

A SUNSET

NOVEMBER 25, 1885

TO VICTOR HUGO

I

It was the dawn of winter: sword in sheath,
 Change, veiled and mild, came down the gradual air
 With cold slow smiles that hid the doom beneath.
 Five days to die in yet were autumn's, ere
 The last leaf withered from his flowerless wreath.
 South, east, and north, our skies were all blown bare,
 But westward over glimmering holt and heath
 Cloud, wind, and light had made a heaven more fair
 Than ever dream or truth
 Showed earth in time's keen youth
 When men with angels communed unaware.
 Above the sun's head, now
 Veiled even to the ardent brow,
 Rose two sheer wings of Sundering cloud, that were
 As a bird's poised for vehement flight,
 Full-fledged with plumes of tawny fire and hoar grey
 light.

II

As midnight black, as twilight brown, they spread,
But feathered thick with flame that streaked and lined
Their living darkness, ominous else of dread,
From south to northmost verge of heaven inclined
Most like some giant angel's, whose bent head
Bowed earthward, as with message for mankind
Of doom or benediction to be shed
From passage of his presence. Far behind,
Even while they seemed to close,
Stoop, and take flight, arose
Above them, higher than heavenliest thought may find
In light or night supreme
Of vision or of dream,
Immeasurable of men's eyes or mounting mind,
Heaven, manifest in manifold
Light of pure pallid amber, cheered with fire of gold.

III

And where the fine gold faded all the sky
Shone green as the outer sea when April glows,
Inlaid with flakes and feathers fledged to fly
Of cloud suspense in rapture and repose,
With large live petals, broad as love bids lie
Full open when the sun salutes the rose,
And small rent sprays wherewith the heavens most high
Were strewn as autumn strews the garden-close

With ruinous roseleaves whirled
About their wan chill world,
Through wind-worn bowers that now no music knows,
Spoil of the dim dusk year
Whose utter night is near,
And near the flower of dawn beyond it blows ;
Till east and west were fire and light,
As though the dawn to come had flushed the coming
night.

IV

The highways paced of men that toil or play,
The byways known of none but lonely feet,
Were paven of purple woven of night and day
With hands that met as hands of friends might meet—
As though night's were not lifted up to slay
And day's had waxed not weaker. Peace more sweet
Than music, light more soft than shadow, lay
On downs and moorlands wan with day's defeat,
That watched afar above
Life's very rose of love
Let all its lustrous leaves fall, fade, and fleet,
And fill all heaven and earth
Full as with fires of birth
Whence time should feed his years with light and heat :
Nay, not life's, but a flower more strong
Than life or time or death, love's very rose of song.

V

Song visible, whence all men's eyes were lit
With love and loving wonder: song that glowed
Through cloud and change on souls that knew not it
And hearts that wist not whence their comfort flowed,
Whence fear was lightened of her fever-fit,
Whence anguish of her life-compelling load.
Yea, no man's head whereon the fire alit,
Of all that passed along that sunset road
Westward, no brow so drear,
No eye so dull of cheer,
No face so mean whereon that light abode,
But as with alien pride
Strange godhead glorified
Each feature flushed from heaven with fire that showed
The likeness of its own life wrought
By strong transfiguration as of living thought.

VI

Nor only clouds of the everlasting sky,
Nor only men that paced that sunward way
To the utter bourne of evening, passed not by
Unblest or unillumined: none might say,
Of all things visible in the wide world's eye,
That all too low for all that grace it lay:
The lowliest lakelets of the moorland nigh,
The narrowest pools where shallowest wavelets play,

Were filled from heaven above
 With light like fire of love,
 With flames and colours like a dawn in May,
 As hearts that lowlier live
 With light of thoughts that give
 Light from the depth of souls more deep than they
 Through song's or story's kindling scroll,
 The splendour of the shadow that reveals the soul.

VII

For, when such light is in the world, we share,
 All of us, all the rays thereof that shine :
 Its presence is alive in the unseen air,
 Its fire within our veins as quickening wine ;
 A spirit is shed on all men everywhere,
 Known or not known of all men for divine.
 Yea, as the sun makes heaven, that light makes fair
 All souls of ours, all lesser souls than thine,
 Priest, prophet, seer and sage,
 Lord of a subject age
 That bears thy seal upon it for a sign ;
 Whose name shall be thy name,
 Whose light thy light of fame,
 The light of love that makes thy soul a shrine ;
 Whose record through all years to be
 Shall bear this witness written—that its womb bare
 thee.

VIII

O mystery, whence to one man's hand was given
Power upon all things of the spirit, and might
Whereby the veil of all the years was riven
And naked stood the secret soul of night !
O marvel, hailed of eyes whence cloud is driven,
That shows at last wrong reconciled with right
By death divine of evil and sin forgiven !
O light of song, whose fire is perfect light !
 No speech, no voice, no thought,
 No love, avails us aught
For service of thanksgiving in his sight
 Who hath given us all for ever
 Such gifts that man gave never
So many and great since first Time's wings took flight.
 Man may not praise a spirit above
Man's : life and death shall praise him : we can only love.

IX

Life, everlasting while the worlds endure,
Death, self-abased before a power more high,
Shall bear one witness, and their word stand sure
That not till time be dead shall this man die.
Love, like a bird, comes loyal to his lure ;
Fame flies before him, wingless else to fly.
A child's heart toward his kind is not more pure,
An eagle's toward the sun no lordlier eye.

Awe sweet as love and proud
As fame, though hushed and bowed,
Yearns toward him silent as his face goes by :
All crowns before his crown
Triumphantly bow down,
For pride that one more great than all draws nigh :
All souls applaud, all hearts acclaim,
One heart benign, one soul supreme, one conquering
name.