

1856

THE THREE VOICES

Lewis Carroll

Carroll, Lewis (pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) (1832-1898) - English novelist, poet, photographer, and mathematician, best known for his fantastical childrens' classics. He was a mathematical lecturer at Oxford. The Three Voices (1856) - One of Lewis Carroll's poems. A parody of Tennyson's poem "The Two Voices." Opening lines: He trilled a carol fresh and free, / He laughed aloud for very glee:...

THE THREE VOICES

FIRST VOICE

HE trilled a carol fresh and free,
He laughed aloud for very glee:
There came a breeze from off the sea:

It passed athwart the glooming flat-
It fanned his forehead as he sat-
It lightly bore away his hat,

All to the feet of one who stood
Like maid enchanted in a wood,
Frowning as darkly as she could.

With huge umbrella, lank and brown,
Unerringly she pinned it down,
Right through the centre of the crown.

Then, with an aspect cold and grim,
Regardless of its battered rim,

She took it up and gave it him.

A while like one in dreams he stood,
Then faltered forth his gratitude
In words just short of being rude:

For it had lost its shape and shine,
And it had cost him four-and-nine,
And he was going out to dine.

“To dine!” she sneered in acid tone
“To bend thy being to a bone
Clothed in a radiance not its own!”

The tear-drop trickled to his chin:
There was a meaning in her grin
That made him feel on fire within.

“Term it not ‘radiance’,” said he:
“‘Tis solid nutriment to me.
Dinner is Dinner: Tea is Tea.”

And she, "Yea so? Yet wherefore cease?
Let thy scant knowledge find increase.
Say 'Men are Men, and Geese are Geese'."

He moaned: he knew not what to say.
The thought "That I could get away!"
Strove with the thought "But I must stay".

"To dine!" she shrieked in dragon-wrath.
"To swallow wines all foam and froth!
To simper at a table-cloth!

"Say, can thy noble spirit stoop
To join the gormandizing troop
Who find a solace in the soup?

"Canst thou desire or pie or puff?
Thy well-bred manners were enough,
Without such gross material stuff."

"Yet well-bred men", he faintly said,
"Are not unwilling to be fed:

Nor are they well without the bread."

Her visage scorched him ere she spoke:

"There are", she said, "a kind of folk
Who have no horror of a joke.

"Such wretches live: they take their share
Of common earth and common air:
We come across them here and there:

"We grant them- there is no escape-
A sort of semi-human shape
Suggestive of the man-like Ape."

"In all such theories", said he,
"One fixed exception there must be.
That is, the Present Company."

Baffled, she gave a wolfish bark:
He, aiming blindly in the dark,
With random shaft had pierced the mark.

She felt that her defeat was plain,
Yet madly strove with might and main
To get the upper hand again.

Fixing her eyes upon the beach,
As though unconscious of his speech,
She said "Each gives to more than each".

He could not answer yea or nay:
He faltered "Gifts may pass away".
Yet knew not what he meant to say.

"If that be so," she straight replied,
"Each heart with each doth coincide.
What boots it? For the world is wide."

"The world is but a Thought," said he:
"The vast unfathomable sea
Is but a Notion- unto me."

And darkly fell her answer dread
Upon his unresisting head,

Like half a hundredweight of lead.

“The Good and Great must ever shun
That reckless and abandoned one
Who stoops to perpetrate a pun.

“The man that smokes- that reads The Times-
That goes to Christmas Pantomimes-
Is capable of any crimes!”

He felt it was his turn to speak,
And, with a shamed and crimson cheek,
Moaned “This is harder than Bezique!”

But when she asked him “Wherefore so?”
He felt his very whiskers glow,
And frankly owned “I do not know”.

While, like broad waves of golden grain,
Or sunlit hues on cloistered pane,
His colour came and went again.

Pitying his obvious distress,
Yet with a tinge of bitterness,
She said "The More exceeds the Less".

"A (A truth of such undoubted weight",
He urged, "and so extreme in date,
It were superfluous to state."

Roused into sudden passion, she
In tone of cold malignity:
"To others, yea: but not to thee."

But when she saw him quail and quake,
And when he urged "For pity's sake!"
Once more in gentle tones she spake.

"Thought in the mind doth still abide
That is by Intellect supplied,
And within that Idea doth hide:

"And he, that yearns the truth to know
Still further inwardly may go,

And find Idea from Notion flow:

“And thus the chain, that sages sought,
Is to a glorious circle wrought,
For Notion hath its source in Thought.”

So passed they on with even pace:
Yet gradually one might trace
A shadow growing on his face.

SECOND VOICE

THEY walked beside the wave-worn beach:
Her tongue was very apt to teach,
And now and then he did beseech

She would abate her dulcet tone,
Because the talk was all her own,
And he was dull as any drone.

She urged “No cheese is made of chalk”:
And ceaseless flowed her dreary talk,
Tuned to the footfall of a walk.

Her voice was very full and rich,
And, when at length she asked him "Which?"
It mounted to its highest pitch.

He a bewildered answer gave,
Drowned in the sullen moaning wave,
Lost in the echoes of the cave.

He answered her he knew not what:
Like shaft from bow at random shot,
He spoke, but she regarded not.

She waited not for his reply,
But with a downward leaden eye
Went on as if he were not by-

Sound argument and grave defence,
Strange questions raised on "Why?" and "Whence?"
And wildly tangled evidence.

When he, with racked and whirling brain,
Feebly implored her to explain,

She simply said it all again.

Wrenched with an agony intense,
He spake, neglecting Sound and Sense,
And careless of all consequence:

“Mind- I believe- is Essence- Ent-
Abstract- that is- an Accident-
Which we- that is to say- I meant-”

When, with quick breath and cheeks all flushed,
At length his speech was somewhat hushed,
She looked at him, and he was crushed.

It needed not her calm reply:
She fixed him with a stony eye,
And he could neither fight nor fly.

While she dissected, word by word,
His speech, half-guessed at and half-heard,
As might a cat a little bird.

Then, having wholly overthrown
His views, and stripped them to the bone,
Proceeded to unfold her own.

“Shall Man be Man? And shall he miss
Of other thoughts no thought but this,
Harmonious dews of sober bliss?

“What boots it? Shall his fevered eye
Through towering nothingness descry
The grisly phantom hurry by?

“And hear dumb shrieks that fill the air:
See mouths that gape, and eyes that stare
And redden in the dusky glare?

“The meadows breathing amber light,
The darkness toppling from the height,
The feathery train of granite Night?

“Shall he, grown gray among his peers,
Through the thick curtain of his tears

Catch glimpses of his earlier years,

“And hear the sounds he knew of yore,
Old shufflings on the sanded floor,
Old knuckles tapping at the door?”

“Yet stir before him as he flies
One pallid form shall ever rise,
And, bodying forth in glassy eyes

“The vision of a vanished good,
Low peering through the tangled wood,
Shall freeze the current of his blood.”

Still from each fact, with skill uncouth
And savage rapture, like a tooth
She wrenched some slow reluctant truth.

Till, like a silent water-mill,
When summer suns have dried the rill,
She reached a full stop, and was still.

Dead calm succeeded to the fuss,
As when the loaded omnibus
Has reached the railway terminus:

When, for the tumult of the street,
Is heard the engine's stifled beat,
The velvet tread of porters' feet.

With glance that ever sought the ground,
She moved her lips without a sound,
And every now and then she frowned.

He gazed upon the sleeping sea,
And joyed in its tranquillity,
And in that silence dead, but she

To muse a little space did seem,
Then, like the echo of a dream,
Harked back upon her threadbare theme.

Still an attentive ear he lent
But could not fathom what she meant:

She was not deep, nor eloquent.

He marked the ripple on the sand:
The even swaying of her hand
Was all that he could understand.

He saw in dreams a drawing-room,
Where thirteen wretches sat in gloom,
Waiting- he thought he knew for whom:

He saw them drooping here and there,
Each feebly huddled on a chair,
In attitudes of blank despair:

Oysters were not more mute than they,
For all their brains were pumped away,
And they had nothing more to say-

Save one, who groaned "Three hours are gone!"
Who shrieked "We'll wait no longer, John!
Tell them to set the dinner on!"
The vision passed: the ghosts were fled:

He saw once more that woman dread:
He heard once more the words she said.

He left her, and he turned aside:
He sat and watched the coming tide
Across the shores so newly dried.

He wondered at the waters clear,
The breeze that whispered in his ear,
The billows heaving far and near,

And why he had so long preferred
To hang upon her every word:
“In truth”, he said, “it was absurd.”

THIRD VOICE

NOT long this transport held its place:
Within a little moment's space
Quick tears were raining down his face.

His heart stood still, aghast with fear;
A wordless voice, nor far nor near,
He seemed to hear and not to hear.

"Tears kindle not the doubtful spark.
If so, why not? Of this remark
The bearings are profoundly dark."

"Her speech", he said, "hath caused this pain.
Easier I count it to explain
The jargon of the howling main,

"Or, stretched beside some babbling brook,
To con, with inexpressive look,
An unintelligible book."

Low spake the voice within his head,
In words imagined more than said,
Soundless as ghost's intended tread:

"If thou art duller than before,
Why quittedst thou the voice of lore?
Why not endure, expecting more?"
"Rather than that", he groaned aghast,
"I'd writhe in depths of cavern vast,
Some loathly vampire's rich repast."

“’Twere hard,” it answered, “themes immense
To coop within the narrow fence
That rings thy scant intelligence.”

“Not so,” he urged, “nor once alone:
But there was something in her tone
That chilled me to the very bone.

“Her style was anything but clear,
And most unpleasantly severe;
Her epithets were very queer.

“And yet, so grand were her replies,
I could not choose but deem her wise;
I did not dare to criticise;

“Nor did I leave her, till she went
So deep in tangled argument
That all my powers of thought were spent.”

A little whisper inly slid,
“Yet truth is truth: you know you did.”

A little wink beneath the lid.

And, sickened with excess of dread,
Prone to the dust he bent his head,
And lay like one three-quarters dead.

The whisper left him- like a breeze
Lost in the depths of leafy trees-
Left him by no means at his ease.

Once more he weltered in despair,
With hands, through denser-matted hair,
More tightly clenched than then they were.

When, bathed in Dawn of living red,
Majestic frowned the mountain head,
“Tell me my fault,” was all he said.
When, at high Noon, the blazing sky
Scorched in his head each haggard eye,
Then keenest rose his weary cry.

And when at Eve the unpitying sun

Smiled grimly on the solemn fun,
“Alack,” he sighed, “what have I done?”

But saddest, darkest was the sight,
When the cold grasp of leaden Night
Dashed him to earth, and held him tight.

Tortured, unaided, and alone,
Thunders were silence to his groan,
Bagpipes sweet music to its tone:

“What? Ever thus, in dismal round,
Shall Pain and Mystery profound
Pursue me like a sleepless hound,

“With crimson-dashed and eager jaws,
Me, still in ignorance of the cause,
Unknowing what I broke of laws?”

The whisper to his ear did seem
Like echoed flow of silent stream,
Or shadow of forgotten dream,

The whisper trembling in the wind:
“Her fate with thine was intertwined,”
So spake it in his inner mind:

“Each orb'd on each a baleful star:
Each proved the other's blight and bar:
Each unto each were best, most far:

“Yea, each to each was worse than foe:
Thou, a scared dullard, gibbering low,
AND SHE, AN AVALANCHE OF WOE!”

THE END