

Burning of the fleet in the Vlie by Sir Robert Holmes

Nor was this all: in ports and roads remote,
 Destructive fires among whole fleets we send;
 Triumphant flames upon the water float,
 And out-bound ships at home their voyage end.

Those various squadrons, variously designed,
 Each vessel freighted with a several load,
 Each squadron waiting for a several wind,
 All find but one, to burn them in the road.

820

Some bound for Guinea, golden sand to find,
 Bore all the gauds the simple natives wear;
 Some, for the pride of Turkish courts designed,
 For folded turbans finest holland bear.

Some English wool, vexed in a Belgian loom,^o
 And into cloth of spungy softness made,
 Did into France or colder Denmark doom,
 To ruin with worse ware our staple trade.

Our greedy seamen rummage every hold,^o
 Smile on the booty of each wealthier chest,
 And, as the priests who with their gods make bold,
 Take what they like and sacrifice the rest.

830

Transitum to the Fire of London^o

But ah! how unsincere are all our joys!
 Which sent from heaven, like lightning make no stay:
 Their palling taste the journey's length destroys,
 Or grief, sent post, o'ertakes them on the way.

Swelled with our late successes on the foe,
 Which France and Holland wanted power to cross,
 We urge an unseen fate to lay us low,
 And feed their envious eyes with English loss.

840

Each element his dread command obeys,
 Who makes or ruins with a smile or frown;
 Who, as by one he did our nation raise,
 So now he with another pulls us down.

Yet, London, empress of the northern clime,
 By a high fate thou greatly didst expire;
 Great as the world's, which at the death of time^o
 Must fall, and rise a nobler frame by fire.

As when some dire usurper heaven provides
 To scourge his country with a lawless sway,
 His birth perhaps some petty village hides,
 And sets his cradle out of fortune's way;

850

Till, fully ripe, his swelling fate breaks out,
 And hurries him to mighty mischiefs on;
 His prince, surprised at first, no ill could doubt,
 And wants the power to meet it when 'tis known:

Such was the rise of this prodigious fire,
 Which, in mean buildings first obscurely bred,
 From thence did soon to open streets aspire,
 And straight to palaces and temples spread.

860

The diligence of trades, and noiseful gain,
 And luxury, more late, asleep were laid;
 All was the night's, and in her silent reign
 No sound the rest of nature did invade.

In this deep quiet, from what source unknown,
 Those seeds of fire their fatal birth disclose:
 And first few scattering sparks about were blown,
 Big with the flames that to our ruin rose.

Then, in some close-pent room it crept along,
 And, smouldering as it went, in silence fed:
 Till the infant monster, with devouring strong,
 Walked boldly upright with exalted head.

870

Now, like some rich or mighty murderer,
 Too great for prison, which he breaks with gold,
 Who fresher for new mischiefs does appear,
 And dares the world to tax him with the old;

So scapes the insulting fire his narrow gaol,
 And makes small outlets into open air:
 There the fierce winds his tender force assail,
 And beat him downward to his first repair.

880

The winds, like crafty courtesans, withheld°
 His flames from burning but to blow them more:
 And, every fresh attempt, he is repelled
 With faint denials, weaker than before.

And now, no longer letted of his prey,
 He leaps up at it with enraged desire,
 O'erlooks the neighbours with a wide survey,
 And nods at every house his threatening fire.

The ghosts of traitors from the bridge descend,
 With bold fanatic spectres to rejoice;
 About the fire into a dance they bend,
 And sing their sabbath notes with feeble voice.

890

Our guardian angel saw them where he sate
 Above the palace of our slumbering king:
 He sighed, abandoning his charge to fate,
 And, drooping, oft looked back upon the wing.

At length the crackling noise and dreadful blaze
 Called up some waking lover to the sight;
 And long it was ere he the rest could raise,
 Whose heavy eyelids yet were full of night.

900

The next to danger, hot pursued by fate,
 Half-clothed, half-naked, hastily retire;
 And frightened mothers strike their breasts, too late,
 For helpless infants left amidst the fire.

Their cries soon waken all the dwellers near;
 Now murmuring noises rise in every street;
 The more remote run stumbling with their fear,
 And in the dark men jostle as they meet.

So weary bees in little cells repose;
 But if night-robbers lift the well-stored hive,
 A humming through their waxen city grows,
 And out upon each other's wings they drive.

910

Now streets grow thronged and busy as by day;
 Some run for buckets to the hallowed choir;
 Some cut the pipes, and some the engines play,
 And some more bold mount ladders to the fire.

In vain; for from the east a Belgian wind
 His hostile breath through the dry rafters sent;
 The flames impelled soon left their foes behind,
 And forward with a wanton fury went.

920

A quay of fire ran all along the shore,
 And lightened all the river with a blaze;
 The wakened tides began again to roar,
 And wondering fish in shining waters gaze.

Old Father Thames raised up his reverend head,
 But feared the fate of Simois would return;
 Deep in his ooze he sought his sedgy bed,
 And shrank his waters back into his urn.

The fire meantime walks in a broader gross;
 To either hand his wings he opens wide;
 He wades the streets, and straight he reaches cross
 And plays his longing flames on the other side.

930

At first they warm, then scorch, and then they take;
 Now with long necks from side to side they feed;
 At length, grown strong, their mother-fire forsake,
 And a new colony of flames succeed.

To every nobler portion of the town
 The curling billows roll their restless tide;
 In parties now they straggle up and down,
 As armies, unopposed, for prey divide. 940

One mighty squadron, with a side-wind sped,
 Through narrow lanes his cumbered fire does haste,
 By powerful charms of gold and silver led
 The Lombard bankers and the Change to waste.°

Another backward to the Tower would go,
 And slowly eats his way against the wind;
 But the main body of the marching foe
 Against the imperial palace is designed.

Now day appears, and with the day the king,
 Whose early care had robbed him of his rest: 950
 Far off the cracks of falling houses ring,
 And shrieks of subjects pierce his tender breast.

Near as he draws, thick harbingers of smoke
 With gloomy pillars cover all the place;
 Whose little intervals of night are broke
 By sparks that drive against his sacred face.

More than his guards his sorrows made him known,
 And pious tears which down his cheeks did shower:
 The wretched in his grief forgot their own;
 (So much the pity of a king has power.) 960

He wept the flames of what he loved so well,
 And what so well had merited his love;
 For never prince in grace did more excel,
 Or royal city more in duty strove.

Nor with an idle care did he behold:
 (Subjects may grieve, but monarchs must redress;)
 He cheers the fearful, and commends the bold,
 And makes despairers hope for good success.

Himself directs what first is to be done,
 And orders all the succours which they bring. 970
 The helpful and the good about him run,
 And form an army worthy such a king.

He sees the dire contagion spread so fast
 That, where it seizes, all relief is vain;
 And therefore must unwillingly lay waste
 That country which would, else, the foe maintain.

The powder blows up all before the fire:
 The amazed flames stand gathered on a heap,
 And from the precipice's brink retire,
 Afraid to venture on so large a leap. 980

Thus fighting fires a while themselves consume,
 But straight, like Turks, forced on to win or die,
 They first lay tender bridges of their fume,
 And o'er the breach in unctuous vapours fly.

Part stays for passage till a gust of wind
 Ships o'er their forces in a shining sheet;
 Part, creeping under ground, their journey blind,
 And, climbing from below, their fellows meet.

Thus, to some desert plain, or old wood-side,
 Dire night-hags come from far to dance their round; 990
 And o'er broad rivers on their fiends they ride,
 Or sweep in clouds above the blasted ground.

No help avails: for, Hydra-like, the fire
 Lifts up his hundred heads to aim his way;
 And scarce the wealthy can one half retire
 Before he rushes in to share the prey.

The rich grow suppliant, and the poor grow proud;
 Those offer mighty gain and these ask more:
 So void of pity is the ignoble crowd,
 When others' ruin may increase their store. 1000

As those who live by shores with joy behold
 Some wealthy vessel split or stranded nigh;
 And, from the rocks, leap down for shipwrecked gold,
 And seek the tempest which the others fly:

So these but wait the owners' last despair,
 And what's permitted to the flames invade:^o
 E'en from their jaws they hungry morsels tear,
 And on their backs the spoils of Vulcan lade.

The days were all in this lost labour spent:
 And when the weary king gave place to night, 1010
 His beams he to his royal brother lent,
 And so shone still in his reflective light.

Night came, but without darkness or repose,
 A dismal picture of the general doom;
 Where souls distracted when the trumpet blows,
 And half unready with their bodies come.

Those who have homes, when home they do repair,
 To a last lodging call their wandering friends.
 Their short uneasy sleeps are broke with care, 1020
 To look how near their own destruction tends.

Those who have none sit round where once it was,
 And with full eyes each wanted room require;
 Haunting the yet warm ashes of the place,
 As murdered men walk where they did expire.

Some stir up coals and watch the vestal fire,
 Others in vain from sight of ruin run;
 And, while through burning labyrinths they retire,
 With loathing eyes repeat what they would shun.

The most in fields like herded beasts lie down,
 To dews obnoxious on the grassy floor: 1030
 And while their babes in sleep their sorrows drown,
 Sad parents watch the remnants of their store.

While by the motion of the flames they guess
 What streets are burning now, and what are near;
 An infant, waking, to the paps would press
 And meets, instead of milk, a falling tear.

No thought can ease them but their sovereign's care,
 Whose praise the afflicted as their comfort sing:
 E'en those whom want might drive to just despair, 1040
 Think life a blessing under such a king.

Meantime he sadly suffers in their grief,
 Outweeps a hermit, and outprays a saint:
 All the long night he studies their relief,
 How they may be supplied, and he may want.

King's prayer

'O God,' said he, 'thou patron of my days,
 Guide of my youth in exile and distress!
 Who me unfriended broughtst by wondrous ways,
 The kingdom of my fathers to possess:

'Be thou my judge, with what unwearied care
 I since have laboured for my people's good; 1050
 To bind the bruises of a civil war,
 And stop the issues of their wasting blood.

'Thou, who hast taught me to forgive the ill,
 And recompense, as friends, the good misled;
 If mercy be a precept of thy will,
 Return that mercy on thy servant's head.

'Or, if my heedless youth has stepped astray,
 Too soon forgetful of thy gracious hand;
 On me alone thy just displeasure lay,
 But take thy judgments from this mourning land. 1060

'We all have sinned, and thou hast laid us low,
 As humble earth from whence at first we came:
 Like flying shades before the clouds we show,
 And shrink like parchment in consuming flame.