

George Campbell, “Lunardi’s Balloon, An Elegy”

Description

GEORGE CAMPBELL

“Lunardi’s Balloon, An Elegy”

Low sunk the sun, departing from the day,
His latest beams had ting’d the western clouds,
Ev’ning advanced, clad in sober grey,
And Night fast follow’d with her dusky shrouds.

Tir’d with its hurry and its bustling noise, 5
I left the town, and, wand’ring thro’ the fields,
I taste the silent Ev’ning’s sober joys,
And all the pleasures which retirement yields.

The mournful Echoes rais’d their loudest voice,
And answer’d plaintive to the lover’s sigh: 10
Prophet of ills, the Owl, with horrid noise,
Scream’d at a distance in the gloomy sky.

The post-horn, sounding, echoes thro’ the air
At intervals I hear the horse’s tread:
His near approach, the growing sounds declare; 15
Far off I see him thro’ the dubious shade.

The rising Moon shot forth a glimm’ring ray,
And gave the nightly rider to the view;
Pensive and sad he pass’d along the way,
And all his horn was hung with sable hue. 20

Stop! stop! I cri’d, and tell thy cause of wo,
Thou ne’er wast wont to shed the briny tear!
What now can make the copious torrents flow!
What sad, what mournful tidings dost thou bear?

Is HASTINGS now from accusation freed? 25
Will we no more hear of his barb’rous rage?
Or PIT and FOX for ever now agreed?
Will their debates no longer fill the page?

Have Prussian wits exhausted all the store
Of anecdotes about their fav'rite king? 30
Or, are the Dutch divisions now no more?
Will Birth-days not their annual tributes bring?

No, these, he said, are not the cause of grief;
'Tis not for these I make such heavy moan:
O, what shall soothe my pain or bring relief? 35
LUNARDI'S fam'd BALLOON, alas! is gone!

I heard him speak, and struck with sad surprise,
Declare, I said, how the mishap befel:
Afresh the torrents bursting from his eyes,
He, with a sigh, began the mournful tale! 40

'Twas where the TYNE rolls down in all his pride,
His limpid waters by NEWCASTLE flow,
Whose stately Turrets rise upon its side,
The fam'd BALLOON receiv'd a fatal blow!

'Twas there the great LUNARDI, fam'd afar 45
For airy journeys in the middle sky,
Perpar'd again to mount the floating Car,
And thro' the clouds in upper regions fly.

The day approach'd, what multitudes attend!
They crowd the mountains and they fill the plain, 50
In hopes to see the wondrous man ascend;
But ah! they look, they wish, they hope in vain!

And now the great BALLOON began to fill;
Her buoyant sides rose bellowing in the air:
Th' intrepid hero us'd his utmost skill; 55
His hopes were rais'd on high and great his care.

Ah! silly mortals! what small hope of joy
Elates our heart, and swells our little mind!
How can a moment this fond hope destroy,
And leave a real, lasting grief behind? 60

We truly thought he would have gone so far
As Earth's attractions had not brought him down;
There got intelligence from ev'ry star,
And been our correspondent in the moon:

For now She, rising, floats about the ground, 65
 The cords are loos'd and all prepar'd for flight:
 The Crowds, at awful distance, stand around,
 And view the scene with wonder and delight.

But ah! what numbers can describe the shock!
 Or how can language paint the sad surprise, 70
 When from the vitriol sudden fire brake,
 And the blue flame met the beholders eyes!

Water! they cri'd; but water there was none;
 She, like an arrow, mounts, and cleaves the air:
 LUNARDI saw his fam'd BALLOON was gone; 75
 Wild were his looks and frantic with despair!

Sure! sure! he cri'd, the elements are join'd
 In close concert, to work my overthrow!
 I float in water, and I'm toss'd with wind:
 But the flame has struck the last, the fatal blow! 80

O fire! how fatal to BALLOON exploits!
 Tytler may tell, LUNARDI too has known,
 Who brav'd the greatest dangers in his flight;
 But now his hopes of future glory's gone.

He saw her rise, but could not bring her back; 85
 He saw her burst, ah! never to return!
 The very heav'ns were mantl'd o'er with black,
 And Nature seem'd the mighty loss to mourn!

NEWCASTLE rais'd her voice in loud lament;
 When Kelso heard, she echo'd back the strain; 90
 Edina join'd in the same sad complaint;
 And Glasgow mourn'd, but mourn'd, alas! in vain!

When thus he said, he spurr'd his weary steed,
 Adieu! adieu! I must no longer stay!
 Then took the road, and with redoubled speed, 95
 Leaving me sad, he pass'd along the way.

NOTES:

Title *Lunardi* Vincenzo (Vincent) Lunardi (1754-1806), Italian diplomat and celebrated balloon aeronaut, active in Britain 1784-1787.

9 *Echoes* The repetition of sound personified here by reference to the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book III, ll. 339-358).

13 *post-horn* A valveless brass horn used by a post rider, messenger, or the guard of a mail coach “to announce arrival” (*OED*).

20 *horn* A reference to the rider’s head.

25 *HASTINGS* Warren Hastings (1732-1818), English statesman, served as Governor General of India from 1773-1784. Facing increased scrutiny of his policies and conduct, and lack of political support at home, Hastings resigned his position and returned to England in June 1785. He was arrested in May 1787 and charges against him were read in Parliament; these included his role in the judicial execution of Maharaja Nandakumar in 1775, and his martial efforts to control British interests in the territories of Bengal and Mysore (*ODNB*).

27 *PIT and FOX* William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), Tory politician and statesman, served as Prime Minister of England from 1783-1801, and Charles James Fox (1749-1806), Whig politician and statesman, were arch political rivals. Their frequent clashes in Parliament were a news staple of this period.

29-30 *Prussian wits...their fav’rite king* A reference to the outpouring of praise and panegyric for Frederick the Great (1712-1786, King of Prussia from 1740) following his death on August 17, 1786.

31 *Dutch divisions* A reference to the Patriot Revolt that caused a period of political instability in the Netherlands from 1780-1787.

41 *TYNE* A major river in northeast England that divides the city of Newcastle from Gateshead.

43 *stately Turrets* Probably a reference to the battlements of the Castle Keep, a medieval fortification on the River Tyne in Newcastle.

49 *what multitudes attend* Contemporary accounts often mention the huge crowds drawn to Lunardi’s balloon launches.

67 *awful* “Profoundly respectful or reverential” (*OED*).

69 *numbers* Poetry.

71 *vitriol* Sulfuric acid.

79 *I float in water* Lunardi’s flight from Edinburgh on December 20, 1785 ended with a forced landing in the North Sea, where he was lucky to be rescued by a passing fishing boat (Lunardi, *An Account of Five Aerial Voyages in Scotland* [London, 1786], p. 101).

82 *Tytler* James Tytler (1745-1804), a Scottish chemist and aeronaut, became the first person in Great Britain to ascend in a balloon on August 25, 1784, preceding Lunardi’s first flight in England by several weeks.

85-86 *He saw her rise...never to return!* Lunardi's attempted ascent from Newcastle on September 19, 1786 went horribly wrong. Campbell's description of the balloon's loss matches the most detailed contemporary account published in *The Yorkshire Magazine* (vol. I, September 1786, pp. 287-88). Curiously, however, Campbell chooses not to mention that one of the local men assisting Lunardi that day, "Mr. Ralph Heron," became tangled in the ropes and was swept several hundred feet in the air. He fell and subsequently died of his injuries. It was this tragic accident (rather than the loss of his balloon) that effectively ended Lunardi's career as an aeronaut in Britain.

87 *heav'ns were mantl'd o'er with black* The hydrogen gas produced by the chemical reaction between sulfuric acid and iron shavings was dark in color and, when released from the balloon due to tearing or accident, would create a black cloud.

90 *Kelso* A market town in Scotland near the English border. Lunardi made a successful ascent from Kelso on October 22, 1785 (*Kay's Edinburgh Portraits*, vol. I, ed. Maidment [London and Glasgow, 1885], p. 65).

91 *Edina* Edinburgh. Lunardi made a total of three ascents from Edinburgh on October 5, 1785, December 20, 1785, and July 31, 1786.

92 *Glasgow* Lunardi made two ascents from Glasgow on November 23 and December 5, 1785.

Source: *Poems on Several Occasions* (Kilmarnock, 1787), pp. 114-118. [ECCO]

Edited by Bill Christmas