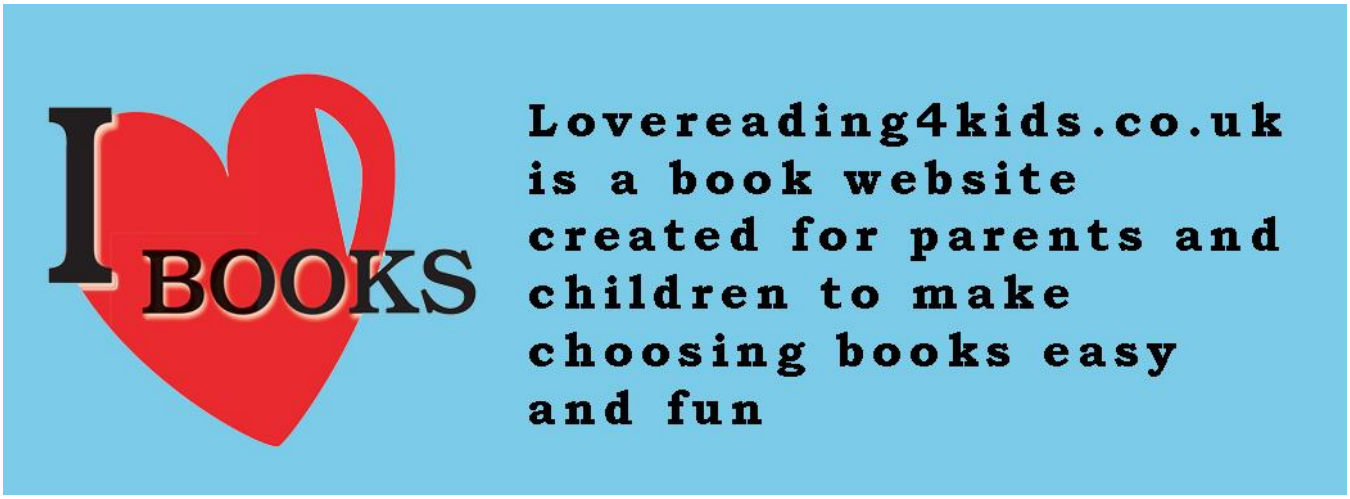

Opening extract from

The Hunting of the Snark

Written by

Lewis Carroll

Illustrated by

Chris Riddell

Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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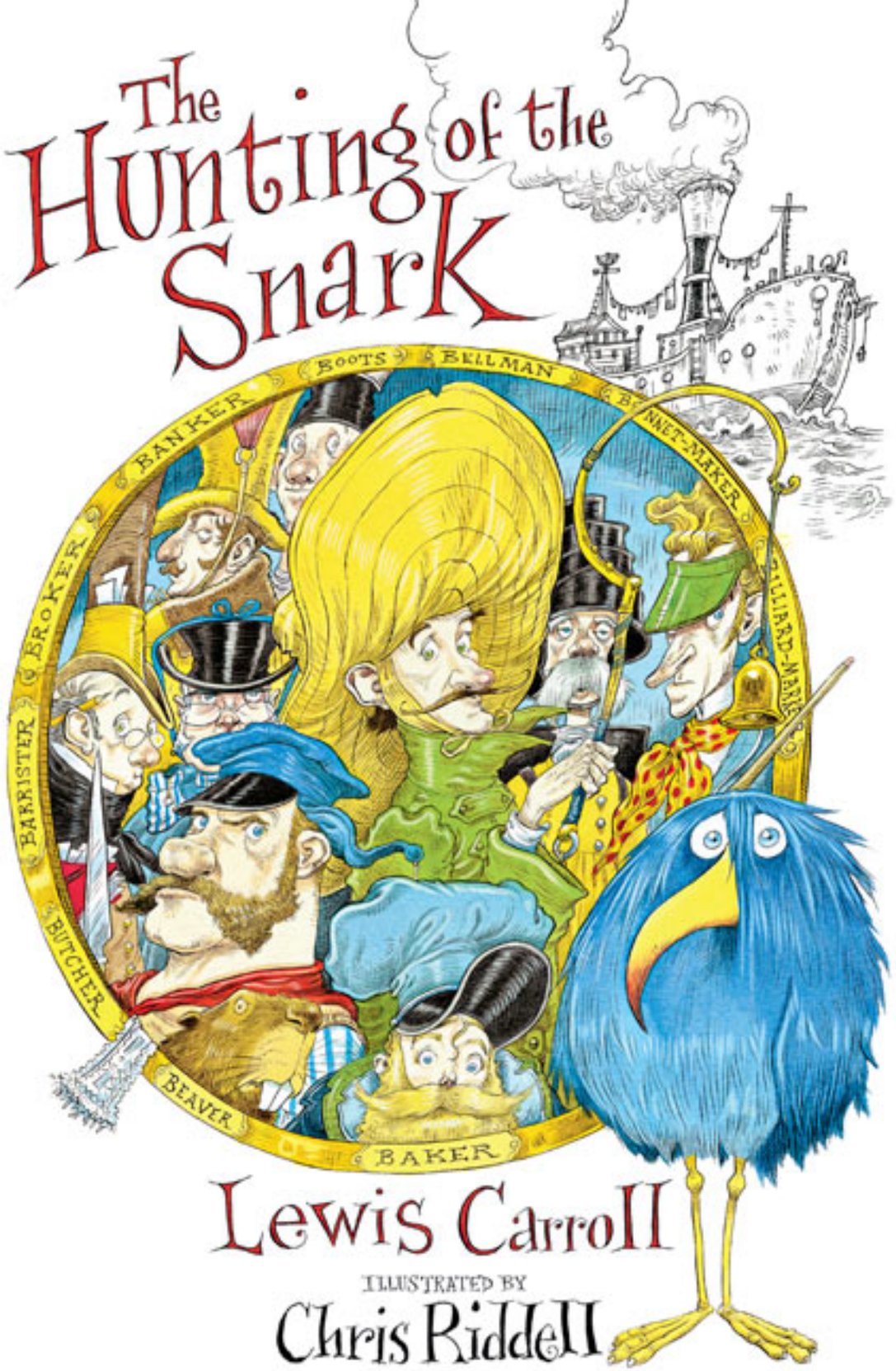
The Hunting of the Snark



Lewis Carroll

ILLUSTRATED BY

Chris Riddell

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Preface

If – and the thing is wildly possible – the charge of writing nonsense were ever brought against the author of this brief but instructive poem, it would be based, I feel convinced, on the line (in Fit the Second) 'Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes'.

In view of this painful possibility, I will not (as I might) appeal indignantly to my other writings as a proof that I am incapable of such a deed: I will not (as I might) point to the strong moral purpose of this poem itself, to the arithmetical principles so cautiously inculcated in it, or to its noble teachings in Natural History – I will take the more prosaic course of simply explaining how it happened.

The Bellman, who was almost morbidly sensitive about appearances, used to have the bowsprit un-shipped once or twice a week to be revarnished, and it more than once happened, when the time came for replacing it, that no one on board could remember which end of the ship it belonged to. They knew it was not of the slightest use to appeal to the Bellman about it – he would only refer to his Naval Code, and read out in pathetic tones Admiralty Instructions which none of them had ever been able to understand – so it generally ended in its being fastened on, anyhow, across the rudder. The helmsman used to stand by with tears in his eyes; he knew it was all wrong, but alas! Rule 42 of the Code, 'No one shall speak to the Man at the Helm,' had been completed by the Bellman himself with the words 'and the Man at the Helm shall speak to no one'. So remonstrance was impossible, and no steering could be done till the next varnishing day. During these bewildering intervals the ship usually sailed backwards.

As this poem is to some extent connected with the lay of the Jabberwock, let me take this opportunity of answering a question that has often been asked me, how to pronounce 'slithy toves'. The 'i' in 'slithy' is long, as in 'writhe'; and 'toves' is pronounced so as to rhyme with 'groves'. Again, the first 'o' in 'borogoves' is pronounced like the 'o' in 'borrow'. I have heard people try to give it the sound of the 'o' in 'worry'. Such is Human Perversity.

This also seems a fitting occasion to notice the other hard words in that poem. Humpty-Dumpty's theory, of two meanings packed into one word like a portmanteau, seems to me the right explanation for all.

For instance, take the two words 'fuming' and 'furious'. Make up your mind that you will say both words, but leave it unsettled which you will say first. Now open your mouth and speak. If your thoughts incline ever so little towards 'fuming', you will say 'fuming-furious'; if they turn, by even a hair's breadth, towards 'furious', you will say 'furious-fuming'; but if you have the rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say 'frumious'.

Supposing that, when Pistol uttered the well-known words 'Under which king, Bezonian? Speak or die!', Justice Shallow had felt certain that it was either William or Richard, but had not been able to settle which, so that he could not possibly say either name before the other – can it be doubted that, rather than die, he would have gasped out 'Rilchiam'!

Fit the First

The Landing

ust the place for a Snark!' the Bellman cried,
As he landed his crew with care;
Supporting each man on the top of the tide
By a finger entwined in his hair.

'Just the place for a Snark! I have said it twice:
That alone should encourage the crew.
Just the place for a Snark! I have said it thrice:
What I tell you three times is true.'

The crew was complete: it included a Boots –
A maker of Bonnets and Hoods –
A Barrister, brought to arrange their disputes –
And a Broker, to value their goods.

A Billiard-marker, whose skill was immense,
Might perhaps have won more than his share –
But a Banker, engaged at enormous expense,
Had the whole of their cash in his care.

There was also a Beaver, that paced on the deck,
Or would sit making lace in the bow:
And had often (the Bellman said) saved them from wreck,
Though none of the sailors knew how.

There was one who was famed for the number of things
He forgot when he entered the ship:
His umbrella, his watch, all his jewels and rings,
And the clothes he had bought for the trip.

He had forty-two boxes, all carefully packed,
With his name painted clearly on each:
But, since he omitted to mention the fact,
They were all left behind on the beach.

The loss of his clothes hardly mattered, because
He had seven coats on when he came,
With three pairs of boots – but the worst of it was,
He had wholly forgotten his name.

He would answer to 'Hi!' or to any loud cry,

Such as 'Fry me!' or 'Fritter my wig!'

To 'What-you-may-call-um!' or 'What-was-his-name!'

But especially 'Thing-um-a-jig!'

While, for those who preferred a more forcible word,

He had different names from these:

His intimate friends called him 'Candle-ends',

And his enemies 'Toasted-cheese'.

'His form is ungainly – his intellect small –'

(So the Bellman would often remark)

'But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,

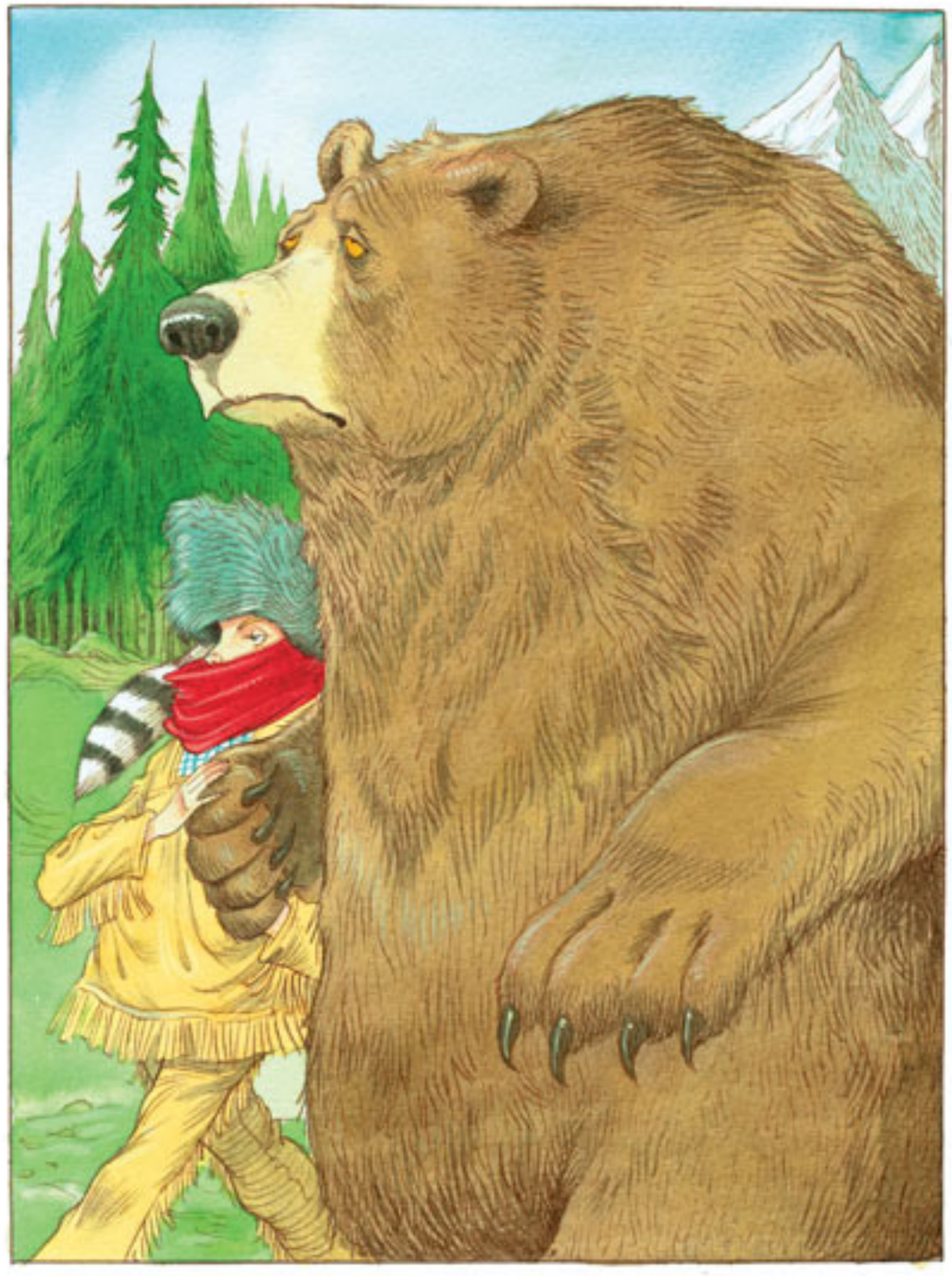
Is the thing that one needs with a Snark.'

He would joke with hyenas, returning their stare

With an impudent wag of the head:

And he once went a walk, paw-in-paw, with a bear,

'Just to keep up its spirits,' he said.



He came as a Baker: but owned, when too late –
And it drove the poor Bellman half-mad –
He could only bake Bridecake – for which, I may state,
No materials were to be had.

The last of the crew needs especial remark,
Though he looked an incredible dunce:
He had just one idea – but, that one being 'Snark',
The good Bellman engaged him at once.

He came as a Butcher: but gravely declared,
When the ship had been sailing a week,
He could only kill Beavers. The Bellman looked scared,
And was almost too frightened to speak:

But at length he explained, in a tremulous tone,
There was only one Beaver on board;
And that was a tame one he had of his own,
Whose death would be deeply deplored.

The Beaver, who happened to hear the remark,
Protested, with tears in its eyes,
That not even the rapture of hunting the Snark
Could atone for that dismal surprise!

It strongly advised that the Butcher should be
Conveyed in a separate ship:
But the Bellman declared that would never agree
With the plans he had made for the trip:

Navigation was always a difficult art,
Though with only one ship and one bell:
And he feared he must really decline, for his part,
Undertaking another as well.

The Beaver's best course was, no doubt, to procure
A second-hand dagger-proof coat —
So the Baker advised it — and next, to insure
Its life in some Office of note:

This the Banker suggested, and offered for hire
(On moderate terms), or for sale,
Two excellent Policies, one Against Fire,
And one Against Damage From Hail.

Yet still, ever after that sorrowful day,
Whenever the Butcher was by,
The Beaver kept looking the opposite way,
And appeared unaccountably shy.