

Alfred Austin (1835-1913)

3 *The Death of Huss*

In the streets of Constance was heard the shout,
“Masters! bring the arch-heretic out!”
The stake had been planted, the faggots spread,
And the tongues of the torches flickered red.
“Huss to the flames!” they fiercely cried: 5
Then the gate of the Convent opened wide.

Into the sun from the dark he came,
His face as fixed as a face in a frame.
His arms were pinioned, but you could see,
By the smile round his mouth, that his soul was free; 10
And his eye with a strange bright glow was lit,
Like a star just before the dawn quencheth it.

To the pyre the crowd a pathway made,
And he walked along it with no man’s aid;
Steadily on to the place he trod, 15
Commending aloud his soul to God.
Aloud he prayed, though they mocked his prayer:
He was the only thing tranquil there.

But, seeing the faggots, he quickened pace,
As we do when we see the loved one’s face. 20
“Now, now, let the torch in the resin flare,
Till my books and body be ashes and air!
But the spirit of both shall return to men,
As dew that rises descends again.”

From the back of the crowd where the women wept, 25
And the children whispered, a peasant stepped.
A goodly faggot was on his back,
Brittle and sere, from last year’s stack;
And he placed it carefully where the torch
Was sure to lick and the flame to scorch. 30

“Why bring you fresh fuel, friend? Here are sticks
To burn up a score of heretics.”
Answered the peasant, “Because this year,
My hearth will be cold, for is firewood dear;
And Heaven be witness I pay my toll, 35
And burn your body to save my soul.”

Huss gazed at the peasant, he gazed at the pile,
Then over his features there stole a smile.
“*O Sancta Simplicitas!* By God’s troth,
This faggot of yours may save us both, 40
And He who judgeth perchance prefer
To the victim the executioner!”

Then unto the stake was he tightly tied,
And the torches were lowered and thrust inside.
You could hear the twigs crackle and sputter the flesh, 45
Then “*Sancta Simplicitas!*” moaned afresh.
’Twas the last men heard of the words he spoke,
Ere to Heaven his soul went up with the smoke.

1882

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