

POETICAL ESSAYS,

For AUGUST 1779.

The HOUSE of NIGHT; Or, Six Hours Lodging with Death.

A V I S I O N.

*Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
Atque metus omnes et inexorabile Fatum
Subjecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari.*

VIRG. Georg. II. v. 490.

I.

LET others draw from smiling skies their theme,
And tell of climes that boast eternal light;
I draw a deeper scene replete with gloom;
I sing the horrors of the house of night.

2.

Stranger believe the truth experience tells;
Poetic dreams are of a finer cast
Than those which o'er the sober brain diffus'd,
Are but a repetition of some action past.

3.

By some sad means the mind cannot recal;
Lonely I rov'd at midnight o'er a plain
Where Chesapeake's deep rivers upward flow
Far to their springs, or seek the sea again.

4.

Though then the woods, in fairest vernal bloom,
Flourish'd, yet nought of this could fancy see;
No wild pinks blest'd the meads, no green the fields,
And naked seem'd to stand each childless tree.

5.

Dark was the sky, and not a friendly star
Shone from the zenith or horizon clear:
Mist sat upon the woods, and darkness rode,
In her black chariot, with a wild career.

6.

And from the woods the late resounding note
Issued of the loquacious Whip-poor-will:
Hoarse roaring wolves, and nightly roving bears,
Clamour'd from far-off cliffs invisible.

7. Fierce

7.

Fierce from the loudly sounding Chesapeake
I heard the winds the dashing waves assail,
And saw from far, by picturing fancy form'd,
The black ship travelling thro' the noisy gale.

8.

When to my view a pile of buildings stood,
And near, a garden of autumnal hue,
Its lately pleasing flowers all drooping stood
Amidst high weeds that in rank plenty grew.

9.

No pleasant fruit or blossom gaily smil'd ;
Nought but unhappy plants and trees were seen ;
The yew, the willow, and the church-yard elm,
The cypress with its melancholy green.

10.

Peace to those buildings ; when at once I heard
The voice of men in a remoter dome :
Much did they talk of death, and much of life ;
Of coffins, shrouds, and horrors of a tomb.

11.

Mean time from a superior chamber came
Confused murmurs, scarce distinguish'd sounds ;
And as I nearer drew disputes arose
Of surgery, and remedies for wounds.

12.

Long were their feuds, for they design'd to talk
Of anchylosis and the shoulder-blade ;
Os femoris, trochanters, and what'er
Has been discuss'd by § Cheselden and § Mead.

13.

And often, each to prove his notion true,
Broughts proofs from Galen or Hippocrates.
But fancy led me hence and left them so,
Firm at their points of hardy no and yes.

14.

Then up three winding stairs my feet were brought
To a high chamber hung with mourning sad ;
The unsnuff'd candles glar'd with visage dim ;
'Midst grief in extacy of woe run mad.

15.

A wide leaf'd table stood on either side,
Well fraught with phials, half their liquids spent ;
And from a bed behind a curtain veil,
I heard a hollow voice of loud lament.

§ § *Two famous Anatomists.*

16. Turn-

16.

Turning to view from whence the murmur came,
My frighted eyes a horrid form survey'd !
Death, dreary death, upon the gloomy couch,
With flesh-less limbs in rueful form was laid.

17.

High o'er his head flew jealousies and cares :
Ghosts, imps, and half the black Tartarian crew,
Arch-Angels damn'd, nor was their prince remote,
Borne on the vaporous wings of Stygian dew.

18.

Sad was his aspect, if we so can call,
That aspect where but skin and bones were seen,
And eyes sunk in their sockets deep and low,
And teeth that only shew'd themselves to grin.

19.

Rest was his scull of hair, and no fresh bloom
Of chearful mirth sat on his visage hoar ;
Sometimes he rais'd his head while deep-drawn groans
Were mix'd with words that did his fate deplore.

20.

Then at my hand I saw a comely youth,
Of port majestic, who began to tell
That this was Death, upon his dying bed,
Sullen, morose, and peevish to be well.

21.

“ Fixt is his doom : the miscreant reigns no more
The monarch of the dying or the dead ;
This night concludes his melancholy reign :
Pour out, ye heavens, your vengeance on his head.”

22.

But now the man of hell towards me turn'd,
And straight with frightful tone began to speak :
Long held he sage discourse, but I forbore
To answer, and much less his news to seek.

23.

He talk'd of tombstones and of monuments,
Of equinoctial climes and India shores :
He talk'd of stars that shed their influence,
Fevers and plagues, with all their sickly stores.

24.

He mention'd too the guiltful calenture
Tempting the sailor on the placid main,
That paints fine groves upon the ocean floor,
Beckoning his footsteps to the faithless scene.

25.

Much spoke he of the myrtle and the yew ;
The summer winds, and of the church-yard hoar ;
Of storms which on the wintry ocean blow,
And dash the well-mann'd galley to the shore.

26.

26.

Of broad-mouth'd cannon and the thunder-bolt ;
Of fevers and contagions, dearth and fire ;
Of poisonous weeds ; but seem'd to sneer at those
Who by the laurel o'er him did aspire.

27.

Then with a hollow voice thus he went on :
“ Arise, make search, and bring, when found, to me
Some cordial potion or some pleasant draught ;
Sweet slumb'rous poppy, or the mild bohea.

28.

But hark, my pitying friend, and if you can
Deceive the grim physician at the door,
Bring half the mountains springs ; ah, hither bring
The cold rock water from the shady bower.

29.

For till this night such thirst did ne'er invade,
A thirst provok'd by heaven's avenging hand ;
Hence bear me, friends, to quaff and quaff again
The cool wave bubbling from the yellow sand.”

30.

But now refresh'd, the phantom rais'd his head,
And writhing, seem'd to aim once more to talk.
Quoth he, “ Since remedies have small avail,
Assist expiring death once more to walk.”

31.

Then slowly rising from his loathsome bed,
On wasted legs the monstrous spectre stood ;
Gap'd wide, and foam'd, and hungry seem'd to ask,
Tho' sick, an endless quantity of food.

32.

Now to the anxious youth his speech he turn'd,
“ Move quick, and bring from yonder black bureau,
The sacred book that may preserve my soul
From long damnation and eternal woe.

33.

And with it bring, for you may find it there,
The works of holy authors dead and gone :
The sacred tome of moving * Drelincourt,
Or what more solemn Sherlock mus'd upon §.”

34.

But he, unmindful of the vain command,
Reason'd with Death, nor were his reasonings few :
“ Quoth he, my lord, what phrenzy moves your brain ;
Pray what, my lord, can Sherlock be to you ?

* *Drelincourt on death.*

§ *Sherlock on death.*

35.

Or all the sage divines that ever wrote,
Grave Drelincourt, or heaven's inspired page;
These point their arrows at your harden'd breast,
And raise new pains that time can ne'er assuage.

36.

Wicked old man, thy age has made thee dote;
If peace, if sacred peace were found for you,
Hell would cry out, and all the damn'd arise,
And more deserving ask for pity too.

37.

Bloody has been thy reign, O man of hell,
Who sympathiz'd with no departing groan;
Cruel thou wast, nor dost thou now deserve
To have "here lies" engrav'd upon thy stone.

38.

He that could build his mansion o'er the tombs,
Depending still on sickness and decay,
Might dwell unmov'd amidst November's glooms,
And laugh the dullest of his shades away.

39.

Even now, to glut thy savage rage, I see
From eastern realms a bloody army rise*.
Else why those lights that tremble in the north;
Why else yon comet blazing thro' the skies?

40.

Rejoice, O fiend, Britannia's tyrant sends
From German plains his myriads to our shore;
The Caledonian with the Albion join'd;
Bring them, ye winds, but waft them back no more!

41.

Why runs thy stream dejected to the main,
O Hudson, Hudson, dreary, dull and slow?
Seek me no more along that mountain stream,
For on his banks is heard the sound of woe.

42.

Sword, famine, thirst, and pining sickness there,
Shall people half the realms this monster owns;
He like the cruel foe, accursed he,
Laughs at our pains, rejoices in our groans.

43.

How will you tremble if you hear your fate,
Out of the dread Apocalypse your doom,
That death and hell must perish in the lake §
Of fire, dispelling half hell's ancient gloom.

* *British.*

§ *Rev. xx. v. 14.*

44.

He heard, and 'round with his black optics gaz'd,
Full of despair, and curs'd, and rav'd, and swore,
" And since this is my doom, said he, call up
Your wood-mechanics * to my chamber door.

45.

Blame not on me the havock to be made,
Proclaim ; even death abhors such woe to see :
I'll quit the world while decently I can,
And leave the business to some deputy §."

46.

Now thus the drooping victim gave me charge,
Pointing from the light window to the west :
" Go three miles o'er the plain and you shall see
A burying-yard of sinners dead unblest.

47.

There, since 'tis dark, I'll plant a quivering light
Just snatch'd from hell, by whose far glimmering beams
Thou shalt behold a tombstone, full eight feet,
Hard by a grave, arrayed with ghosts and dreams.

48.

And on that stone engrave this epitaph,
Since death it seems must die like mortal men :
Yes, on that stone engrave this epitaph,
Tho' all hell's furies snatch the engraving pen.

49.

" Death in this tomb his weary bones hath laid,
Tir'd of his long continued victory :
What glory can there be to vanquish those
Who all beneath his stroke are sure to die ?

50.

Vast and unmatch'd throughout the world my fame
Is borne secure, and rides aloft in state :
No, by the stars, and by the heavens I swear,
Not Alexander's name is half so great.

51.

Six thousand years has sovereign sway been mine ;
None but myself can real glory claim ;
Great regent of the earth I reign'd alone,
And princes trembled when my mandate came.

52.

Traveller, wouldst thou his noblest trophies seek,
Search in no narrow spot obscure for those ;
The sea profound, the surface of the land,
Is moulded with the myriads of his foes."

* *The Undertakers.*

§ *George III.*

53.

Scarce had he spoke, when on the lofty dome
Burst from the skies the fury of a blast;
Round the four eaves so loud and sad it play'd,
As tho' all music were to breathe its last.

54.

Warm was the gale, and such as travellers say
Sport with the sands on Zara's barren waste:
Black was the sky; a mourning carpet spread;
Its azure blotted and its stars o'er cast.

55.

Lights through the air like blazing stars were hurl'd;
Dogs howl'd, heaven mutter'd, and the tempest blew;
The red half moon peep'd from behind a cloud,
As if afraid the fearful scene to view.

56.

The mournful trees that in the garden stood,
Rent to the tempest as it rush'd along;
The elm, the myrtle, and the cypress sad,
More melancholy tun'd its dreary song.

57.

Now from within the howls of Death I heard
Cursing the dismal night that gave him birth;
Damning his ancient sire and mother sin,
Who at the gates of hell accursed brought him forth*.

58.

Of his pale breast with cruel hand he smote,
And tearing from his limbs a winding sheet;
Roar'd like a devil; while the woods around,
As wicked as himself, his words repeat.

59.

Thrice toward the heaven his meagre arms he rear'd;
Invok'd all hell and thunders on his head;
Bade light'nings fly, earth yawn, and tempests roar,
And the sea wrap him in its ouzy bed.

60.

“ My life for one cool draught: O fetch your springs:
Haste, seize the wretch who my request denies.
Tophet receive him to thy lowest pit,
Chain'd 'midst eternal oaths and blasphemies.”

61.

Dim burnt the lamp, and now the phantom death
Gave his last groans in horror and despair.
“ All hell demands me hence,” he said, and threw
The red lamp hissing thro' the midnight air.

* See *Paradise Lost*, book II. v. 780.

62.

Trembling across the plain my course I held,
And found the cœmety in the gloom,
And in the midst a hell-red waving light
Walking in horrid circles round the tomb.

63.

At distance far, approaching to the grave.
By lamps and lanthorns guided thro' the shades,
A fable chariot drove with wild career,
And following close a gloomy cavalcade ;

64.

Whose spectre forms yet chill my soul with dread ;
Each wore a vest by Pluto's consort wove,
Death's kindred all : Death's horses they bestrode,
And gallop'd fiercely as the chariot drove.

65.

Each horrid face a grizly mask conceal'd ;
Their busy eyes shot terror to my soul,
As now and then, by the pale lanthorn's beam,
I saw them for their partel friend condole.

66.

Now deep was plac'd the carcase in the tomb,
To dust and dull oblivion now resign'd ;
Then turn'd the chariot tow'rd the house of night ;
The fable steeds went swifter than the wind :

67.

But as I stoop'd to write the appointed verse,
Swifter than thought the airy scene decay'd ;
Blooming the morn arose, and in the east
Stalk'd gallantly in her sun-beam parade.

68.

Waking I found my weary night a dream ;
Dreams are perhaps forebodings of the soul ;
Learn'd fages tell why all these whims arose,
And from what source such mystic visions roll.

69.

Do they portend approaching death, which tells
I soon must hence my darksome journey go ?
Sweet Cherub Hope ! Dispel the clouded dream
Sweet Cherub Hope, man's guardian god below.

70.

Stranger, who'er thou art who this shalt read,
Say does thy nightly fancy rove like mine ;
Transport thee oe'r wide lands and wider seas
Now underneath the pole and now the burning line ?

71.

Poet, who thus doist rove, say, shall thou fear
New Jordan's stream prefigured by the old ?
It will but waft thee where thy fathers are
The bards with long eternity enroll'd.

72.

It will but waſt thee where thy Homer ſhrouds
His laurell'd head in ſome Elyſian grove,
And on whoſe ſkirts perhaps in future years,
At awful diſtance you and I may rove.

73.

Enough--- when God and nature give the word,
I'll tempt the duſky ſhore and narrow ſea:
Content to die, juſt as it be decreed,
At four icore years, or now at twenty-three.
