

Lower Lights

By Philip Bliss, Chicago, ca 1870. Inspired by a sermon of pastor D.L. Moody concerning a shipwreck on a dark and stormy night. A ship was approaching the harbour of Cleveland, with a pilot on board. The captain, noticing only one light as they drew near - that from the lighthouse - asked the pilot if he was quite sure that it was Cleveland harbour, as other lights should have been burning at the harbour mouth. The pilot replied that he was quite sure, whereupon the captain enquired:

“Where are the lower lights?” “Gone out, sir,” replied the pilot.

The pilot steered the vessel upon her course toward safety, but in the darkness he missed the channel, the ship struck rocks, and in the stormy waters many lives were lost.

Then Moody made his appeal to his congregation: “Brothers, the Master will take care of the great lighthouse! Let us keep the lower lights burning!”

Among Moody’s hearers that evening was Mr. Philip P. Bliss, a well-known hymn writer, and the striking story at once suggested to him one of his most popular hymns.

Most famously performed by Johnny Cash. Roud 16709.

Verse four added to the original by Roger Turner of Kings Pond Shantymen.

Brightly beams our Father’s mercy
From His lighthouse evermore
But to us He gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore

Chorus

*Let the lower lights be burning
Send a gleam across the wave
Some poor failing, struggling, sailor
You may rescue, you may save*

Dark the night of sin has settled
Loud the angry billows roar
Eager eyes are watching longing
For the lights along the shore

Trim your feeble lamp my brother
Some poor sailor tempest-tossed
Trying now to make the harbour
In the darkness may be lost

Safely now within the harbour
Sheltered from the storms of life
Praying that our fellow sailors
Will be guided by the light

Chorus X2