

*Fire*

*by Sarah Peacock*

*Part Three of a Quartet based on Air, Fire, Earth and Water*

Sarah Peacock

The city burns. Amidst the smoking timbers, cries of alarm and cloud of darkness that hangs over everything, we are turning on one another. Old rifts, fanned by the winds of unrest and malice, take hold at the edge of friendships. Before daybreak all will be reduced to ashes.

So this is what hell must be like. There's a howling gale raging through the tenement timbers, a fire storm at its back. I can feel the heat of the pavement through the soles of my bare feet. Only fear, pure animal instinct, drives me on. I follow the others and part of me feels distant, detached, like I'm seeing it all from above. We are all leaving some part of our sanity behind. It amuses me, the way we load ourselves with the trappings of life. There's a woman next to me bent beneath earthenware jugs, blankets, clothes but what she's really leaving behind is parts of herself, the things she can't carry. An old man, his face blackened with smoke, wearing only a blanket, sits in the gutter. He has his head in his hands but I can hear his voice clearly as he laments the end of the world, the coming of armageddon. We shall all be judged.

I carry nothing, caught out as I was in the alehouse. It had been a busy day. Didn't seem that many had been pious enough to abstain from my services after church. Perhaps it's the long hot summer we've had. Everyone's parched. Everyone thirsts for something.

We're all running now. Those with the gold, those without. All I have is the clothes I stand up in. I don't even have my shoes and I feel it now, my feet are blistering in the heat. What do I carry? Some would say guilt or sin, but whatever burden I once bore, its long gone. Maybe this is a chance of redemption.

The woman next to me is talking but she faces away. Maybe she's talking to herself.

Approx 2031 words

Sarah Peacock

“What if we're going the wrong way?”

“What?” I frown at her. She juggles her pots and pans, the blankets and clothes draped over her body. She resembles a bloated clothes horse. Maybe I could knock her out, steal myself a clean set of clothes. I doubt it, too many people around and she's huge. I'd fit twice into her skirts.

“How do we know the fire's not spreading this way. We could be walking straight into it.” Her voice breaks at the end of the sentence. I sigh and look around. We're jammed between two tenements, the jetties leaning together above us, so that with the smoke as well it's hard to see anything. Every now and then I feel the wind come upon us. It's hot, dry and carries drops of fire that sear my exposed skin. I can smell my brows and lashes singeing. I try to turn my face away but it's everywhere.

Coming upon another alley, another part of the city I hardly recognise, I propel myself on. Nothing is like it is on a normal day. It resembles a bad dream. The timbers press closer, the blackened glass in the shop windows reflects faces that are more twisted, more cruel than any I've ever seen before. I feel I walk in a foreign land, there being no friends here. Every man and woman stands only to defend himself or herself and the little property they have. A group has gathered outside one of the shops. This is somewhere I would never afford to come – it sells art, luxury goods. As I near them no one notices me so I join the periphery of the throng, eager to see what they all stare at. It's hard to see above the thickset shoulders of the man in front of me. He wears a butchers apron, bloodstained and grubby. I lean to one side, try to get a glimpse between him and the wiry old man standing next to him.

At the centre of the crowd is a man with dark hair. He is well dressed but is on his

Approx 2031 words

Sarah Peacock

knees in the dirt and ashes. His face is moustached and his eyes are closed. I sense menace in the crowd.

“I saw him do it!” An elderly woman, filthy with ash points at him. Her eyes dance with the glow of the fire storm behind us.

“She speaks the truth! I witnessed it too. He had some flame in his hands..a match, a grenade of some sort.”

The crowd presses inwardly, their excitement and anger apparent in equal measures. It is the only group I have seen gathered in two whole days. Everyone else has been fleeing for Moorfields, one long mass of bodies pushing out of the city. Some have been making for the river but I heard that even that route is now not without its dangers. Something holds them here, something stronger than the fear.

“I am simply an artist.” The man on the ground lifts his head for moment. “I paint pictures. I don't know what you are talking about.” His accent is foreign. French, I think. I've met one or two in my work.

“He lies!” The butcher in front of me steps forward. His great bulk casts a shadow over the French man who is now trying to get to his feet.

“Wait!” I don't think anyone hears me as I move into the circle but as I look around I see the whites of their eyes glaring from soot encrusted faces in my direction. I'm caught half way between challenging their hasty actions and fleeing, letting what will surely happen, happen. The faces must see my hesitance because they take the opportunity to seize upon me.

“What? So the likes of *you* is going to defend him now are you?” The butchers red sweating face comes close to my own, his bulging eyes filled with equal amounts of lust and loathing.

Approx 2031 words

Sarah Peacock

“Get out of here. You should be minding your own business. Let us deal with this.”

The elderly woman wipes a blackened hand across her face. It leaves a trail across her sunken cheeks that is at odds with her brocade dress and cape.

I gather myself, push past the butcher and walk straight up to the man in the centre of the cruel circle. He lifts his head with great effort, one bruised eye regarding me warily.

“You should come with me, find safety.”

He shakes his head. No he will stay. The shop front behind him is his and he will die to defend it. Unlike myself, he can't let go of his past, stand by and watch it burn away. I take one last look at the snarling crowd, understanding. They need someone to blame. They need a reason why.

I make for the river. I'm going against the flow of people now, all heading in the opposite direction but I have no fear. I know where I'm going. Down by the river, I smile at the sight of the shacks. They're all empty now and that feels as if it is as it should be. All the ghosts have gone.

He was clever. He never laid a hand on us. Not in that way, anyway. He beat us but it came to be expected. In the early days I thought I'd loved him. He'd bought trinkets. Cheap rubbish, but I knew no better. And he was an improvement on what I'd had before. I'd almost given up when he'd found me. I'd been nothing a but a scrap of a waif. He'd found me down by the river, behind the tar paper shacks, knee deep in other people's filth, watching the barges coming up and down the river amidst the drunken shouts and spats going on around me. Sometimes there'd be a knife. Someone would get stuck with one and there'd be a trail of

Approx 2031 words

Sarah Peacock

blood mixing with the river mud and shit but then there'd be one less head to worry about.

Before long, someone else would move into the little shack, take what they wanted, turf out what they didn't. I survived because was I too small, too young, too scared. I'd hover in the background like a ghost. And that's where he found me. Lucky he did, really as that was only mere days before the pestilence came. After that, there was shack upon shack going empty, once they'd removed the bodies. I realise now that if he hadn't come when he did I would be one of the bloated stiffs they'd lugged onto cart or barge and buried in a pit outside the walls. I'd be gone and no one would even know. A ghost of a ghost.

I pay someone, handsomely, to get a boat over the river and I sit, crushed between the faceless. No one talks. There's nothing to say anyhow. All heads are down, faces smeared with soot and resignation. I relish in the feeling of my scorched feet dragging in the water as I dangle them over the side of the boat. On the other side of the river I make for an ale house I once knew, in my early days working the city. The landlord was always kind to me.

I take a seat by the open window in a corner where no one notices me and I gaze out upon the scene. London Bridge is aflame. It is one great arch of fire and smoke all the way across, a great fiery rainbow. I wonder what is left of my tenement now and what is left of him, if anything.

After he took me in, I ended up doing favours for him, working the streets. I knew every inch of my part of the city; the winding cobbled alleys, the jettied tenements, the calls of the traders, the illegal foundries and the smell of piss. That was until last night. Last night, with one careless spark, one ember falling where it shouldn't, everything had changed.

The shouts, different from the usual liquor swilled violence, had woken me. I staggered down the narrow stairs of my tenement to find folk running about, distracted

Approx 2031 words

Sarah Peacock

creatures darting up and down the street. There, I smelt the smoke, felt the heat of the fire and at once, I knew what I had to do. It wasn't hard really. He was sleeping, in his cups as usual after spending half the night soaking away my profits.

All it took was the turn of a key.

After that, I stay around for a little while, watching the fire draw closer, feeling the wind carry the heat towards us, the scene in front of me warping like it does on a hot day, as the street emptied and there was me, alone, him inside.

His shouts, angry at first, became more urgent and then all I heard was the screaming, him sounding more animal than human, reminding me of the pigs down by the river when they knew the butcher was coming with his knives.

Through the ale house window, I see sparks fly up, creating their own blazing constellation in the sky above the bridge. Half a dozen boats upon the river are illuminated for a brief moment, the last of the refugees. I finish my drink and make for the great dome of the cathedral.

The scaffolding has been burning for a good while it seems and the roof is now catching. I ignore the pain, the heat of the pavement, and watch in awe as the flames eat away at all that history, all those years, wrapped up in stone and timber and I think; this is it, my fall from grace.

Too soon, the place becomes a roaring inferno and rivers of lead run between the cobbles, steaming silvered rain. As the timbers groan and collapse sending great stones careering through the smoky haze, I smile. Let it burn, I think. Let them all go to hell.

Approx 2031 words