

LES ORIENTALES.--1829.

THE SCOURGE OF HEAVEN.

("Là, voyez-vous passer, la nuée.")

[I., November, 1828.]

I.

Hast seen it pass, that cloud of darkest rim?

Now red and glorious, and now gray and dim,

Now sad as summer, barren in its heat?

One seems to see at once rush through the night

The smoke and turmoil from a burning site

Of some great town in fiery grasp complete.

Whence comes it? From the sea, the hills, the sky?

Is it the flaming chariot from on high

Which demons to some planet seem to bring?

Oh, horror! from its wondrous centre, lo!

A furious stream of lightning seems to flow

Like a long snake uncoiling its fell ring.

II.

The sea! naught but the sea! waves on all sides!

Vainly the sea-bird would outstrip these tides!

Naught but an endless ebb and flow!

Wave upon wave advancing, then controlled

Beneath the depths a stream the eyes behold

Rolling in the involved abyss below!

Whilst here and there great fishes in the spray

Their silvery fins beneath the sun display,

Or their blue tails lash up from out the surge,

Like to a flock the sea its fleece doth fling;

The horizon's edge bound by a brazen ring;

Waters and sky in mutual azure merge.

"Am I to dry these seas?" exclaimed the cloud.

"No!" It went onward 'neath the breath of God.

III.

Green hills, which round a limpid bay

Reflected, bask in the clear wave!

The javelin and its buffalo prey,

The laughter and the joyous stave!
The tent, the manger! these describe
A hunting and a fishing tribe
Free as the air--their arrows fly
Swifter than lightning through the sky!
By them is breathed the purest air,
Where'er their wanderings may chance!
Children and maidens young and fair,
And warriors circling in the dance!
Upon the beach, around the fire,
Now quenched by wind, now burning higher,
Like spirits which our dreams inspire
To hover o'er our trance.

Virgins, with skins of ebony,
Beauteous as evening skies,
Laughed as their forms they dimly see
In metal mirrors rise;
Others, as joyously as they,
Were drawing for their food by day,
With jet-black hands, white camels' whey,
Camels with docile eyes.

Both men and women, bare,
Plunged in the briny bay.
Who knows them? Whence they were?

Where passed they yesterday?
Shrill sounds were hovering o'er,
Mixed with the ocean's roar,
Of cymbals from the shore,
And whinnying courser's neigh.

"Is't there?" one moment asked the cloudy mass;
"Is't there?" An unknown utterance answered: "Pass!"

IV.

Whitened with grain see Egypt's lengthened plains,
Far as the eyesight farthest space contains,
Like a rich carpet spread their varied hues.
The cold sea north, southwards the burying sand
Dispute o'er Egypt--while the smiling land
Still mockingly their empire does refuse.

Three marble triangles seem to pierce the sky,
And hide their basements from the curious eye.
Mountains--with waves of ashes covered o'er!
In graduated blocks of six feet square
From golden base to top, from earth to air
Their ever heightening monstrous steps they bore.

No scorching blast could daunt the sleepless ken

Of roseate Sphinx, and god of marble green,
Which stood as guardians o'er the sacred ground.
For a great port steered vessels huge and fleet,
A giant city bathed her marble feet
In the bright waters round.

One heard the dread simoom in distance roar,
Whilst the crushed shell upon the pebbly shore
Crackled beneath the crocodile's huge coil.
Westwards, like tiger's skin, each separate isle
Spotted the surface of the yellow Nile;
Gray obelisks shot upwards from the soil.

The star-king set. The sea, it seemed to hold
In the calm mirror this live globe of gold,
This world, the soul and torchbearer of our own.
In the red sky, and in the purple streak,
Like friendly kings who would each other seek,
Two meeting suns were shown.

"Shall I not stop?" exclaimed the impatient cloud.
"Seek!" trembling Tabor heard the voice of God.

V.

Sand, sand, and still more sand!

The desert! Fearful land!
Teeming with monsters dread
And plagues on every hand!
Here in an endless flow,
Sandhills of golden glow,
Where'er the tempests blow,
Like a great flood are spread.
Sometimes the sacred spot
Hears human sounds profane, when
As from Ophir or from Memphre
Stretches the caravan.
From far the eyes, its trail
Along the burning shale
Bending its wavering tail,
Like a mottled serpent scan.
These deserts are of God!
His are the bounds alone,
Here, where no feet have trod,
To Him its centre known!
And from this smoking sea
Veiled in obscurity,
The foam one seems to see
In fiery ashes thrown.

"Shall desert change to lake?" cried out the cloud.

"Still further!" from heaven's depths sounded that Voice aloud.

VI.

Like tumbled waves, which a huge rock surround;
Like heaps of ruined towers which strew the ground,
 See Babel now deserted and dismayed!
Huge witness to the folly of mankind;
Four distant mountains when the moonlight shined
 Seem covered with its shade.

O'er miles and miles the shattered ruins spread
Beneath its base, from captive tempests bred,
 The air seemed filled with harmony strange and dire;
While swarmed around the entire human race
A future Babel, on the world's whole space
 Fixed its eternal spire.

Up to the zenith rose its lengthening stair,
While each great granite mountain lent a share
 To form a stepping base;
Height upon height repeated seemed to rise,
For pyramid on pyramid the strained eyes
 Saw take their ceaseless place.

Through yawning walls huge elephants stalked by;
Under dark pillars rose a forestry,

Pillars by madness multiplied;
As round some giant hive, all day and night,
Huge vultures, and red eagles' wheeling flight
Was through each porch descried.

"Must I complete it?" said the angered cloud.

"On still!" "Lord, whither?" groaned it, deep not loud.

VII.

Two cities, strange, unknown in history's page,
Up to the clouds seemed scaling, stage by stage,
Noiseless their streets; their sleeping inmates lie,
Their gods, their chariots, in obscurity!
Like sisters sleeping 'neath the same moonlight,
O'er their twin towers crept the shades of night,
Whilst scarce distinguished in the black profound,
Stairs, aqueducts, great pillars, gleamed around,
And ruined capitals: then was seen a group
Of granite elephants 'neath a dome to stoop,
Shapeless, giant forms to view arise,
Monsters around, the spawn of hideous ties!
Then hanging gardens, with flowers and galleries:
O'er vast fountains bending grew ebon-trees;
Temples, where seated on their rich tiled thrones,
Bull-headed idols shone in jasper stones;

Vast halls, spanned by one block, where watch and stare
Each upon each, with straight and moveless glare,
Colossal heads in circles; the eye sees
Great gods of bronze, their hands upon their knees.
Sight seemed confounded, and to have lost its powers,
'Midst bridges, aqueducts, arches, and round towers,
Whilst unknown shapes fill up the devious views
Formed by these palaces and avenues.
Like capes, the lengthening shadows seem to rise
Of these dark buildings, pointed to the skies,
Immense entanglement in shroud of gloom!
The stars which gleamed in the empyrean dome,
Under the thousand arches in heaven's space
Shone as through meshes of the blackest lace.
Cities of hell, with foul desires demented,
And monstrous pleasures, hour by hour invented!
Each roof and home some monstrous mystery bore!
Which through the world spread like a twofold sore!
Yet all things slept, and scarce some pale late light
Flitted along the streets through the still night,
Lamps of debauch, forgotten and alone,
The feast's lost fires left there to flicker on;
The walls' large angles clove the light-lengthening shades
'Neath the white moon, or on some pool's face played.
Perchance one heard, faint in the plain beneath,
The kiss suppressed, the mingling of the breath;

And the two sister cities, tired of heat,
In love's embrace lay down in murmurs sweet!
Whilst sighing winds the scent of sycamore
From Sodom to Gomorrah softly bore!
Then over all spread out the blackened cloud,
"Tis here!" the Voice on high exclaimed aloud.

VIII.

From a cavern wide
In the rent cloud's side,
In sulphurous showers
The red flame pours.
The palaces fall
In the lurid light,
Which casts a red pall
O'er their facades white!

Oh, Sodom! Gomorrah!
What a dome of horror
Rests now on your walls!
On you the cloud falls,
Nation perverse!
On your fated heads,
From its fell jaws, a curse
Its lightning fierce spreads!

The people awaken
Which godlessly slept;
Their palaces shaken,
Their offences unwept!
Their rolling cars all
Meet and crash in the street;
And the crowds, for a pall,
Find flames round their feet!

Numberless dead,
Round these high towers spread,
Still sleep in the shade
By their rugged heights made;
Colossi of rocks
In ill-steadied blocks!
So hang on a wall
Black ants, like a pall!

To escape is in vain
From this horrible rain!
Alas! all things die;
In the lightning's red flash
The bridges all crash;
'Neath the tiles the flame creeps;
From the fire-struck steeps

Falls on the pavements below,
All lurid in glow,
Rolling down from on high!

Beneath every spark,
The red, tyrannous fire
Mounts up in the dark
Ever redder and higher;
More swiftly than steel
Uncontrolled, see it pass!
Horrid idols all twist,
By the crumbling flame kissed
In their infamous dread,
Shrivelled members of brass!

It grows angry, flows on,
Silver towers fall down
Unforeseen, like a dream
In its green and red stream,
Which lights up the walls
Ere one crashes and falls,
Like the changeable scale
Of a lizard's bright mail.
Agate, porphyry, cracks
And is melted to wax!
Bend low to their doom

These stones of the tomb!
E'en the great marble giant
Called Nabo, sways pliant
Like a tree; whilst the flare
 Seemed each column to scorch
 As it blazed like a torch
Round and round in the air.

The magi, in vain,
From the heights to the plain
Their gods' images carry
 In white tunic: they quake--
 No idol can make
The blue sulphur tarry;
The temple e'en where they meet,
Swept under their feet
In the folds of its sheet!
Turns a palace to coal!
Whence the straitened cries roll
From its terrified flock;
 With incendiary grips
It loosens a block,
 Which smokes and then slips
From its place by the shock;
 To the surface first sheers,
 Then melts, disappears,

Like the glacier, the rock!
The high priest, full of years,
On the burnt site appears,
 Whence the others have fled.
Lo! his tiara's caught fire
As the furnace burns higher,
 And pale, full of dread,
See, the hand he would raise
To tear his crown from the blaze
 Is flaming instead!

Men, women, in crowds
Hurry on--the fire shrouds
 And blinds all their eyes
As, besieging each gate
Of these cities of fate
To the conscience-struck crowd,
In each fiery cloud,
 Hell appears in the skies!

IX.

Men say that then, to see his foe's sad fall
As some old prisoner clings to his prison wall,
Babel, accomplice of their guilt, was seen
O'er the far hills to gaze with vision keen!

And as was worked this dispensation strange,
A wondrous noise filled the world's startled range;
Reached the dull hearing that deep, direful sound
Of their sad tribe who live below the ground.

X.

'Gainst this pitiless flame who condemned could prevail?
Who these walls, burnt and calcined, could venture to scale?
Yet their vile hands they sought to uplift,
Yet they cared still to ask from what God, by what law?
In their last sad embrace, 'midst their honor and awe,
Of this mighty volcano the drift.
'Neath great slabs of marble they hid them in vain,
'Gainst this everliving fire, God's own flaming rain!
'Tis the rash whom God seeks out the first;
They call on their gods, who were deaf to their cries,
For the punishing flame caused their cold granite eyes
In tears of hot lava to burst!
Thus away in the whirlwind did everything pass,
The man and the city, the soil and its grass!
God burnt this sad, sterile champaign;
Naught living was left of this people destroyed,
And the unknown wind which blew over the void,
Each mountain changed into a plain.

XI.

The palm-tree that grows on the rock to this day,
Feels its leaf growing yellow, its slight stem decay,
 In the blasting and ponderous air;
These towns are no more! but to mirror their past,
O'er their embers a cold lake spread far and spread fast,
 With smoke like a furnace, lies there!

J.N. FAZAKERLEY