

# Brooklyn Theater Fire

As sung by  
Lester Coffee  
08-20-1946 Harvard, IL

BROOKLYN THEATER FIRE 360 B 8421

In the eve-ning bright stars they were shi-ning, And the  
moon it shone clear on the land. Our ci-ty in peace and in  
qui-et; The ho-ur of mid-night was at hand. Hark, do you hear the cry  
" fire?!" How dismal the bells they do sound. The Brook-lyn thea-ter is  
burn-ing, Its fast burn-ing down to the ground.

## Verse 1.

We never can forget those two orphans.  
Bad luck seemed to stand in their way.  
It seems they were brought to our city,  
The lives of our dear friends to take.

## Verse 2.

The doors they were open at seven.  
The curtains were rolled up at eight.  
And those that had seats, they were happy –  
Outsiders were mad they were late.

## Verse 3.

The play it went on very smoothly  
‘Til sparks from the curtain did fly.  
It was then the women and children,  
“Oh God save our lives” they did cry.

## Verse 4.

Next morning among the black ruins,  
Oh God, what a sight met our eyes.  
The dead they were lying in heaps  
And some could not be recognized.

## Verse 5.

Mothers were weeping and crying  
For sons who were out on that night.  
Oh God, may their souls rest in heaven,  
All those who were innocent and bright.

## Verse 6.

What means this large gathering of people  
Upon such a cold winter day?  
What means this long line of hearses  
That gather in their mournful array?

Verse 7.

It's away to the cemetery of Greenwood  
Where the winds of the cold winter blow.  
It's there where the funeral is going  
The dead and unknown for to lie.

*Transcription and lyrics from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection.*

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## **Critical Commentary**

Transcriptions by Peters, p. 243, and HST.

### **Editor's notes:**

Vance Randolph gives this background about the song: "The Conway Theater, Brooklyn, N.Y., burned Dec. 5, 1876, with a loss of 295 lives. The *Saturday Review of Literature*, Jan. 11, 1930, p. 642, prints a text of 'The Brooklyn Fire' from Ernest Beard of Downing, Wis. Mr. Beard heard it forty years before, in Ohio. The same *Review* (Sept. 14, 1929, p. 131) gives several stanzas of this piece as recalled by Anne Ellis, Albuquerque, N.M., who learned it in a mining camp about 1884" (Randolph 137).

Alternate titles/related songs: "The Two Orphans."

### **Sources:**

Newman, Katharine D. *Never Without a Song: The Years and Songs of Jennie Devlin, 1865-1952*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. "The Two Orphans."

Owens, William A. *Texas Folk Songs*. Musical transcriptions by Jessie Ann Owens. Austin: Texas Folklore Society, 1950. 2d ed. rev. and enl. Dallas: SMU Press, 1976.

Peters, Harry B., ed. *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin: An Illustrated Compendium of Words and Music*. Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977.

Randolph, Vance, collector and editor. *Ozark Folksongs*. Vol. IV. Columbia, Mo.: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1946-50. Text only.

K.G.