

1861

THREE SUNSETS

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.

Three Sunsets (1861) - One of Lewis Carroll's poems. Opening lines: He saw her once, and in the glance, / A moment's glance of meeting eyes,...

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HE saw her once, and in the glance, A moment's glance of meeting eyes,
His heart stood still in sudden trance: He trembled with a sweet surprise
All in the waning light she stood, The star of perfect womanhood.

That summer-eve his heart was light: With lighter step he trod the ground:
And life was fairer in his sight, And music was in every sound:
He blessed the world where there could be So beautiful a thing as she.

There once again, as evening fell And stars were peering overhead,
Two lovers met to bid farewell: The western sun gleamed faint and red,
Lost in a drift of purple cloud.

That wrapped him like a funeral-shroud.

Long time the memory of that night
The hand that clasped, the lips that kissed,
The form that faded from his sight
Slow sinking through the tearful mist
In dreamy music seemed to roll
Through the dark chambers of his soul.

So after many years he came A wanderer from a distant shore:

The street, the house, were still the same, But those he sought were there no more:
His burning words, his hopes and fears, Unheeded fell on alien ears.

Only the children from their play Would pause the mournful tale to hear,
Shrinking in half-alarm away, Or, step by step, would

venture near To touch with timid curious hands That strange wild
man from other lands.

He sat beside the busy street, There, where he last had seen her
face; And thronging memories, bitter-sweet, Seemed yet to haunt
the ancient place: Her footfall ever floated near: Her voice was ever
in his ear.

He sometimes, as the daylight waned And evening mists began to
roll, In half-soliloquy complained Of that black shadow on his soul,
And blindly fanned, with cruel care, The ashes of a vain despair.

The summer fled: the lonely man Still lingered out the lessening
days: Still, as the night drew on, would scan Each passing face with
closer gaze Till, sick at heart, he turned away, And sighed "She will
not come to-day."

So by degrees his spirit bent .

To mock its own despairing cry, In stern self-torture to invent New
luxuries of agony, And people all the vacant space With visions of
her perfect face.

Then for a moment she was nigh, He heard no step, but she was
there; As if an angel suddenly Were bodied from the viewless air,
And all her fine ethereal frame Should fade as swiftly as it came.

So, half in fancy's sunny trance, And half in misery's aching void,
With set and stony countenance His bitter being he enjoyed, And
thrust for ever from his mind The happiness he could not find.

As when the wretch, in lonely room, To selfish death is madly
hurled, The glamour of that fatal fume Shuts out the wholesome
living world So all his manhood's strength and pride One sickly
dream had swept aside.

Yea, brother, and we passed him there, But yesterday, in merry
mood, And marvelled at the lordly air That shamed his beggar's
attitude, Nor heeded that ourselves might be Wretches as
desperate as he; Who let the thought of bliss denied Make havoc of
our life and powers, And pine, in solitary pride, For peace that
never shall be ours, Because we will not work and wait In trustful
patience for our fate.

And so it chanced once more that she Came by the old familiar
spot: The face he would have died to see Bent o'er him, and he
knew it not; Too rapt in selfish grief to hear, Even when happiness
was near.

And pity filled her gentle breast For him that would not stir nor
speak, The dying crimson of the west, That faintly tinged his
haggard cheek, Fell on her as she stood, and shed A glory round
the patient head.

Ah, let him wake! The moments fly: This awful tryst may be the
last.

And see, the tear, that dimmed her eye, Had fallen on him ere she
passed She passed: the crimson paled to gray: And hope departed
with the day.

The heavy hours of night went by, And silence quickened into
sound, And light slid up the eastern sky, And life began its daily
round But light and life for him were fled: His name was numbered
with the dead.

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THE END