind him, shows him to have been a conscientious lover of hard work from the time when, at the age of fifteen, he began to earn 'bread and cheese' by selling his 'queer songs and sketches', at prices from ninepence to four shillings. This love of hard work is so characteristic of genius, that a great man has (no doubt with some exaggeration) made the capacity for taking infinite pains a definition of genius itself, while the individual humour which is shown in Lear's pictures is itself the sufficient proof of his genius. He was a landscape painter of individual power. The mere list of the books of natural history which he illustrated, of the many and distant lands which, poor and weak in health, he visited, and of his journals and records of these places, 'with such a pencil, such a pen', is enormous; and all this while he was carefully cultivating and training himself in the proper work of an artist, which was the real business of his life. And while it is true that, without all the

preparation, the books of Nonsense could not have been written, it is true also that they are only the outcome and overflow of a life which was no less serious and noble than genial and loving. Like Shakespeare, he understood that all merriment should be held 'within the limit of becoming mirth', and this limit he found for himself in his fondness for children – 'he loved to see little folks merry' – and in that habit of doing conscientious and finished work which characterises the true artist.

He gives an account of the beginning and growth of this work in the introduction to his *More Nonsense*, to which I refer the reader. I have myself said more elsewhere on a subject which has for me a never-ending interest.* I will rather here give an account of a visit paid by my son Henry to our old friend –

When staying at Cannes at Christmas 1882, I was invited by Mr Lear to go over to San Remo to spend a few days with him. Mr Lear's villa was large, and the second he had built; the first became unbearable to him from a large hotel having been planted in front of it. So he put his new house in a place by the sea, where, as he said, nothing could interrupt his light unless the fishes built. The second house was exactly like the first. This, Mr Lear explained to me, was necessary, or else Foss, his cat, might not have approved of the new villa. At breakfast the morning after I arrived, this much-thought-of, though semi-tailed, cat jumped in at the window and ate a piece of toast from my hand. This, I found, was considered an event; when visitors stayed at Villa Tennyson, Foss generally hid himself in the back regions; but his recognition of me was a sort of 'guinea stamp', which seemed to please Mr Lear greatly, and assure him of my fitness to receive the constant acts of kindness he was showing me. Being an art student, my interest in Mr Lear's painting was as great as in his Nonsense, and I can vividly recall the morning spent in his studio, a large room upstairs. He was then at work on a series of watercolours, and his method seemed to be to dip a brush into a large wide-necked bottle of watercolour, and

* In the *Quarterly Review* of October 1888 and the *Atlantic Monthly* of May 1894, in the former of which was first given the second part of 'Mr and Mrs Discobolos' and in the latter the 'Eclogue' and 'Uncle Arly', and in my 'Talk at a Country House' (Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston, USA, 1894).

when he had made one or two touches on the drawing, to carry it to the end of the room and put it on the floor, the performance being repeated till quite a row was arranged across the room. Downstairs he had a gallery lighted from the top, which had many beautiful watercolours along the walls, and one great canvas of Mount Athos, which seemed finished, but which he was always making experiments upon in white chalk. At the end of the gallery stood a huge canvas, I think it was eighteen feet long, covered over with lines in squares, but no drawing on it. This, he told me, was to be a picture of Enoch Arden on the desert island. My remark that this would be a great undertaking roused Mr Lear to declare warmly that an old man should never relax his efforts or fail to attempt great things because he was seventy. I could not, however, but feel that there was some inconsistency between this and his habitually saying he was going to live two years longer, and no more. Mr Lear as an artist was by sympathy a Pre-Raphaelite; he was not one of the original brotherhood, but considered himself a nephew of the originators of the movement, and he told me he had written to his friend, Sir John Millais, 'My dear aunt, I send you a drawing of my cat to show you how I am getting on.'

Mr Lear told me that, as a boy, his voice being a good one, he used to be taken to sing at artists' parties, and he was very proud of once having heard Turner (whose art he worshipped) sing a song. Apparently there was no great matter in the ditty, and the note was very untuneable, for Turner had neither voice nor ear. The refrain Mr Lear remembered, and used to hum, chuckling to himself, 'And the world goes round a-bound, a-bound.' Mr Lear told me that he approved of the saying of someone, 'Study the works of the Almighty first, and Turner next.' Once meeting a friend who had stayed in a house where Turner was painting, Mr Lear anxiously asked, 'Cannot you tell me something the great man said?' 'He never said anything,' was the reply.

Mr Lear's household arrangements were peculiar. Three brothers, young Albanians – sons of his old servant Giorgio – did all the housework and cooking, and the youngest, a youth of seventeen, he looked after with fatherly care. He had taught him to say the Lord's Prayer with him every evening, telling me how he felt it his duty to prevent the young man growing up without religion, and expressing his horror of a godless world.

Mr Lear was by temperament melancholy; it was not the grave

air assumed by a humorist to give his jokes more point, but a gentle sadness through which his humour shone. He felt keenly the neglect of the world for his pictures, but he seemed anxious to prevent all but his nearest friends seeing them. When I was staying with him, it happened to be the afternoon on which he was supposed to be at home to show his pictures to possible buyers. Early in the afternoon he told me that he had sent his servants out, and was going to open the door himself. He explained that if anyone came he did not like he could send them away, and also keep out Germans. He seemed to have a great horror and fear that a German might be let in by accident. What caused this fear I was not able to discover. As the afternoon advanced a ring at the doorbell was heard, and Mr Lear went to open the door. Sitting in the gallery, I heard the voice of a lady enquiring if she could see the pictures, and I could hear Mr Lear, in a voice of the most melancholy kind, telling her that he never showed his pictures now, he was much too ill; and from his voice and words I have no doubt the lady went away with the idea that a most unhappy man lived there. Mr Lear came back to the gallery with much satisfaction at the working of his plan, which was so far superior to the servant's 'Not at home', as by his method he could send away bores and let in people he liked. Later on, some friends he wanted to see came, and the melancholy old man, too ill to show his pictures, changed into the most genial host. In the evenings he often sang; the 'Yonghy Bonghy Bo' was inimitable. His voice had gone, but the refinement and expression was remarkable. His touch, too, was finished and smooth; unfortunately his playing was by ear, so that many of the really beautiful songs he composed were lost. One such still haunts me: the words, Tennyson's 'In the Garden at Swainston', were set to most touching and appropriate music. I think he felt the words very strongly; they echoed his own feelings; he had outlived many friends, and many dead men 'walked in the walks' with him. He showed me a long frame with photographs of his friends in it; it hung in the drawing-room, but there were several blank places. He told me when a friend died his picture was taken out and put into a frame hanging in his bedroom. This melancholy never soured his mind nor stopped his matchless flow of humour and bad puns; but it coloured them all. My visit at Villa Tennyson coming to an end, on the last evening after dinner he wrote a letter for me to take

back to my father, sending him the then unpublished conclusion to 'Mr and Mrs Discobbolos'; and when this was done he took from a place in his bureau a number of carefully cut-out backs of old envelopes, and on these he drew, to send to my sister, then eight years old, the delightful series of heraldic pictures of his cat. After he had done seven he said it was a great shame to caricature Foss, and laid aside the pen.

The next day ended my visit – one which I shall ever remember. The touching kindness which marked all his actions towards me I shall never forget; and I still see the tall, melancholy form, with loose clothes and round spectacles, leaning over the railings of the San Remo railway station, though happily I did not then know that I was looking on that kindly figure for the last time.

H. S.

In conclusion, and as counterpart to this account of the good old man and his household, let me commend to the reader the autobiographical sketches, to one of which I have already referred. They were published 'by way of preface' to a former edition of the present volume and are here reprinted.

EDWARD STRACHEY
Sutton Court, September 1894

BY WAY OF PREFACE

It is believed that all save the youngest readers of these Nonsense books will be interested in the two following autobiographical letters by the author, which have never till now been published. The first, written nearly a quarter of a century back, just before one of his journeys in search of the picturesque, is a strict recital of date and fact; the second, composed some years later, and after he had set up his residence at San Remo, was written for a young lady of his acquaintance, who had quoted to him the words of a young lady not of his acquaintance, which form the refrain of the verses – ‘How pleasant to know Mr Lear!’

My dear F.,

I want to send you, before leaving England, a note or two as to the various publications I have uttered – bad and good, and of all sorts – also their dates, that so you might be able to screw them into a beautiful memoir of me in case I leave my bones at Palmyra or elsewhere. Leastwise, if a man does anything all through life with a deal of bother, and likewise of some benefit to others, the details of such bother and benefit may as well be known accurately as the contrary.

Born in 1812 (12th May), I began to draw, for bread and cheese, about 1827, but only did uncommon queer shop-sketches – selling them for prices varying from ninepence to four shillings: colouring prints, screens, fans; awhile making morbid disease drawings for hospitals and certain doctors of physic. In 1831, through Mrs Wentworth, I became employed at the Zoological Society, and, in 1832, published *The Family of the Psittacidae*, the first complete volume of coloured drawings of birds on so large a scale published in England, as far as I know – unless Audubon’s were previously engraved. J. Gould’s *Indian Pheasants* was commenced at the same time, and after a little while he employed me

to draw many of his birds of Europe, while I assisted Mrs Gould in all her drawings of foregrounds, as may be seen in a moment by anyone who will glance at my drawings in G.'s *European Birds* and the *Toucans*. From 1832 to 1836, when my health failed a good deal, I drew much at the Earl of Derby's; and a series of my drawings was published by Dr Gray of the British Museum – a book now rare. I also lithographed many various detached subjects, and a large series of Testudinata for Mr (now Professor) Bell; and I made drawings for Bell's *British Mammalia*, and for two or more volumes of the *Naturalist's Library* for the editor, Sir W. Jardine, those volumes being the Parrots, and, I think, the Monkeys and some Cats. In 1835 or 1836, being in Ireland and the Lakes, I leaned more and more to landscape, and when in 1837 it was found that my health was more affected by the climate month by month, I went abroad, wintering in Rome till 1841, when I came back to England and published a volume of lithographs called *Rome and its Environs*. Returning to Rome, I visited Sicily and much of the South of Italy, and continued to make chalk drawings, though in 1840 I had painted my two first oil-paintings. I also gave lessons in drawing in Rome, and was able to make a very comfortable living. In 1845 I came again to England, and in 1846 gave Queen Victoria some lessons, through Her Majesty's having seen a work I published in that year on the Abruzzi, and another on the Roman States. In 1847 I went through all Southern Calabria, and again went round Sicily, and in 1848 left Rome entirely. I travelled then to Malta, Greece, Constantinople and the Ionian Islands; and to Mount Sinai and Greece a second time in 1849, returning to England in that year. All 1850 I gave up to improving myself in figure-drawing, and I continued to paint oil-paintings till 1853, having published in the meantime, in 1851 and 1852, two volumes entitled *Journals of a Landscape Painter (in Albania and in Calabria)*. The first edition of *A Book of Nonsense* was published in 1846, lithographed by tracing-paper. In 1854 I went to Egypt and Switzerland, and in 1855 to Corfu, where I remained the winters of 1856, 1857 and 1858, visiting Athos and, later, Jerusalem and Syria. In the autumn of 1858 I returned to England. The winters of 1859 and 1860 were passed in Rome but in 1861 I remained all the winter in England, and painted the Cedars of Lebanon and Masada, going after my sister's death in March 1861 to Italy. The two following winters – 1862 and 1863 – were passed at Corfu, and in

the end of the latter year I published *Views in the Ionian Islands*. In 1862 a second edition of *A Book of Nonsense*, much enlarged, was published, and is now in its sixteenth thousand.

O bother!

Yours affectionately,

EDWARD LEAR

'How pleasant to know Mr Lear!'

Who has written such volumes of stuff!
Some think him ill-tempered and queer,
But a few think him pleasant enough.

His mind is concrete and fastidious,
His nose is remarkably big;
His visage is more or less hideous,
His beard it resembles a wig.

He has ears, and two eyes, and ten fingers,
Leastways if you reckon two thumbs;
Long ago he was one of the singers,
But now he is one of the dumbs.

He sits in a beautiful parlour,
With hundreds of books on the wall;
He drinks a great deal of Marsala,
But never gets tipsy at all.

He has many friends, laymen and clerical,
Old Foss is the name of his cat;
His body is perfectly spherical,
He weareth a runcible hat.

When he walks in a waterproof white,
The children run after him so!
Calling out, 'He's come out in his night-
gown, that crazy old Englishman oh!'

He weeps by the side of the ocean,
He weeps on the top of the hill;
He purchases pancakes and lotion,
And chocolate shrimps from the mill.

He reads but he cannot speak Spanish,
He cannot abide ginger-beer;
Ere the days of his pilgrimage vanish,
How pleasant to know Mr Lear!



*There was an Old Derry down Derry,
Who loved to see little folks merry;
So he made them a book,
And with laughter they shook
At the fun of that Derry down Derry*