**The Defence of Lucknow**

**[Alfred Tennyson](https://www.telelib.com/authors/T/TennysonAlfred/index.html)**

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| **I****BANNER** of England, not for a season, O banner of Britain, hast thouFloated in conquering battle or flapt to the battle-cry!Never with mightier glory than when we had rear’d thee on highFlying at top of the roofs in the ghastly siege of Lucknow—Shot thro’ the staff or the halyard, but ever we raised thee anew,And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.**II.**Frail were the works that defended the hold that we held with our lives—Women and children among us, God help them, our children and wives!Hold it we might—and for fifteen days or for twenty at most.‘Never surrender, I charge you, but every man die at his post!’Voice of the dead whom we loved, our Lawrence the best of the brave:Cold were his brows when we kiss’d him—we laid him that night in his grave.‘Every man die at his post!’ and there hail’d on our houses and hallsDeath from their rifle-bullets, and death from their cannon-balls,Death in our innermost chamber, and death at our slight barricade,Death while we stood with the musket, and death while we stoopt to the spade,Death to the dying, and wounds to the wounded, for often there fell,Striking the hospital wall, crashing thro’ it, their shot and their shell,Death—for their spies were among us, their marksmen were told of our best,So that the brute bullet broke thro’ the brain that could think for the rest;Bullets would sing by our foreheads, and bullets would rain at our feet—Fire from ten thousand at once of the rebels that girdled us round—Death at the glimpse of a finger from over the breadth of a street,Death from the heights of the mosque and the palace, and death in the ground!Mine? yes, a mine! Countermine! down, down! and creep thro’ the hole!Keep the revolver in hand! you can hear him—the murderous mole!Quiet, ah! quiet—wait till the point of the pickaxe be thro’!Click with the pick, coming nearer and nearer again than before—Now let it speak, and you fire, and the dark pioneer is no more;And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew!**III.**Ay, but the foe sprung his mine many times, and it chanced on a daySoon as the blast of that underground thunderclap echo ‘d away,Dark thro’ the smoke and the sulphur like so many fiends in their hell—Cannon-shot, musket-shot, volley on volley, and yell upon yell—Fiercely on all the defences our myriad enemy fell.What have they done? where is it? Out yonder. Guard the Redan!Storm at the Water-gate! storm at the Bailey-gate! storm, and it ranSurging and swaying all round us, as ocean on every sidePlunges and heaves at a bank that is daily devour’d by the tide—So many thousands that if they be bold enough, who shall escape?Kill or be kill’d, live or die, they shall know we are soldiers and menReady! take aim at their leaders—their masses are gapp’d with our grape—Backward they reel like the wave, like the wave flinging forward again,Flying and foil’d at the last by the handful they could not subdue;And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.**IV.**Handful of men as we were, we were English in heart and in limb,Strong with the strength of the race to command, to obey, to endure,Each of us fought as if hope for the garrison hung but on him;Still—could we watch at all points? we were every day fewer and fewer.There was a whisper among us, but only a whisper that past‘Children and wives—if the tigers leap into the fold unawares—Every man die at his post—and the foe may outlive us at last—Better to fall by the hands that they love, than to fall into theirs!’Roar upon roar in a moment two mines by the enemy sprungClove into perilous chasms our walls and our poor palisades.Rifleman, true is your heart, but be sure that your hand be as true!Sharp is the fire of assault, better aimed are your flank fusillades—Twice do we hurl them to earth from the ladders to which they had clung,Twice from the ditch where they shelter we drive them with hand-grenades;And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.**V.**Then on another wild morning another wild earthquake out-toreClean from our lines of defence ten or twelve good paces or more.Rifleman, high on the roof, hidden there from the light of the sun—One has leapt up on the breach, crying out: ‘Follow me, follow me!’—Mark him—he falls! then another, and *him* too, and down goes he.Had they been bold enough then, who can tell but the traitors had won?Boardings and rafters and doors—an embrasure I make way for the gun!Now double-charge it with grape! It is charged and we fire, and they run.Praise to our Indian brothers, and let the dark face have his due!Thanks to the kindly dark faces who fought with us, faithful and few,Fought with the bravest among us, and drove them, and smote them, and slew,That ever upon the topmost roof our banner in India blew.**VI.**Men will forget what we suffer and not what we do. We can fight!But to be soldier all day and be sentinel all thro’ the night—Ever the mine and assault, our sallies, their lying alarms,Bugles and drums in the darkness, and shoutings and soundings to arms,Ever the labour of fifty that had to be done by five,Ever the marvel among us that one should be left alive,Ever the day with its traitorous death from the loopholes around,Ever the night with its coffinless corpse to be laid in the ground,Heat like the mouth of a hell, or a deluge of cataract skies,Stench of old offal decaying, and infinite torment of flies.Thoughts of the breezes of May blowing over an English field,Cholera, scurvy, and fever, the wound that *would* not be heal’d,Lopping away of the limb by the pitiful-pitiless knife,—Torture and trouble in vain,—for it never could save us a life.Valour of delicate women who tended the hospital bed,Horror of women in travail among the dying and dead,Grief for our perishing children, and never a moment for grief,Toil and ineffable weariness, faltering hopes of relief,Havelock baffled, or beaten, or butcher’d for all that we knew—Then day and night, day and night, coming down on the still-shatter’d wallsMillions of musket-bullets, and thousands of cannon-balls—But ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.**VII.**Hark cannonade, fusillade! is it true what was told by the scout,Outram and Havelock breaking their way through the fell mutineers?Surely the pibroch of Europe is ringing again in our ears!All on a sudden the garrison utter a jubilant shout,Havelock’s glorious Highlanders answer with conquering cheers,Sick from the hospital echo them, women and children come out,Blessing the wholesome white faces of Havelock’s good fusileers,Kissing the war-harden’d hand of the Highlander wet with their tears!Dance to the pibroch!—saved! we are saved!—is it you? is it you?Saved by the valour of Havelock, saved by the blessing of Heaven!‘Hold it for fifteen days!’ we have held it for eighty-seven!And ever aloft on the palace roof the old banner of England blew. |