



DEATH: A POETICAL ESSAY.

BY DR. PORTERUS.

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**F**R I E N D to the wretch, whom every friend forsakes,  
 I woo thee, Death ! In Fancy's fairy paths  
 Let the gay Songster rove, and gently trill  
 The strain of empty joy.—Life and its joys  
 I leave to those that prize them.—At this hour,  
 This solemn hour, when Silence rules the world,  
 And wearied Nature makes a general pause !  
 Wrapt in Night's sable robe, through cloysters drear  
 And charnels pale, tenanted by a throng  
 Of meagre phantoms shooting crosfs my path  
 With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale  
 Of Death.—Deep in a murky cave's recess  
 Lav'd by Oblivion's listless stream, and fenc'd  
 By shelving rocks and intermingled horrors  
 Of yew' and cypres' shade from all intrusion  
 Of busy noontide-beam, the Monarch sits  
 In unsubstantial Majesty enthron'd.  
 At his right hand, nearest himself in place  
 And frightfulness of form, his parent Sin  
 With fatal industry and cruel care

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Busies herself in pointing all his stings,  
 And tipping every shaft with venom drawn  
 From her infernal store : around him rang'd  
 In terrible array and strange diversity  
 Of uncouth shapes, stand his dread Ministers ;  
 Foremost Old Age, his natural ally  
 And firmest friend : next him diseases thick,  
 A motley train ; Fever with cheek of fire ;  
 Consumption wan ; Palsy, half warm with life,  
 And half a clay-cold lump ; joint-torturing Gout,  
 And ever-gnawing Rheum ; Convulsion wild ;  
 Swol'n Dropsy ; panting Asthma ; Apoplex  
 Full-gorg'd.—There too the Pestilence that walks  
 In darkness, and the Sickness that destroys  
 At broad noon-day. These and a thousand more,  
 Horrid to tell, attentive wait ; and, when  
 By Heaven's command Death waves his ebon wand,  
 Sudden rush forth to execute his purpose,  
 And scatter desolation o'er the Earth.

Ill-fated Man, for whom such various forms  
 Of Misery wait, and mark their future prey !  
 Ah ! why, All-Righteous Father, didst thou make  
 This Creature Man ? why wake th' unconscious dust  
 To life and wretchedness ? O better far  
 Still had he slept in uncreated night,  
 If this the Lot of Being !—Was it for this  
 Thy Breath divine kindled within his breast

The vital flame? For this was thy fair image  
 Stamp't on his soul in godlike lineaments?  
 For this dominion given him absolute  
 O'er all thy creatures, only that he might reign  
 Supreme in woe? From the blest source of Good  
 Could Pain and Death proceed? Could such foul Ills  
 Fall from fair Mercy's hands? Far be the thought,  
 The impious thought! God never made a Creature  
 But what was good. He made a living Man:  
 The Man of Death was made by Man himself.  
 Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,  
 Fresh with immortal bloom; No pain he knew,  
 No fear of death, no check to his desires  
 Save one command. That one command (which stood  
 'Twixt him and ruin, the test of his obedience,  
 Urg'd on by wanton curiosity  
 He broke.—There in one moment was undone  
 The fairest of God's works. The same rash hand  
 That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit,  
 Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin  
 And Death and all the family of Pain  
 To prey upon Mankind. Young Nature saw  
 The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.  
 Then fled her new-born lustre, then began  
 Heaven's chearful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd  
 The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds  
 To hide the willing Sun. The Earth convuls'd

With painful throes threw forth a bristly crop  
 Of thorns and briars; and Insect, Bird, and Beast,  
 That wont before with admiration fond  
 To gaze at Man, and fearless croud around him,  
 Now fled before his face, shunning in haste  
 Th' infection of his misery. He alone,  
 Who justly might, th' offended Lord of Man,  
 Turn'd not away his face, he full of pity  
 Forfook not in this uttermost distress  
 His best-lov'd work. That comfort still remain'd,  
 (That best, that greatest comfort in affliction)  
 The countenance of God, and thro' the gloom  
 Shot forth some kindly gleams, to chear and warm  
 Th' offender's sinking soul. Hope sent from Heaven  
 Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar  
 A happier scene of things; the Promis'd Seed  
 Trampling upon the Serpent's humbled crest,  
 Death of his sting disarm'd, and the dank grave  
 Made pervious to the realms of endless day,  
 No more the limit but the gate of life.

Chear'd with the view, Man went to till the ground  
 From whence he rose; sentenc'd indeed to toil  
 As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath  
 So merciful is Heaven) this toil became  
 The solace of his woes, the sweet employ  
 Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard  
 Against disease and Death.—Death tho' denounc'd  
 Was yet a distant Ill, by feeble arm

Of Age, his sole support, led slowly on.  
 Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men  
 Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes ;  
 Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years  
 One solitary ghost went shivering down  
 To his unpeopled shore. In sober state,  
 Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,  
 The venerable Patriarch guileless held  
 The tenor of his way ; Labour prepar'd  
 His simple fare, and Temperance rul'd his board,  
 Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve  
 He sunk to sudden rest ; gentle and pure  
 As breath of evening Zephyr and as sweet  
 Were all his slumbers ; with the Sun he rose,  
 Alert and vigorous as He, to run  
 His defin'd course. Thus nerv'd with Giant Strength  
 He stem'd the tide of time, and stood the shock  
 Of ages rolling harmless o'er his head.  
 At life's meridian point arriv'd, he stood,  
 And looking round saw all the vallies fill'd  
 With nations from his loins ; full-well content  
 To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the Earth,  
 Along the gentle slope of life's decline  
 He bent his gradual way, till full of years  
 He dropt like mellow fruit into his grave.  
 Such in the infancy of time was Man,  
 So calm was life, so impotent was Death.  
 O had he but preserv'd these few remains,

These shatter'd fragments of lost happiness,  
 Snatch'd by the hand of heaven from the sad wreck  
 Of innocence primæval; still had he liv'd  
 Great ev'n in ruin; tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn;  
 Though mortal, yet not every where beset  
 With Death in every shape! But He, impatient  
 To be compleatly wretched, hastes to fill up  
 The measure of his woes. 'Twas Man himself  
 Brought Death into the world, And Man himself  
 Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace,  
 And multiplied destruction on mankind.

First Envy, Eldest-Born of Hell, embru'd  
 Her hands in blood, and taught the Sons of Men  
 To make a Death which Nature never made,  
 And God abhorr'd, with violence rude to break  
 The thread of life ere half its length was run,  
 And rob a wretched brother of his being.  
 With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd  
 The execrable deed. 'Twas not enough  
 By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,  
 Puny impiety! whole kingdoms fell  
 To fate the lust of power; more horrid still,  
 The foulest stain and scandal of our nature  
 Became its boast.—One Murder made a Villain,  
 Millions a Hero.—Princes were privileg'd  
 To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.  
 Ah! why will Kings forget that they are Men?  
 And Men that they are brethren? Why delight

In human sacrifice ? Why burst the ties  
 Of Nature, that should knit their souls together  
 In one soft bond of amity and love ?  
 Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on  
 Inhumanly ingenious to find out  
 New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,  
 Artificers of Death ! Still Monarchs dream  
 Of universal Empire growing up  
 From universal ruin.—Blast the design,  
 Great God of Hosts, nor let thy creatures fall  
 Unpitied victims at Ambition's shrine !

Yet say, should Tyrants learn at last to feel,  
 And the loud din of battle cease to roar ;  
 Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend  
 Her olive branch, and give the world repose,  
 Would Death be foil'd ? Would health, and strength, and  
 youth

Defy his power ? Has he no arts in store,  
 No other shafts save those of war ?—Alas !  
 Ev'n in the smile of Peace, that smile which sheds  
 A heavenly sunshine o'er the soul, there basks  
 That serpent Luxury : War its thousands slays,  
 Peace its ten thousands : In th' embattled plain  
 Though Death exults, and claps his raven wings,  
 Yet reigns he not ev'n there so absolute,  
 So mercilefs, as in yon frantic scenes  
 Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,  
 Where, in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd,  
 Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawless Love,

He snares the simple youth, who nought suspecting  
Means to be blest—But finds himself undone.

Down the smooth stream of life the Stripling darts  
Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky,  
Hope swells his sails, and Fancy steers his course;  
Safe glides his little bark along the shore  
Where Virtue takes her stand; but if too far  
He launches forth beyond Discretion's mark,  
Sudden the tempest scowls, the surges roar,  
Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep,  
O sad but sure mischance! O happier far  
To lie like gallant Howe midst Indian wilds  
A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands  
In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice  
To Freedom's holy cause; than so to fall  
Torn immature from life's meridian joys,  
A prey to Vice, Intemperance, and Disease,

Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,  
Ye Sons of Pleasure, by th' Almighty stricken,  
Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)  
To lift against yourselves the murderous steel,  
To wrest from God's own hand the sword of Justice,  
And be your own avengers.—Hold, rash Man,  
Though with anticipating speed thou'lt rang'd  
Through every region of delight, nor left  
One joy to gild the evening of thy days,  
Though life seem one uncomfortable void,  
Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair,



Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe,  
 Compar'd with thy hereafter. Think, O think,  
 And ere thou plunge into the vast abyfs,  
 Pause on the verge awhile, look down and see  
 Thy future mansion.—Why that start of horror?  
 From thy slack hand why drops th' uplifted steel?  
 Didst thou not think such vengeance must await  
 The wretch, that with his crimes all fresh about him  
 Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,  
 Into his Maker's presence, throwing back  
 With insolent disdain his choicest gift?

Live then, while Heaven in pity lends thee life,  
 And think it all too short to wash away  
 By penitential tears and deep contrition  
 The scarlet of thy crimes. So shalt thou find  
 Rest to thy soul, so unappall'd shalt meet  
 Death when he comes, not wantonly invite  
 His lingering stroke. Be it thy sole concern  
 With innocence to live, with patience wait  
 Th' appointed hour; too soon that hour will come,  
 Tho' Nature run her course; But Nature's God,  
 If need require, by thousand various ways,  
 Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,  
 And quench the lamp of life.—O when he comes,  
 Rous'd by the cry of wickedness extreme  
 To Heaven ascending from some guilty land  
 Now ripe for vengeance; when he comes array'd  
 In all the terrors of Almighty wrath;  
 Forth from his bosom plucks his lingering Arm,

And

And on the miscreants pours destruction down !  
 Who can abide his coming ? Who can bear  
 His whole displeasure ? In no common form  
 Death then appears, but starting into Size  
 Enormous, measures with gigantic stride  
 Th' astonish'd Earth, and from his looks throws round  
 Unutterable horror and dismay.  
 All Nature lends her aid. Each Element  
 Arms in his cause. Ope fly the doors of Heaven,  
 The fountains of the deep their barriers break,  
 Above, below, the rival torrents pour,  
 And drown Creation, or in floods of fire  
 Descends a livid cataract, and consumes  
 An impious race.—Sometimes when all seems peace,  
 Wakes the grim whirlwind, and with rude embrace  
 Sweeps nations to their grave, or in the deep  
 Whelms the proud wooden world ; full many a youth  
 Floats on his watery bier, or lies unwept  
 On some sad desert shore !—At dead of night  
 In fallen silence stalks forth Pestilence :  
 Contagion close behind taints all her steps  
 With poisonous dew ; no smiting Hand is seen,  
 No sound is heard ; but soon her secret path  
 Is mark'd with desolation ; heaps on heaps  
 Promiscuous drop : No friend, no refuge near ;  
 All, all, is false and treacherous around,  
 All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is Death.  
 But ah ! what means that ruinous roar ? why fail  
 These tottering feet ?—Earth to its centre feels

The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch  
 Through all its pillars, and in every pore,  
 Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave  
 Precipitating domes, and towns, and towers,  
 The work of ages. Crush'd beneath the weight  
 Of general devastation, millions find  
 One common grave; not ev'n a widow left  
 To wail her sons: the house, that should protect,  
 Entombs its master, and the faithless plain,  
 If there he flies for help, with sudden yawn  
 Starts from beneath him.—Shield me, gracious Heaven!  
 O snatch me from destruction! If this Globe,  
 This solid Globe, which thine own hand hath made  
 So firm and sure, if this my steps betray;  
 If my own mother Earth from whence I sprung  
 Rise up with rage unnatural to devour  
 Her wretched offspring, whither shall I fly?  
 Where look for succour? Where, but up to thee,  
 Almighty Father? Save, O save thy suppliant  
 From horrors such as these!—At thy good time  
 Let Death approach; I reckon not—let him but come  
 In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,  
 Too much for Man to bear. O rather lend  
 Thy kindly aid to mitigate his stroke,  
 And at that hour when all aghast I stand,  
 (A trembling Candidate for thy compassion,)  
 On this World's brink, and look into the next;  
 When my soul starting from the dark unknown  
 Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings

To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd  
From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,  
And all the lovely relatives of life,  
Then shed thy comforts o'er me; then put on  
The gentlest of thy looks. Let no dark Crimes  
In all their hideous forms then starting up  
Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,  
And stab my bleeding heart with two edg'd-torture,  
Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe.  
Far be the ghastly crew! and in their stead,  
Let chearful Memory from her purest cells  
Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair  
Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back  
With tenfold usury the pious care,  
And pouring o'er my wounds the heavenly balm  
Of conscious innocence.—But chiefly, Thou,  
Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from Heaven  
To bleed for Man, to teach him how to live,  
And, oh! still harder Lesson! how to die,  
Disdain not Thou to smooth the restless bed  
Of Sickness and of Pain.—Forgive the tear  
That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,  
Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,  
Till my rapt Soul anticipating Heaven  
Bursts from the thraldom of incumbering clay,  
And on the wing of Extasy upborn  
Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.