

## Literature, &amp;c.

## THE GREAT FIRE AT NEW-YORK,

IN DECEMBER, 1835.

The following vivid description of the awful conflagration that visited the city of New York, in Dec. 1835, and the just retribution of the supposed incendiaries, we take from a new work lately published in the New World office, entitled "Abel Parsons, or the Brother's Revenge."

It was the night of the sixteenth December, 1835. The weather was intensely cold, and a heavy, piercing wind, from the northwest, howled over the devoted city. The sun had gone down, drearily and gloomily, to his couch in the distant valleys of the Far West, and the sky exhibited a threatening aspect. Few were the pedestrians whose steps resounded on the frozen pavements; few, save the unhallowed seekers of forbidden pleasure, or the wretched victims of poverty and crime, braved the chilling tempest. The watchman, clad in his coarse frieze coat, hastened to find a shelter, and shuddered, as a fitful gust ever and anon swept by him with exceeding fury.

Suddenly there arose a cry of "Fire! Fire!" As the unwelcome sound reverberated from street to street, the hearts of thousands throbbed with the apprehensions of impending ruin. The intense cold—the severe wind—became, in the imaginations of men, the angry spirits which the Demon of Fire had commissioned to promote his designs. The weak prayed for the deliverance of Heaven: the strong rushed forth to battle with the mighty element.

The flames had already burst out, when the alarm was given. The store of Messrs. Comstock and Andrews, in Merchant street, with its valuable contents, formed the nucleus of destruction. Fearfully, rapidly, on every side, the consuming fire swept on. Store after store, warehouse after warehouse, street after street, glowed like a heated furnace, with the intensity of the devouring element.

The arm of man was powerless; the ordinary supplies of water were frozen up, and the fire engines could afford no substantial relief. Their puny efforts to extinguish the irresistible power of the rolling whirlwinds of flame were unavailing. As well might the infant of a year have striven to roll back a mountain wave of the ocean; as well might a diminutive dwarf of the kingdom of Lilliput have attempted to conquer a giant of the sons of Anak.

The population of the city came forth, *en masse*. The prolonged and fearful light—the perpetual alarm of the warning bells, and the confused shouts of the excited multitude, declared too well the extensive character of the conflagration. Sleep was banished from the hovels of the poor, and the palaces of the rich. All feared for their neighbours, for their friends, for themselves. It was no longer a partial evil, which insensibility could disregard, or maliciousness rejoice at. The most timid, and the most courageous, were equally at a loss to prevent its progress, or predict its termination.

The magnificent exchange with its lofty columns and imposing dome, became at length in imminent danger. The utmost exertions of an active crowd of citizens, were combined to insure its preservation. The rolling ocean of fire for a moment stood still—but only to collect its energies for a resistless onset. On it came; the crowd retired before the excessive heat—the flame danced in the marble hall, and played around the majestic columns.

Merchant street—Exchange street—Pearl street—Water street—Wall street—the Exchange, were now on fire.

The scene was one of awful majesty and sublimity. Immediately before the spectator was the burning Exchange. The red flames darted from its shattered windows, and open passages, like the forked and pointed tongues of fiery serpents. The carved cornices and balustrades were blackened and consumed; the lofty columns of marble glittered in the fearful illumination, and crumbled into powder. Beyond heaven and tossed a raging ocean of fire. The waves of fire sunk slowly down, or rolled their glowing peaks far up into the empyrean, as the wild blast swept with changing power over the city.

A thick cloud of smoke was spread, like a dark pall, in the midnight sky. Its blackness contrasted strangely with the brilliant light of the burning pile. Yet, continually, like flashing meteors, fragments of burning roofs and blazing goods, impelled by the united powers of wind and heat, were borne aloft on the

funeral cloud, sparkling a moment in the distance, and falling then in showers of fire.

Ever and anon was heard the crash of the falling walls, as building after building yielded to the conquering element. The hissing of the fiery tongues, and the crackling of the consuming timbers, sank into momentary insignificance before the stunning shock of a crumbling edifice. The solid earth trembled and shook as if it had been heaved by an earthquake. As the walls fell in, an unusual cloud of smoke and dust slowly and heavily arose, and mingled with the burdened air. Then the fierce wind rolled it rapidly away, and the burning mass glowed with an intense heat.

The streets, in the vicinity of the conflagration, were crowded with a dense throng of human beings. The spectators were alternately affected with admiration at the stern grandeur of the prospect, and with sorrow at the terrible ruin which was consummating. The fire shone, with an unearthly glare, upon the features of the assembled thousands. Men looked into each others' faces, and shuddered at the transformation which so simple a cause could produce in the expression of their countenances. Every object had an unnatural aspect, which spoke to the excited imagination of the awful terrors and hideous images of Pandemonium. Occasionally a slight change of wind, or the eddying current of a whirlwind of flame, directed the rising columns of smoke and fire downward to the earth. Then over and around the mighty multitude were diffused the thick smoke, and the dark mist; and the heated air, filled with burning fragments, scorched the chilled bodies. Half suffocated, they panted for the clear, cold air of heaven, and swayed about with an uneasy and restless motion. How wild and terrible! thus to stand in the centre of a vast crowd, and hear no sounds save the roaring of the careering winds—the hissing and crackling of the devouring flames—the cries and screams of excited men—the thundering crash of falling buildings, and to see no visions save the lurid glare of the fire, gleaming through the thick black smoke, and the wild wrecks of the destroying tempest.

But not inactive did all gaze upon the terrifying spectacle. The fortunes of thousands were at stake, and bravely did they strive to avert the impending ruin. The firemen, though the whole of the long and dreary night, labored with a zeal and an energy deserving better success. They met the flames in every direction of their progress; and although they were obliged to yield, they contested every inch with unconquerable fortitude.

The most strenuous efforts were made for the preservation of the valuable goods which had been stored in those long ranges of warehouses. Crowds of men—merchants, their clerks, and dependants, and such of the numerous spectators as benevolence, or the promise of reward, brought to their assistance—were continually and laboriously employed in removing the most precious articles from the path of the insatiable destroyer. In the early part of the fire, the great hall of the Exchange, and the interior of the Garden street Church, were filled with rich and costly merchandize. The streets in the vicinity were rendered almost impassable, by the huge piles of wares which had been deposited there for safety. In most instances these measures of precaution were entirely fruitless. The progress of the fire was so rapid, and its extent so fearful, that the very premises resorted to for safety became involved in the general ruin.

Once, twice, thrice, the unwearied and indefatigable merchant removed his richest fabrics, from one place of fancied security to another, only to see them utterly consumed. The Exchange, the Church in the Garden street, successively fell, and the very streets blazed with a richer incense than was ever burnt on the altars of the temple of Diana. The most valuable products of art and nature, from every quarter of the globe—the costly laces of France, the silks of India, the shawls of Tibet and Persia, wines of exquisite flavor, fruits of delicious taste, all that sense could desire, all that pride could crave, were swept away in one common and irresistible ruin. Every spark of brightness, that flashed in the upper regions of the air, had borne away the value of a diamond—every tongue of flame, that darted freely and swiftly into the heavens, was like molten gold.

The merchants, and their friends and dependants, were not the only individuals who were actively engaged in the vicinity of the burning stores. The prowling desperadoes, who infest the low

haunts and obscure alleys of the city—the nightly band of thieves, robbers, and burglars, from the dandyish prince of the swell mob, to the half starved, half naked graduate of the filthiest dens of beastly pollution, hovered around the scene of destruction, like hyenas around a field of battle. With the selfishness and the cruelty which characterize them, they assured the guise of friendship, and basely plundered while they pretended to assist their victims. The most valuable articles of merchandize were carried off by these abandoned villains, and secreted in their temporary places of concealment. The vigilance of the police detected many of the wretches in the very act, but thousands escaped entirely with their rich booty. Loss was thus accumulated upon loss—ruin followed in the path of ruin; what the fire did not consume, the thieves pillaged. Alas! for the baseness of human nature. The instinct of brutes would teach them to shun such unexampled perfidy.

Slowly and wearily the lagging hours passed away, and still the fire raged with unabated fury. The scene of its early development was a total wreck; the merchandize was destroyed, the crumbling walls of the warehouses had fallen to the ground, the narrow street was filled with smoking ruins; but to the east and south, with resistless force, the burning cataract rolled on. The flames approached the river. The docks and slips were crowded with vessels of every size and description, from the light sloop with its single mast, to the heavy ship, with its towering masts and projecting spars. They were speedily hauled into the centre of the stream, by the united exertions of their several crews. It was a strange, and a wonderful—ay, and a fearful sight, to stand upon the deck of one of those large ships, and gaze upon the burning city. The vast extent of the sweeping flames—the dark cloud on high, and the reflection of the light on the dense throng of human beings who lined the neighboring avenues, were distinctly visible. The illuminated spires of the churches and cathedrals, gleamed brilliantly in the distance; and in the opposite direction, the Brooklyn heights glittered like a fringed border of gold on the edge of the dark and gloomy river. And then how singularly appeared the tapering masts, and naked spars, and shivering groups of men, clustered about the cheerless decks, in that red and awful light. And the dark shadows, which they threw upon the rippling stream, danced horribly to and fro, and seemed to the straining vision, like the forms of demons; laughing and mocking at the misery and desolation before them, and at the smoke and the fire, which assimilated the fair regions of earth to their caverns of torment and despair.

A scene of destruction such as we are attempting to describe, is full of the development of human character and passion. The conventional propensities of society are forgotten in the overpowering excitement of feelings which pervades every bosom. Men act from impulse, rather than from the dictates of reason; one master mind may sway the energies of thousands.

At the period when the progress of the flames rendered the destruction of the Exchange certain and inevitable, and the rear of the building was wrapt in a luminous garment of fire, hundreds of spectators stood before the magnificent edifice, lamenting the necessity of a result which had been arduously contested. Among them was an old man, whose calm physiognomy and noble deportment exhibited a striking contrast to the excited features and unsteady restlessness of those who surrounded him.—He stood on the pavement, opposite the devoted structure, hemmed in by the dense crowd. It was Ernest Dickson, the scholar.

Suddenly he shouted, with a clear loud voice, that sounded distinctly above the noise and confusion which prevailed in that vicinity:

"Save the statue of Hamilton!" Instantly did the multitude echo back, with one universal shout of applause, the cry.

"Save the statue of Hamilton!" Two men sprang simultaneously from the crowd; one of them was Arnyte Butler—the other was arrayed in the undress of a naval officer.

"Follow! comrades," exclaimed the officer, rushing up the steps.

Butler was at his side, and a dozen men followed in a moment.

The large doors, forming the entrance to the great hall, were immediately torn from their hinges and thrown in the passage way. The statue of Hamilton was thus rendered visible, even to the spectators in the street, for the flames

were already darting into the room. The floor was covered with piles of rich goods, which had thus been transported thither for security. Elevated on a firm and massy pedestal, in the centre of the hall, the majestic statue seemed like the presiding and protecting genius of the place.—The noble features of the warrior and the statesman beamed in the red glare of the mighty element with a grave and dignified expression, and the sculptured drapery hung on his manly form exquisitely beautiful. So looked, so stood Cicero, before the Conscript Fathers of the Roman Senate, ready to denounce the conspirators against the freedom of the Republic. In this work of art, the stern energy of the Grecian and the majestic beauty of the Roman were blended, so as to harmonize, in one glorious model, the highest perfections of intellect and genius.

The men rushed to the statue, and endeavored to remove it from the pedestal. Their efforts were fruitless. Others came to their assistance, but the immense weight of the statue resisted their combined strength and powerful exertions. The fire rapidly extended into the great hall, and seized upon the combustible materials which were strewn about the floor. The persons who had gathered around the statue were ultimately compelled to retreat, without having achieved their object.

The flames played wildly and fiercely about the marble image of the great statesman. With a strange feeling of reverence and wonder, did the multitude gaze upon the magnificent spectacle. The statue seemed to live, to breathe, almost to speak, almost to move. Proud endurance, and fearless intrepidity, were depicted on the features. It was bathed in fire, and volumes of smoke shrouded it at length in a dark and misty drapery. The dome of the building fell in, with a tremendous crash, and the statue was crashed beneath the heavy weight. So, in the vigor of his manhood, in the plenitude of his powers, in the proud elevation of moral and intellectual greatness, fell its glorious prototype and original.

A momentary stillness—a hushed silence, pervaded an immense throng of spectators, when the dome of the Exchange yielded to the consuming element.—The old man passed through the crowd, and seized Arnyte Butler by the arm.

"My young friend," observed the scholar, "you strove nobly to preserve yonder specimen of the fine arts. In the name of my country and the world I thank you. Among the sickening remembrances of this fearful night, will be ranked the destruction of the statue of Hamilton. Come, Mr Butler, shall we attempt to approach the river?"

The old man and his companion took a short circuit through the adjacent streets, so as to avoid the pressure of the vast multitude of spectators. Even these avenues were thronged with individuals, passing to and fro. Carts and wagons, laden with merchandize, were continually driving to some distant part of the city, where their contents might be deposited in security, or returning empty to the scene of ruin.

"Were you acquainted with Alexander Hamilton?" inquired Butler, after they had emerged from the dense crowd.

"I knew him well, intimately, Mr Butler. He was my early and sincere friend; I cherish his memory with mingled emotions of affection and admiration. He was a great man, my young friend, endowed with a high order of intellect, and acting from the impulses of a generous and noble nature.—He aspired to honorable and exalted stations, not from a petty desire for the glittering insignia of official authority, but from a glorious ambition to advance the cause of human liberty and happiness.—In his personal relations, as a relative, he was kind and generous—as a friend he was sincere and confiding—as a man, he was an ornament and a benefactor of his kind. In his public relations, as a soldier, he was brave and successful—as a civilian, eloquent, learned and upright—as a statesman, he was a friend of constitutional liberty, an advocate of public justice, and of public order, and a firm supporter of the rights of his country.—How unlike in many, in the most respects, to the man whose murderous arm tore him away, in the vigor of his manhood from the society which he adorned, and the country he loved. But the present reputation of both is as diverse as their characters and circumstances. The one fell, indeed, in the maturity of his mental and corporal strength; but he left behind him the jewel of unblemished and unspotted honor. A nation wept his fall, and his grateful countrymen have proudly placed his name among those