

1869

FOUR RIDDLES

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. Four Riddles (1869) - One of Lewis Carroll's poems, consisting of two double acrostics and two charades. Opening lines: There was an ancient City, stricken down / With a strange frenzy, and for many a day

FOUR RIDDLES

(These consist of two Double Acrostics and two Charades.

No. I. was written at the request of some young friends, who had gone to a ball at an Oxford Commemoration- and also as a specimen of what might be done by making the Double Acrostic a connected poem instead of what it has hitherto been, a string of disjointed stanzas, on every conceivable subject, and about as interesting to read straight through as a page of a Cyclopaedia. The first two stanzas describe the two main words, and each subsequent stanza one of the cross "lights".

No. II. was written after seeing Miss Ellen Terry perform in the play of "Hamlet". In this case the first stanza describes the two main words.

No. III. was written after seeing Miss Marion Terry perform in Mr. Gilbert's play of "Pygmalion and Galatea". The three stanzas respectively describe "My First", "My Second", and "My Whole".)

I THERE was an ancient City, stricken down With a strange frenzy,
and for many a day They paced from morn to eve the crowded
town, And danced the night away.

I asked the cause: the aged man grew sad: They pointed to a
building gray and tan, And hoarsely answered "Step inside, my
lad, And then you'll see it all."

Yet what are all such gaities to me Whose thoughts are full of
indices and surds? $x^2 + 7x + 5311 = 3$

But something whispered "It will soon be done:

Bands cannot always play, nor ladies smile:

Endure with patience the distasteful fun For just a little while!"

A change came o'er my Vision- it was night: We clove a pathway through a frantic throng:

The steeds, wild-plunging, filled us with affright:

The chariots whirled along.

Within a marble hall a river ran A living tide, half muslin and half cloth:

And here one mourned a broken wreath or fan, Yet swallowed down her wrath:

And here one offered to a thirsty fair (His words half-drowned amid those thunders tuneful) Some frozen viand (there were many there), A tooth-ache in each spoonful.

There comes a happy pause, for human strength Will not endure to dance without cessation; And every one must reach the point at length Of absolute prostration.

At such a moment ladies learn to give, To partners who would urge them overmuch, A flat and yet decided negative Photographers love such.

There comes a welcome summons- hope revives, And fading eyes grow bright, and pulses quicken:

Incessant pop the corks, and busy knives Dispense the tongue and chicken.

Flushed with new life, the crowd flows back again:

And all is tangled talk and mazy motion Much like a waving field of golden grain, Or a tempestuous ocean.

And thus they give the time, that Nature meant For peaceful sleep and meditative snores, To ceaseless din and mindless merriment And waste of shoes and floors.

And One (we name him not) that flies the flowers, That dreads the dances, and that shuns the salads, They doom to pass in solitude the hours, Writing acrostic-ballads.

How late it grows! The hour is surely past That should have warned us with its double knock? The twilight wanes, and morning comes at last "Oh, Uncle, what's o'clock?"

The Uncle gravely nods, and wisely winks.

It may mean much, but how is one to know? He opes his mouth- yet out of it, methinks, No words of wisdom flow.

Answer: Commemoration, Monstrosities.

II

EMPRESS of Art, for thee I twine This wreath with all too slender skill.

Forgive my Muse each halting line, And for the deed accept the will!

O day of tears! Whence comes this spectre grim, Parting, like Death's cold river, souls that love? Is not he bound to thee, as thou to him, By vows, unwhispered here, yet heard above?

And still it lives, that keen and heavenward flame, Lives in his eye, and trembles in his tone:

And these wild words of fury but proclaim A heart that beats for thee, for thee alone!

But all is lost: that mighty mind o'erthrown, Like sweet bells jangled, piteous sight to see!

"Doubt that the stars are fire," so runs his moan, "Doubt Truth herself, but not my love for thee!"

A sadder vision yet: thine aged sire Shaming his hoary locks with treacherous wile!

And dost thou now doubt Truth to be a liar? And wilt thou die, that hast forgot to smile?

Nay, get thee hence! Leave all thy winsome ways And the faint fragrance of thy scattered flowers: In holy silence wait the appointed days, And weep away the leaden-footed hours.

Answer: Ellen Terry.

III

THE air is bright with hues of light And rich with laughter and with singing:

Young hearts beat high in ecstasy, And banners wave, and bells are ringing:

But silence falls with fading day, And there's an end to mirth and play. Ah, well-a-day!

Rest your old bones, ye wrinkled crones!

The kettle sings, the firelight dances.
 Deep be it quaffed, the magic draught That fills the soul with
 golden fancies!
 For Youth and Pleasance will not stay, And ye are withered, worn,
 and gray.

Ah, well-a-day!

O fair cold face! O form of grace, For human passion madly
 yearning!

**O weary air of dumb despair, From marble won, to marble
 turning!**

“Leave us not thus!” we fondly pray.
 “We cannot let thee pass away!” Ah, well-a-day!
 Answer: Galatea (Gala-tea).

IV

MY First is singular at best:

**More plural is my Second: My Third is far the pluralest So plural-
 plural, I protest It scarcely can be reckoned!**

My First is followed by a bird:

My Second by believers In magic art: my simple Third
 Follows, not often, hopes absurd And plausible deceivers.
 My First to get at wisdom tries A failure melancholy!
 My Second men revered as wise:

My Third from heights of wisdom flies To depths of frantic folly.

My First is ageing day by day:

My Second's age is ended:

My Third enjoys an age, they say, That never seems to fade away,
 Through centuries extended.

My Whole? I need a poet's pen To paint her myriad phases:

The monarch, and the slave, of men A mountain-summit, and a den
 Of dark and deadly mazes A flashing light- a fleeting shade

Beginning, end, and middle Of all that human art hath made Or
 wit devised! Go, seek her aid, If you would read my riddle!

Answer. Imagination (I-Magi-nation).

THE END