

“The Tay Bridge ” by Theodor Fontane

(December 28th, 1879)*

When shall we three meet again?

Macbeth

“When shall we three our forces unite?”

“At the seventh hour, at the bridge tonight.”

“At the center pier, let’s meet.”

“I’ll make the flames retreat.”

5 “Me, too, my dear.”

“From the north, I shall hail.”

“And I, from the south.”

“And I, from the sea shall sail.”

“Aye, we’ll be dancing in a ring,

10 And make the bridge fall down as we sing.”

“By the pricking of my thumbs,

At the seventh hour the train this way comes –

Shall it be dashed into the Tay?”

“Aye, ‘tis so – and now away!”

15 “Aye, must be – without delay!”

“Sand, sand,

All that is built by the hand of man!.”

*

To the north, the tollhouse stands —

Each window a view to the south commands;

20 The husband and wife, with an anxious eye,

Look out to the south and of misgivings sigh,

Keeping a lookout and praying for a light,

Which o’er the water advances bright,

Proclaiming, “In spite of night and driving rain,

25 I come, I, the Edinburgh train.”

And now the bridge keeper: "I see a light
 On the opposite shore. That's her, all right!"
 Mother, be done with such wild fear —
 Our Johnny wants his Christmas tree and soon will be here.

30 On the tree some candles there yet be;
 Set them all aglow for the Christ Child to see.
 He will be with us *twice* on this sacred day,
 And in eleven minutes he is due to come this way."

Past the southern tower, there came the train,
 35 Huffing and puffing against the pelting rain,
 And the conductor Johnny shouted out, "The bridge ahead!
 But so what? – What have we to dread?
 A solid boiler, and two-fold steam,
 In such a struggle they win, it would seem.
 40 And as the elements rush and rend and run,
 Who but us shall o'ercome?"

This bridge is our pride and joy;
 I smile, thinking back, when I was a boy:
 The wear and tear, my nerves worn thin,
 45 With the wretched ferry barge way back then.
 How many a Christmas Eve so dear,
 I had to spend in the ferry house right near.
 And saw our windows shining bright,
 And counted the hours, but could not go home that night."

50 To the north, the tollhouse stands —
 Each window a view to the south commands;
 The husband and wife, with an anxious eye,
 Look out to the south and of misgivings sigh,
 For with greater violence the winds did lash,
 55 And now, as if fire from the heavens did crash,
 A-glow in glory and wedded to hell,

O'er the waters below.....And again darkness fell.

“When shall we three meet by and by?”

“At midnight, where the mountain ridge we spy.”

60 “On the high moor, where the alder trunk does lie.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Me, too, I by evil spirits swear.”

“The victims’ number I shall ascertain.”

“And I, their names”.

65 “And I, their pain.”

“Let’s do!

Like splinters the girders broke in two.”

“Sand, sand,

All that is built by the hand of man!. ”

Translated by Norman Barry (2007)

- “December 28th, 1879” refers to the actual date of the disaster, not the setting of the ballad, nor the day when Fontane composed it, nor the day of publication.