DEATH: A POETICAL ESSAY.

BY DR. PORTFEUS.

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FRIEND 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 cross 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 sanc'd
By shelving rocks and intermingled horrors
Of yew' and cypress' 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
Vol. III.
Buries herself in pointing all his flings,
And tipping every shaft with venom drawn
Over the drearier florid round him rang'd
In terrible array and strange diversity.
Of uncouth shapes, with terribles drawn,
Foremost Old Age, his natural ally,
And every sinew, with his dreads thickest
A molly train; with check of fire,
Consumption was; Palsy, half warm with life,
And half a clay-hold lump; joint-torturing Gout,
And ever-grazing Rheum; Convulsion wild;
Swollen Damp; panting Atheria; Apoplex
Full-gorg'd—there too the Peltigere that walks
In darkness, and the Sicknel that destroys
At broad noon-day. There and a thousand more,
Horrid to tell, attendent wait; and when
Sudden run forth to execute his purpose,
Ill-fated Man, for whom such various forms
Of Miliary wait, and mark their future prey!

Ah! why, All-Righteous Father, didst thou make
This Creature Man? why wake thine unconscious soul
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 bled within his breath.
The vital flame? For this was thy fair image
Stampt 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 soul Ills
Fall from fair Mercy's hands? Fair be the thought;

The impious thought! God never made a Creature
But what wasgood. 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 cheerful 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

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With
With painful thorns, o'er which a bright crop
Of thorns and briars; and Incest, Diet, and Beast.
That went before, with admiration fond.
To gaze at Man, and feasts crowd around him,
Now fled before his face, flaming in haste.
Th' infection of his misery. He alone,
Who furtively might, th' offended Lord of Man,
Turn'd not away his face, full of pity.
Forbode not in this uttermost dishabits
That comfort full remain'd,
His bed-love's work. That comfort full remain'd,
That best, that greatest comfort in affliction.
The countenance of God, and the gloom
Shot forth some kindly gleams, to cheer and warm
The offender's sinking soul. Hope went from Heaven
Uprais'd his drooping head, and hope'd afar.
A happier scheme of things; the Promis'd Seed
Trampling upon the Serpent's humbled crest,
Made pensive to the realms of endless day,
No more the limit but the gate of life.
Cheer'd with the view, Man went to till the ground
From whence he rose; scented indeed to toil.
As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath
So merciful is Heaven) this toil became
The toil of Men, the sweet employ
Of many a virtue, the sweet employ.
Against disease and Death. — Death's denoued
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;
Scarcely 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 destin'd course. Thus nerv'd with Giant Strength
He stem'd the tide of time, and flood 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 fragments of lost happiness,
Snatched by the hand of heaven from the sad wreck
Of innocence primal; till had he lived
Great even in ruin; tho' fell, yet not forlorn;
Though mortal, yet not everywhere belott;
To be completely wretched, halfe to fill up
The measure of his woes. 'Twas Man himself
Brought Death into the world, And Man himself
Gave keenest to his darts, quickened his pace,
And multiplied destruction on mankind.
First Envy, eldest-born of Hell, embrued
Her hand in blood, and taught the Sons of Men
To make a Death which Nature never made,
And God abhor'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's faw, and soon imprvd
The execrable deed. 'Twas not enough
By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,
Puny impety! whole kingdoms fell,
To taste the luft 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 privileged
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
In human sacrifice? Why burst the ties of Nature, that should knit their souls together?

Yet till they breathe destruction, still go on
Inhumanly ingenious to find out New pains for life, new terrors for the grave.

Yet say, should tyrants learn at last to feel,
And the loud din of battle cease to roar;
Then the world repose, and give the world repose.

Defy his power? Has he no arts in store?
No other shafts have those of war?

Ev'n in the smile of Peace, that smiles which feeds
Her olive branch, and gives the world repose.

Would Death be foiled? Would health, and strength,

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Would Death be foiled? Would health, and strength,
He snare the simple youth, who thought 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 corpse, cut off by savage hands
In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice
To freedom's holy cause; than to 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'rt 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,
Compared with thy hereafter. Think, O think,
And ere thou plunge into the void abyss,
Paul in the verge awhile, look down and see
Thy future mansion—Why that vault of horror?
Didst thou not think such vengeance must await
The wretch, that with his crimes all fiendish about him
Rushed irreverent, unprepared, uncalled,
Into his Maker’s presence, throwing back
With infant’s distress, his chosen 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 scars of thy crimes. So shalt thou find
Death when he comes, not wily to invite
His lingering stroke, Be it thy sole concern
With innocence to live, with patience wait
Tho’ appointed hour too soon that hour will come,
Ripe for all the terrors, and all the pains
Is the cry of wretchedness, extreme
Now ripe for vengeance; when he comes array’d
Forth from his bosom plucks his lingering Arm,
And quench the lamp of life—O when he comes,
And on the micreants pours destruction down!

Who can abide his coming? Who can bear
His whole displeasure? In no common form
Death then appears, but darting into Size
Enormous, measures with gigantic frise
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,
Defends a livid cataract, and confuses
anguish nations to their grave, or in the deep
Sweeps the proud wooden world; full many a youth
Floats on his watery bier, or lies unwept.

Waves the grim whirlwind, and with rude embrace
On some sad desert shore!—At dead of night
In fallen silence walks forth Petilence:
Contagion close behind taints all her steps
With poisonous dew; no limiting Hand is seen,
No sound is heard; but soon her secret path
Is marked with defoliation; heaps on heaps
Promiscuous drop: No friend, no refuge near,
All that they touch, or taffe, or breathe, is Death.
But ah! what means that ruinous roar? why full

Thee 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. Cruel! 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 faulchets plain
Starts from beneath him—Shield me, gracious Heaven!
O snatch me from destruction! If this Globe,
This fold Globe, which thine own hand hath made
So firm and fair, if this my feet betray;
O Father, if my own Earth from whence I sprang
Rise up with rage unnatural to devour
Her wretched offspring, which my trusty hand
From horrors such as these!—At thy good time
Let Death approach; I reck 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,
On this World's brink, and look into the next;
When my foul flitting from the dark unknown
Calls back a withful look, and fondly clings.
To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd
From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,
Then fled thy comforts o'er me: then put on
The gentl'd of thy looks. Let no dark Crimes
In all their hideous forms then startling up
Plant themselves round my couch, in grim array,
And fab my bleeding heart with two edg'd torture,
Sence of past guilt, and dread of future woe.
Far be the ghastly crew! and in their head,
Let cheerful Memory from her purlie cells
Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair
Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back
With tenfold宁 the pious care,
And pouring o'er my wounds the heavenly balm
Of conscious innocence.—But chiefly, Thou
To bleed for Man, to teach him how to live,
And, oh! I will hinder Kedon! how to die.
Difain not Thou to smooth the relid's bed
Of Sick'ness and of Pain. — Forgive the tear
Of weakling Nature drops, calm all her fears,
Wake all her hope, and animate her faith,
Till my rapt Soul anticipating Heaven
Bursts from the thrall'd of incumber clay,
And on the wing of Elysian Life,
Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.