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Season Two, Episode One

A Crack of Thunder

By Gabriel Urbina

[A public house, at night. Nearly empty. A fire roars and crackles nearby. Outside, distant rain pours.]

Leech:

Bad night to be out. How long do you think it will do that?

[There's a pause, as if he is hearing a reply from the listener.]

Oh, come up by the fire you look like a drowned rat sitting in the dark, get yourself dry before you catch your death. That's better innit.

[Pause]

I'm sorry you're...you're going to have to speak up there's not much hearing left in this ear j-just a bit of a ring. One more time.

[Pause]

No, no I'm quite fine. I'm fine I said. I'm dry enough the wine keeps me plenty warm. Huh, me and I, I-I'm a waterman, well I used to be. Brigadier for old Barbons fire office, the Lord keep his soul, wherever it may have wound up.



Bit on in years now, neither of my legs are what they used to be. One's a little worn down, one's a little splintered. Not fast enough for any more. But I did my time they used to call me leech. It's a bit of a joke you see, you know leech like a arrgghh, you know what's it called? A surgeon. Yeah, you know a Physica, a medicine man, nah, I'm not actual leech. Only time I ever got near one of those was the day I got this,

[There's a knock on a hollow wooden object.]

I must have been 14, thereabouts. Piece of timber fell, crushed my leg.

By the time they got me out from under it I could barely see straight. But I did see the man my father found. I saw the way he looked at me, and at the black that's creeping up my leg and he just went, "leg's gonna have to come off, the blood poison has already taken hold w-we couldn't let it spread." He could save the leg or you could save me, that's what he said. My mother howled, my father wept as they held me down but the leg came off. The man didn't even blink. His hands were steady as he cut and closed the wound with fire.

And before he left, he said to me, "Get strong again boy, and take heart if it were 200 years ago, the corruption would have had you or it would have been entirely between you and the Lord our God, but we live in a new age and a man can choose a measure of how he lives and how he dies. So get strong again and stand tall and proud." So I got strong again and I stood tall and proud. Even if I had to stand on a wooden leg.

It wasn't too bad except for the,--

[There's a loud crash of thunder]

It's s like it's right on top of us.



[A chair is pushed back, and leech gets on his feet. he walks, slowly, to a window. His steps are accompanied by a dull wooden scraping sound. A curtain rustles as Leech parts it. And then reverse. We hear him walk back to the chair - step, scrape, step, scrape, step, scrape - and sit back down.]

Can't have been far, no, no, no. We'd be able to smell it by now. Don't worry about that. No, I'd know. I was just saying before I was a waterman, and that was, huh? Well, yes and no. See, that's where most of us were recruited from, ferrymen taking people back and forth across the Thames. They figured if we could do that, we'd know how to move water better than anyone around the city. But that wasn't what we did.

You weren't there for the fire were you? The Great Fire of London back in 1666. The fire. I was there. I saw half the damn city burn. You see, a funny thing happens when a whole world goes' upside down. There's always someone who looks at a charred remains and gets a funny little light in their eyes and their mind goes, "See there's a real opportunity here for someone with a bit of vision". And in a matter of days he's visited everyone who's lost their home or all their business or their church and he's gone. "Tell you what, old boy I will give you a shilling or five every month, and then if your house ever burns down again, I'll buy you a new one with the cash from the quay hey".

Course then he turns around, marches down to the docks finds himself a couple of the water boys and goes, "Oy oy you revolting lot, might of you miserable wretches would like to make a shiny penny in exchange for a whole mess of trouble?" So he gives us one of those new water wrenches from Austria. Has a stop in our fires before anyone's houses burn down. So they pay him shillings, he pays us pennies and he rakes in the pounds. It's brilliant.

It wasn't bad work mind you, and everyone found a thing here that was best suited for them. With this damn leg of mine I wasn't much good at pumping the engine or hauling the powder. But I could think I could see what needed to be done.



No, you heard me right. I did say gunpowder. No, we used it when stopping fires. Gunpowder was the reason only half of London burned down in 66. Think of it this way. Imagine is three houses. One day the house on the right starts to go up in smoke. What do you do? Do you grab the bucket or the water engine or a shovel and the pickaxe? Or do you fill up the middle house with black powder and set the trail ablaze. Now you're sure if you use the powder, you do nothing to stop the fire in the first house. But you make sure the house on the left can't catch on fire and neither can the three other houses it stands next to and neither could any other high buildings those houses stand next to.

Of course, we used gunpowder, nothing holds a fire quite like fire. A flame can't burn what's already gone. It's quite a thing to see. One moment, a building's there. Years of work for carpenters and joiners and bricklayers. I mean, another is a flash like a bolt of lightning and a crack of thunder and a hole where the house used to be. But it's a thunderbolt you hurled. And as you watch a flames dance, some small part of you feels like you're taller than any man that's ever walked the halls of--But it's just a moment and a moment later, the crack of thunder passes and it's gone.

There are a couple of different companies back then. You had a fire office working for the insurance office while the this and that brigade worked for the right honorable company whosoever and so on. But in those days there was only one house that all the brigades answered to. No one said no to King Billy. It's a William the Third of England to you. Billy of Orange, he had a most glorious revolution.

What's that? Yeah, the palace caught on fire, course it did. Four times in the last 50 years before it all came down. Born low or high. All men got to meet their maker someday. Well, same as that whether you live in the lowest hovel or the highest tower, you, you set a torch to it. Sooner or later everything burns, everything burns.



You ever been up Whitehall way? What little's left of it. Almost 200 houses there was there once, 1500 rooms. They said the palace had more chambers than even the halls of the Vatican. They said it was grander than any of the palaces on the continent. On a clear autumn's day you stood in St James's Park you could see it all before you, stretching from Northumberland all the way down to Downing and on and on and on. House after house, acre after acre. You look up and find the grand arch of the kings gate staring down at you like a mountain peak. And below it, a palace with buildings of every size and shape. A shining city on the Thames all carved of white stone, Whitehall-- all gone now.

Nothing left on the ground but a banqueting house. There's so much rubbish and ash, 15 hours is all it took. 15 hours of violence and fury. How'd it start? Same way it always starts. It was a fourth of January. The year's end festivities have only just finishing. It snowed that day. I remember it snowing. I remember most everything from that day. They say it was a girl, one of the maids. The one to start the fire that burned down Whitehall Palace, some slip of a thing, working for Colonel this or the Earl of that. She was told to wash and dry some linen. I mean they had to have the linen, they absolutely needed the bloody linen. And so she hung it over a brazier. Threw enough charcoal in with to run a forge for a fortnight. Set the damn thing ablaze.

[Fire crackles and burns]

And then it happened, just a moment that's all it takes. She looked away for a breath, and in that breath, the linens caught, and from the linens the hangings. And then the wainscots, then the beds, and then it was chaos.

The smoke probably took her breath. She was one of the first to go.

[The flames crackle and rise and the sound of chaos and people starts]



We were summoned to the palace grounds. We were all summoned. Men from seven different parishes from all over. Masons, bricklayers, joiners, everyone. We were all watermen that night, but by the time I got there, the fire had spread from the Earl of Portland's house and started its great, terrible journey. And this was a flame that burnt like a thing possessed, like the very ghost of King James was blowing it onwards from hell itself. All it took was a glance, and I knew, this fire would only be stopped by fire, if it'll be stopped at all. The leg had to come off. I turned to the men, "powder," I shouted. "Much of it as you can carry into the main hall. Now".

One of them, a carpenter from the palace, looked to me like I've taken leave of my senses, and he said, "But that's the Kings Hall, you're going to blow it to smithereens." "Oh use your goddamn head. The flames are spreading quickly along the south houses. The hall will give it fire and kindling and a bridge to the Western reaches."

At that moment, one of the houses along the gallery collapsed. Its near wall going down and reveal a skeleton of burning timber. On the far side, blackened shadow that had once been a guard fell to the ground. I told them to get the powder in the great hall.

No one argued after that.

It took us about a half an hour to get the powder in place. By the time the first two barrels were set the fire was clawing at the hall. And through the walls we can hear as a world, screamed and crashed and burned. I was out of the hall almost before the last barrel was set. My hands shaking as I set the trail all the way back to the cold night air.

I prayed that the wind would blow with us and carry any stray spark away from the line of powder, until all the men could get away from the hall.



"Get away. Get clear, the hall's about to come down. Powder, powder." I saw the last of the men in my brigade leap into the dirt. Landing in a pile, their hands clasped over their eyes and ears. Someone put a torch in my hand and I brought the flame down at the end of the powder trail and lit the fuse. You ever see a trail of black powder lit? It burns fast and bright, leaving a soot on the ground as he races home. And oh, this one raced.

By the time I look back, the spark was half way to the hall. And that's when I saw him. I didn't know who he was, some poor gardener they told me later. He'd been tending to the shrubbery in the privy garden when the flames started. Even though the help was needed in the great hall. "No, stop, stop, get away from it." He didn't hear me over that din. And so I took off into a run, or as much of one as my leg would let me towards a hall. And every step I shouted at the top of my lungs, "Get away from it. Don't go into the great hall. Don't go into the hall. It's going to blow. We set powder. It's going up."

[There's a huge explosion and a high-pitched ringing, Leech breathes heavily]
For a moment, everything around me was darkness.

My vision came back first, as I slowly floated back to consciousness. I saw men grasping my arms dragging me away from the site. Their lips moving, muted cries of concern. It took another moment for the ringing in my ears to start to die down and another of my head to stop spinning. Took much longer for me I noticed I was covered from head to toe in dust and soot and blood. I forced myself to look back towards the hall where the entrance had been, a huge slab of broken stone remained.

There was just enough of a charred blackened husk visible underneath it for me to recognize it as the gardener's hand. "It would have been quick," someone whispered, "Probably didn't have time to realize what was happening." They always said that, they always say that. But when my eyes rose up, what I saw made my heart stop. The flame had found it's way into the hall before we'd ignited the powder, and the force of the blast cast the burning wreckage to the



four winds. Fresh flames were breaking out from the chapel. And in from the vestry, and in from the pantry. We sought to starve the fire, instead, we'd given it a banquet.

We worked all through the night to try to save Whitehall. Men ran buckets, and pumped the water engines until their hands blistered and cracked, and they dropped from exhaustion, the sweat freezing on their brow, and we brought more gunpowder. We blew up 19 more buildings that night. We set black powder at the Lords apartments along the docks, and pantries on the west side of the court, and the vain room and Lord Montague's lodgings, and the more and more and more of the palace. Each time we prayed that we'd finally fanned it. The choke point where we could starve out the fire. Every time our own fires just fed the beast.

Every step we were too late or too few, or without enough powder. Fully obliterate the buildings, cut off the flames. There was simply too much of Whitehall. Too many apartments, too many towers, too many grand lodgings for mere men to quell this unleashed fury of nature. They said there was no greater or grander Palace in all of Europe. On that night, there was no bigger kindling pile, then Whitehall. And then suddenly, I noticed something. The ranks of those of us that were on the palace grounds suddenly swelled.

There were five no, ten no, twenty times the men, there had been. Men and women suddenly flew at the palace ready to serve King and Country. And as they poured in the burning buildings to fight the flames, I thought we might have a fighting chance. I let myself feel that way for just a moment. And then I saw, not what I wanted to see, what was really happening. Men and women were pouring in residences of Whitehall but when they emerged, they weren't carrying innocents to safety. Instead, they hauled paintings, strong boxes, chairs, linens, coins, anything of value the fire hadn't already blackened and charred. The looters became a tide we have to fight against, pushing back our efforts. Least we demolish a building before they had a chance to pick it clean. And so that night, that palace was ravaged twice over, first by the vultures and the hyenas of London, and then by the fire itself.



And by the wee hours of the morning, this clever fire spread and ran without opposition. The uncontested new master of Whitehall. It ran up and down royal stairs, eating everything in it's path. It feasted on the king's bed chambers. All of His Majesty's personal effects. In one of the halls, sculptures and suits of armor, lay burning blackened and sooted by the flames till the roof crashed down around it. And it all went from art to rubble, to ash to nothing. And on and on, until one by one, the choruses of madness were silenced by the arrival of the dawn. The looters had their appetite and their greed sated. The water engines spluttered. The men behind their operations spent and burned.

The last of the burning building teetered and fell, not so much sideways as inwards, as if quietly succumbing in the fiery plague that had run its course.

Finally, even a gunpowder was held back as we realized that the fire and finally starved itself where we have failed to. And so it was that we greeted the dawn covered in soot, and with a crack of thunder still ringing in our ears. And of Whitehall palace there was nothing left to see but rubble and smoke.

[The sounds of the public house return. The rain falls outside and the fire from the fireplace crackles softly]

That was 1698, 10 years next January. And since then, nothing has come of the ruins of Whitehall. King Billy swore on all of his remaining worldlies that he'd restored the palace to its former glory, but there's still nothing there. The teetering walls and an old bricked off Banquet hall. Soon there won't be many of us who remember Whitehall. Still a few of us though, for a while longer.

Nah, no I don't go that way much these days, not much to be gained from places like that. And I can think of at least one ghost who might hold me personally responsible. But sometimes when I look into a fire that burns hot and bright, I could almost see it, the shining palace. And just for a moment it's complete again. And a king's gate stands tall and proud. And then I hear that



distant thunder, and the moment passes. And I remember all men die sooner or later and give it enough time. Everything burns. Everything burns.

