

A Long Story

Thomas Gray

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In Britain's isle, no matter where,
An ancient pile of building stands:
The Huntingdons and Hattons there
Employed the power of fairy hands

To raise the ceiling's fretted height,
Each panel in achievements clothing,
Rich windows that exclude the light,
And passages that lead to nothing.

Full oft within the spacious walls,
When he had fifty winters o'er him,
My grave Lord-Keeper led the brawls;
The Seal and Maces danced before him.

His bushy beard and shoe-strings green,

His high-crowned hat and satin-doublet,

Moved the stout heart of England's Queen,
Though Pope and Spaniard could not trouble it.

"What, in the very first beginning!

Shame of the versifying tribe!

Your history whither are you spinning?
Can you do nothing but describe?"

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A house there is (and that's enough)
From whence one fatal morning issues
A brace of warriors, not in buff,
But rustling in their silks and tissues.

The first came cap-a-pee from France
Her conquering destiny fulfilling,
Whom meaner beauties eye askance,
And vainly ape her art of killing.

The other Amazon kind heaven
Had armed with spirit, wit, and satire:
But Cobham had the polish given,
And tipped her arrows with good-nature.

To celebrate her eyes, her air—
Coarse panegyrics would but tease her.
Melissa is her nom de guerre.
Alas, who would not wish to please her!

With bonnet blue and capucine,
And aprons long they hid their armour,
And veiled their weapons bright and keen
In pity to the country-farmer.

Fame in the shape of Mr. P[ur]t
(By this time all the parish know it)
Had told that thereabouts there lurked
A wicked imp they call a poet,

Who prowled the country far and near,

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Bewitched the children of the peasants,
Dried up the cows and lamed the deer,
And sucked the eggs and killed the pheasants.

My lady heard their joint petition,

Swore by her coronet and ermine,
She'd issue out her high commission
To rid the manor of such vermin.

The heroines undertook the task;
Through lanes unknown, o'er stiles they ventured,
Rapped at the door nor stayed to ask,
But bounce into the parlour entered.

The trembling family they daunt,
They flirt, they sing, they laugh, they tattle,
Rummage his mother, pinch his aunt,
And up stairs in a whirlwind rattle.

Each hole and cupboard they explore,
Each creek and cranny of his chamber,
Run hurry–skurry round the floor,
And o'er the bed and tester clamber,

Into the drawers and china pry,
Papers and books, a huge imbroglio!
Under a tea–cup he might lie,
Or creased, like dogs–ears, in a folio.

On the first marching of the troops

The Muses, hopeless of his pardon,

Conveyed him underneath their hoops
To a small closet in the garden.

So Rumour says (who will, believe)

But that they left the door ajar,
Where, safe and laughing in his sleeve,

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He heard the distant din of war.

Short was his joy. He little knew

The power of magic was no fable.
Out of the window, whisk, they flew,
But left a spell upon the table.

The words too eager to unriddle,
The poet felt a strange disorder:
Transparent birdlime formed the middle,
And chains invisible the border.

So cunning was the apparatus,
The powerful pothooks did so move him,
That, will he, nill he, to the Great-House
He went, as if the Devil drove him.

Yet no his way (no sign of grace,

For folks in fear are apt to pray)
To Phoebus he preferred his case,

And begged his aid that dreadful day.

The godhead would have backed his quarrel,
But, with a blush on recollection,
Owned that his quiver and his laurel
'Gainst four such eyes were no protection.

The court was sate, the culprit there,
Forth from their gloomy mansions creeping
The Lady Janes and Joans repair,
And from the gallery stand peeping:

Such as in silence of the night

Come (sweep) along some winding entry
(Styack has often seen the sight)

Or at the chapel-door stand sentry;

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In peaked hoods and mantles tarnished,
Sour visages, enough to scare ye,
High dames of honour once, that garnished
The drawing-room of fierce Queen Mary!

The peeress comes. The audience stare,
And doff their hats with due submission:
She curtsies, as she takes her chair,
To all the people of condition.

The bard with many an artful fib
Had in imagination fenced him,
Disproved the arguments of Squib,
And all that Groom could urge against him.

But soon his rhetoric forsook him,
When he the solemn hall had seen;
A sudden fit of ague shook him,
He stood as mute as poor Maclean.

Yet something he was heard to mutter,
"How in the park beneath an old-tree
(Without design to hurt the butter,
Or any malice to the poultry,)

"He once or twice had penned a sonnet;
Yet hoped that he might save his bacon:
Numbers would give their oaths upon it,

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He ne'er was for a conjurer taken."

The ghostly prudes with hagged face

Already had condemned the sinner.

My lady rose and with a grace—
She smiled, and bid him come to dinner.

"Jesu—Maria! Madam Bridget,
Why, what can the Viscountess mean?"
(Cried the square hoods in woeful fidget)
"The times are altered quite and clean!

"Decorum's turned to mere civility;
Her air and all her manners show it.
Commend me to her affability!
Speak to a commoner and poet!"

(Here 500 stanzas are lost.)

And so God save our noble King,
And guard us from long-winded lubbers,
That to eternity would sing,
And keep my lady from her rubbers.