

Lewis Carroll (1832-98)

1 *The Aged Aged Man*

“I’ll tell thee everything I can:
There’s little to relate.
I saw an aged aged man,
A-sitting on a gate.
‘Who are you, aged man?’ I said. 5
‘And how is it you live?’
And his answer trickled through my head,
Like water through a sieve.

He said ‘I look for butterflies
That sleep among the wheat: 10
I make them into mutton-pies,
And sell them in the street.
I sell them unto men’, he said,
‘Who sail on stormy seas;
And that’s the way I get my bread — 15
A trifle, if you please.’

But I was thinking of a plan
To dye one’s whiskers green,
And always use so large a fan
That they could not be seen. 20
So, having no reply to give
To what the old man said,
I cried ‘Come, tell me how you live!’
And thumped him on the head.

His accents mild took up the tale: 25
He said ‘I go my ways,
And when I find a mountain-rill,
I set it in a blaze;
And thence they make a stuff they call
Rowland’s Macassar-Oil — 30
Yet twopence-halfpenny is all
They give me for my toil.’

But I was thinking of a way
 To feed oneself on batter,
And so go on from day to day 35
 Getting a little fatter.

I shook him well from side to side,
 Until his face was blue:
'Come, tell me how you live,' I cried,
 'And what it is you do!' 40

He said 'I hunt for haddocks' eyes
 Among the heather bright,
And work them into waistcoat-buttons
 In the silent night.
And these I do not sell for gold 45
 Or coin of silvery shine,
But for a copper halfpenny,
 And that will purchase nine.

'I sometimes dig for buttered rolls,
 Or set limed twigs for crabs: 50
I sometimes search the grassy knolls
 For wheels of Hansom-cabs.
And that's the way' (he gave a wink)
 'By which I get my wealth —
And very gladly will I drink 55
 Your Honour's noble health.'

I heard him then, for I had just
 Completed my design
To keep the Menai bridge from rust
 By boiling it in wine. 60
I thanked him much for telling me
 The way he got his wealth,
But chiefly for his wish that he
 Might drink my noble health.

And now, if e'er by chance I put 65
 My fingers into glue,
Or madly squeeze a right-hand foot
 Into a left-hand shoe,

Or if I drop upon my toe
 A very heavy weight, 70
I weep, for it reminds me so
Of that old man I used to know —
Whose look was mild, whose speech was slow
Whose hair was whiter than the snow,
Whose face was very like a crow, 75
With eyes, like cinders, all aglow,
Who seemed distracted with his woe,
Who rocked his body to and fro,
And muttered mumblingly and low,
As if his mouth were full of dough, 80
Who snorted like a buffalo —
That summer evening long ago,
 A-sitting on a gate.”

1871

(From *Through the Looking-Glass*. *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*. With an Introduction by Alexander Woollcott, and the Illustrations by John Tenniel. Penguin Books, 1988)