

THE DYING NEGRO

ADVERTISEMENT.

The following Poem was occasioned by a fact which had recently happened at the time of its first publication, in 1773. A Negro, belonging to the Captain of a West-India-man, having agreed to marry a white woman, his fellow-servant, in order to effect his purpose, had left his master's house and procured himself to be baptized; but being detected and taken, he was sent on board the Captain's vessel then lying in the river; where, finding no chance of escaping, and preferring death to another voyage to America, he took an opportunity of stabbing himself. As soon as his determination is fixed, he is supposed to write this Epistle to his intended wife.

'Arm'd with thy sad last gift – the pow'r to die!
 Thy shafts, stern Fortune, now I can defy;
 Thy dreadful mercy points at length the shore,
 Where all is peace, and men are slaves no more;
 - This weapon, ev'n in chains, the brave can wield,
 And vanquish'd, quit triumphantly the field:
 - Beneath such wrongs let pallid Christians live,
 Such they can perpetrate, and may forgive.
 Yet while I tread that gulf's tremendous brink,
 Where nature shudders, and where beings sink,
 Ere yet this hand a life of torment close,
 And end by one determin'd stroke my woes,
 Is there a fond regret, which moves my mind
 To pause, and cast a lingering look behind?
 - O my lov'd bride! – for I have call'd thee mine,
 Dearer than life, whom I with life resign,
 For thee ev'n here this faithful heart shall glow,
 A pang shall rend me, and a tear shall flow. –
 How shall I soothe thy grief, since fate denies
 Thy pious duties to my closing eyes?
 I cannot clasp thee in a last embrace,
 Nor gaze in silent anguish on thy face;
 I cannot raise these fetter'd arms for thee,
 To ask that mercy Heav'n denies me;
 Yet let thy tender breast my sorrows share,
 Bleed for my wounds, and feel my deep despair.
 Yet let thy tears bedew a wretch's grave,
 Whom Fate forbade thy tenderness to save.
 Receive these sighs – to thee my soul I breathe,
 Fond love in dying groans is all I can bequeath.
 “Why did I, slave, beyond my lot aspire?
 Why didst thou fan the inauspicious fire?
 For thee I bade my drooping soul revive;
 For thee alone I could have borne to live;
 And love, I said, shall make me large amends,
 For persecuting foes, and faithless friends:
 Fool that I was! enur'd so long to pain,
 To trust to hope, or dream of joy again.

Joy, stranger guest, my easy faith betray'd,
And love now points to death's eternal shade;
There, while I rest from misery's galling load,
Be thou the care of every pitying God;
Nor may that Demon's unpropitious pow'r,
Who shed his influence on my natal hour,
Pursue thee too with unrelenting hate,
And blend with mine the colour of thy fate.

For thee may those soft hours return again,
When Pleasure led thee smiling o'er the plain,
Ere, like some hell-born spectre of dismay,
I crossed thy path and darken'd all the way.
Ye waving groves, which from this cell I view!
Ye meads, now glittering with the morning dew!
Ye flowers, which blush on yonder hated shore,
That at my baneful step shall fade no more,
A long farewell! – I ask no verbal bloom –
No pageant wreaths to wither on my tomb.
- Let serpents hiss and night-shade blacken there,
To mark the friendless victim of despair!
“And better in the' untimely grave to rot,
The world and all its cruelties forgot,
Than, dragg'd once more beyond the western main,
To groan beneath some dastard planter's chain,
Where my poor countrymen in bondage wait
The slow enfranchisement of lingering fate.
Oh! My heart sinks, my dying eyes o'erflow,
When memory paints the picture of their woe!
For I have seen them, ere the dawn of day,
Rous'd by the lash, begin their cheerless way;
Greeting with groans unwelcome morn's return,
While rage and shame their gloomy bosoms burn;
And, chiding every hour the slow-pac'd sun,
Endure their toils till all his race was run;
No eye to mark their sufferings with a tear,
No friend to comfort, and no hope to cheer;
Then like the dull unpitied brutes repair
To stalls as wretched, and as coarse a fare;
Thank Heav'n, one day of misery was o'er,
And sink to sleep, and wish to wake no more. -
Sleep on! ye lost companions of my woes,
For whom in death this tear of pity flows;

Sleep, and enjoy the only boon of Heav'n
To you in common with your tyrants giv'n!
O while soft slumber from their couches flies,
Still may the balmy blessing steep your eyes;
In swift oblivion lull awhile your woes,
And brightest visions gladden the repose!

Let Fancy, then, unconscious of the change,
Through our own fields and native forests range;
Waft ye to each once-haunted stream and grove,
And visit every long-lost scene ye love!
- I sleep no more – nor in the midnight shade
Invoke ideal phantoms to my aid;
Nor wake again, abandon'd and forlorn,
To find each dear delusion fled at morn;
A slow consuming death let others wait,
I snatch destruction from unwilling fate:
You ruddy streaks the rising sun proclaim,
That never more shall beam upon my shame;
Bright orb! for others let thy glory shine,
Mature the golden grain and purple vine,
While fetter'd Afric still for Europe toils,
And Nature's plunderers riot on her spoils;
Be theirs the gifts thy partial rays supply,
Be mine the gloomy privilege to die.
“And thou, whose impious avarice and pride
The holy Cross to my sad brows denied,
Forbade me Nature's common rights to claim,
Or share with thee a Christian's sacred name;
Thou too, farewell! – for not beyond the grave
Extends thy pow'r, nor is my dust thy slave.
In vain Heav'n spread so wide the swelling sea,
Vast watry barrier, 'twist thy world and me;
Swift around the globe, by earth nor Heav'n control'd,
Fly stern oppression and dire lust of gold.

Where'er the hell-hounds mark their bloody way,
Still nature groans and man becomes their prey.
In the wild wastes of Afric's sandy plain,
Where roars the lion through his drear domain,
To curb the savage monarch in the chase,
There too Heav'n planted man's majestic race;
Bade reason's sons with nobler titles rise,
Lift high their brow sublime, and scan the skies.
What though the sun in his meridian blaze
Dart on their naked limbs his scorching rays;
What though no rosy tints adorn their face,
No silken tresses shine with flowing grace;
Yet of ethereal temper are their souls,
And in their veins the tide of honour rolls;
And valour kindles there the hero's flame,
Contempt of death, and thirst of martial fame;
And pity melts the sympathising breast,
Ah! fatal virtue! – for the brave distrest.
“My tortur'd bosom, sad remembrance spare!
Why dost thou plant thy keenest daggers there?
And show me what I was, and aggravate despair?

Ye streams of Gambia, and thou sacred shade!
Where in my youth's first dawn I joyful stray'd,
Oft have I rous'd, amid your caverns dim,
The howling tiger, and the lion grim;
In vain they gloried in their headlong force,
My javelin pierc'd them in their raging course.
But little did my boding mind bewray,
The victor and his hopes were doom'd a prey
To human brutes more fell, more cruel far than they.
Ah! What avails the conqueror's bloody meed,
The generous purpose, or the dauntless deed!
This hapless breast expos'd on every plain,
And liberty preferred to life in vain?

Fall'n are my trophies, blasted is my fame,
Myself become a thing without a name,
The sport of haughty lords, and ev'n of slaves the shame.
"Curst be the winds and curst the tides which bore
These European robbers to our shore!
O be that hour involved in endless night,
When first their streamers met my wondering sight!
I call'd the warriors from the mountain's steep,
To meet these unknown terrors of the deep;
Rous'd by my voice, their generous bosoms glow,
They rush indignant, and demand the foe,
And poise the darts of death, and twang the bended bow:
When lo! Advancing o'er the sea-beat plain,
I mark'd the leader of a warlike train:
Unlike his features to our swarthy race;
And golden hair play'd round his ruddy face.
While with insidious smile and lifted hand,
He thus accosts our unsuspecting band:
'Ye valiant chiefs, whom love of glory leads
To martial combats, and heroic deeds;
No fierce invader your retreat explores,
No hostile banner waves along your shores.
From the dread tempests of the deep we fly,
Then lay, ye chiefs, these pointed terrors by:
And O, your hospitable cares extend,
So may ye never need the aid ye lend!
So may ye still repeat to every grove
The songs of freedom, and the strains of love!
Soft as the accents of the traitor flow,
We melt with pity, and unbend the bow;
With liberal hand our choicest gifts we bring,
And point the wanderers to the freshest spring.

Nine days we feasted on the Gambian strand,
And songs of friendship echo'd o'er the land¹.
When the tenth morn her rising lustre gave,

The chief approach'd me by the sounding wave:
 'O youth,' said he, 'what gift can we bestow,
 Or how requite the mighty debt we owe
 For lo! propitious to our vows, the gale
 With milder omens fills the swelling sail.
 To-morrow's sun shall see our ships explore
 These deeps, and quit your hospitable shore.
 Yet while we linger, let us still employ
 The' number'd hours in friendship and in joy;
 Ascend our ships, their treasures are your own,
 And taste the produce of a world unknown.'
 "He spoke; with fatal eagerness we burn, -
 And quit the shores, undestin'd to return!
 The smiling traitors with insidious care
 The goblet proffer, and the feast prepare,
 'Till dark oblivion shades our closing eyes,
 And all disarm'd each fainting warrior lies.
 O wretches! to your future evils blind!
 O morn for ever present to my mind!
 When bursting from the treacherous bands of sleep,
 Rous'd by the murmurs of the dashing deep,

1. "Which way soever I turned my eyes on this spot, I beheld a perfect image of pure nature, an agreeable solitude bounded on every side by charming landscapes; the rural situation of cottages in the midst of trees; the ease and indolence of Negroes, reclined under the shade of their spreading foliage; the simplicity of their dress and manners; the whole revived in my mind the idea of our first parents, and I seemed to contemplate the world in its primitive state. They are, generally speaking, very good-natured, sociable and obliging – M. Adanson's Voyage to Senegal, &c.

I woke to bondage and ignoble pains,
 And all the horrors of a life in chains².
 Ye Gods of Afric! in that dreadful hour
 Where were your thunders and avenging pow'r?
 Did not my pray'rs, my groans, my tears invoke
 Your slumbering justice to direct the stroke?
 No Power descended to assist the brave,
 No lightnings flash'd, and I became a slave.
 From lord to lord my wretched carcase sold,
 In Christian traffic, for their sordid gold;
 Fate's blackest clouds were gather'd o'er my head;
 And, bursting now, they mix me with the dead.
 "Yet when my fortune cast my lot with thine,
 And bade beneath one roof our labours join,
 Surpris'd I felt the tumults of my breast
 Lull'd by thy beauties to unwonted rest.
 Delusive hopes my changing soul enflame,
 And gentler transports agitate my frame.
 What though obscure thy birth, superior grace
 Shone in the glowing features of thy face.

2. "As we passed along the coast, we very often lay before a town, and fired a gun for the natives to come off, but no soul came near us. At length we learned by some ships that were trading down the coast, that the natives came seldom on board an English ship, for fear of being detained or carried off; yet at last some ventured on board; but if these chanced to spy any arms, they would all immediately take to their canoes, and make the best of their way home." – Smith's Voyage to Guinea.

"It is well known that many of the European nations have, very unjustly and inhumanly, without any provocation, stolen away, from time to time, abundance of the people, not only on this coast, but almost everywhere in Guinea, who have come on board their ship in a harmless and confiding manner; these they have in great numbers carried away and sold in the plantations." – J. Barbot's Description of Guinea.

Ne'er had my youth such winning softness seen,
Where Afric's sable beauties dance the green,
When some sweet maid receives her lover's vow,
And binds the offer'd chaplet to her brow.
While on thy languid eyes I fondly gaze,
And trembling meet the lustre of their rays,
Thou, gentle virgin, thou didst not despise
The humble homage of a captive's sighs.
By Heav'n abandon'd, and by man betray'd,
Each hope resign'd of comfort or of aid,
Thy generous love could every sorrow end,
In thee I found a mistress and a friend;
Still as I told the story of my woes,
With heaving sighs thy lovely bosom rose;
The trickling drops of liquid crystal stole
Down thy fair cheek and mark'd thy pitying soul:
Dear drops! upon my bleeding heart, like balm
They fell, and soon my tortur'd mind grew calm;
Then my lov'd country, parents, friends forgot;
Heav'n I absolve'd, nor murmur'd at my lot;
Thy sacred smiles could every pang remove,
And liberty became less dear than love.
- "And I have lov'd thee with as pure a fire,
As man e'er felt, or woman could inspire:
No pangs like these my pallid tyrants know,
Not such transports, and not such their woe.
Their softer frames a feeble soul conceal,
A soul unus'd to pity or to feel;
Damp'd by base lucre, and repell'd by fear,
Each nobler passion faintly blazes here.
Not such the mortals burning Afric breeds,
Mother of virtues and heroic deeds!
Descended from yon radiant orb, they claim
Sublimar courage and a fiercer flame.

Nature has there, unchill'd by art, imprest
Her awful majesty on every breast.
Where'er she leads, impatient of control,
The dauntless Negro rushes to the goal;

Firm in his love, resistless in his hate,
His arm is conquest, and his frown is fate.
“What fond affection in my bosom reigns!
What soft emotions mingle with my pains!
Still as thy form before my mind appears,
My haggard eyes are bath’d in gushing tears;
Thy lov’d idea rushes to my heart,
And stern despair suspends the lifted dart –
O could I burst these fetters which restrain
My struggling limbs, and waft thee o’er the main
To some far distant shore, where Ocean roars
In horrid tempests round the gloomy shores;
To some wild mountain’s solitary shade,
Where never European faith betray’d;
How joyful could I, of thy love secure,
Meet every danger, every toil endure!
For thee I’d climb the rock, explore the flood,
And tame the famish’d savage of the wood.
When scorching summer drinks the shrinking streams,
My care should screen thee from its sultry beams;
At noon I’d crown thee with the fairest flowers,
At eve I’d lead thee to the safest bowers;
And when bleak winter howl’d around the cave,
For thee his horrors and his storms I’d brave;
Nor snows nor raging winds should damp my soul,
Nor such a night as shrouds the dusky pole:
O’er the dark waves my bounding skiff I’d guide,
To pierce each mightier monster of the tide;

Through frozen forests force my dreadful way,
In their own dens to rouse the beasts of prey;
Nor other blessing ask, if this might prove
How fix’d my passion, and how fond my love.
- Then should vain fortune to my sight display
All that her anger now has snatch’d away;
Treasures more vast than Avarice e’er design’d
In midnight visions to a Christian’s mind;
The monarch’s diadem, the conqueror’s meed,
That empty prize for which the valiant bleed;
All that ambition strives to snatch from fate,
All that the gods e’er lavish’d in their hate;
Not these should win thy lover from thy arms,
Or tempt a moment’s absence from thy charms;
Indignant would I fly these guilty climes,
And scorn their glories as I hate their crimes!
“But whither does my wandering fancy rove?
Hence ye wild wishes of desponding love!
- Ah! Where is now that voice which lull’d my woes;
That angel-face, which sooth’d me to repose?
By nature tempted, and with passion blind,

Are these the joys hope whisper'd to my mind?
Is this the end of constancy like thine?
Are these the transports of a love like mine?
My hopes, my joys, are vanish'd into air,
And now of all that once engag'd my care,
These chains alone remain, this weapon and despair
- "So be thy life's gay prospects all o'er-cast,
All thy fond hopes dire disappointment blast!
Thus end thy golden visions, son of pride!
Whose ruthless ruffians tore me from my bride;

That beauteous prize Heav'n had reserv'd at last,
Sweet recompense for all my sorrows past.
O may thy harden'd bosom never prove
The tender joys of friendship or of love!
Yet may'st thou, doom'd to hopeless flames a prey,
In unrequited passion pine away!
May every transport violate thy rest,
Which tears the jealous lover's gloomy breast!
May secret anguish gnaw thy cruel heart,
'Till death in all his terrors wing the dart;
Then, to complete the horror of thy doom,
A favour'd rival smile upon thy tomb!
"Why does my lingering soul her flight delay?
Come, lovely maid, and gild the dreary way!
Come, wildly rushing with disorder'd charms,
And clasp thy bleeding lover in thy arms;
Close his sad eyes, receive his parting breath,
And soothe him sinking to the shades of death!
O come – thy presence can my pangs beguile,
And bid the' inexorable tyrant smile;
Transported will I languish on thy breast,
And sink enraptur'd to eternal rest:
The hate of men, the wrongs of fate forgive,
Forget my woes, and almost wish to live.
- Ah! rather fly, lest aught of doubt control
The dreadful purpose labouring in my soul;
Tears must not bend me, nor thy beauties move,
This hour I triumph over fate and love!
- "Again with tenfold rage my bosom burns,
And all the tempest of my soul returns;
Again the furies fire my madding brain,
And death extends his sheltering arms in vain;
For unreveng'd I fall, unpitied die;
And with my blood glut Pride's insatiate eye!

"Thou Christian God! to whom so late I bow'd,
To whom my soul its new allegiance vow'd,
When crimes like these thy injur'd pow'r profane,
O God of Nature! art thou call'd in vain?

Didst thou for this sustain a mortal wound,
While Heav'n, and Earth, and Hell, hung trembling round?
That these vile fetters might my body bind,
And agony like this distract my mind?
On thee I call'd with reverential awe,
Ador'd thy wisdom and embrac'd thy law;
Yet mark thy destin'd convert as he lies,
His groans of anguish, and his livid eyes,
These galling chains, polluted with his blood,
Then bid his tongue proclaim thee just and good!
But if too weak thy vaunted power to spare,
Or sufferings move thee not, O hear despair!
Thy hopes and blessings I alike resign,
But let revenge, let swift revenge be mine!
Be this proud bark, which now triumphant rides,
Toss'd by the winds and shatter'd by the tides!
And may these fiends, who now exulting view
The horrors of my fortune, feel them too!
Be theirs the torment of a lingering fate,
Slow as thy justice, dreadful as my hate;
Condemn'd to grasp the riven plank in vain,
And chas'd by all the monsters of the main;
And while they spread their sinking arms to thee,
Then let their fainting souls remember me!
“- Thanks, righteous God! – Revenge shall yet be mine;
Yon flashing lightning gave the dreadful sign.
I see the flames of heavenly anger hurl'd,
I hear your thunder shake a guilty world.

The time shall come, the fated hour is nigh,
When guiltless blood shall penetrate the sky.
Amid these horrors, and involving night,
Prophetic visions flash before my sight;
Eternal Justice wakes, and in their turn
The vanquish'd triumph, and the victors mourn; -
Lo! Discord, fiercest of the' infernal band,
Fires all her snakes, and waves her flaming brand;
No more proud Commerce courts the western gales,
But marks the lurid skies, and furls her sails;
War mounts his iron car, and at his wheels
In vain soft Pity weeps, and Mercy kneels;
He breathes a savage rage through all the host,
And stains with kindred blood the impious coast;
Then, while with horror sickening Nature groans,
And earth and Heav'n the monstrous race disowns, -
Then the stern Genius of my native land,
With delegated vengeance in his hand,
Shall raging cross the troubled seas, and pour
The plagues of hell on yon devoted shore.
What tides of ruin mark his ruthless way!

How shriek the fiends exulting o'er their prey!
I see their warriors gasping on the ground, -
I hear their flaming cities crash around. -
In vain with trembling heart the coward turns,
In vain with generous rage the valiant burns. -
One common ruin, one promiscuous grave,
O'erwhelms the dastard, and receives the brave -
For Afric triumphs! – his avenging rage
No tears can soften, and no blood assuage.
He smites the trembling waves, and at the shock
Their fleets are dash'd upon the pointed rock.
He waves his flaming dart, and o'er their plains,
In mournful silence, Desolation reigns –

Fly swift, ye years! – Arise, thou glorious morn!
Thou great avenger of thy race be born!
The conqueror's palm and deathless fame be thine!
One generous stroke, and liberty be mine!
- And now, ye Pow'rs! to whom the brave are dear,
Receive me falling, and your suppliant hear.
To you this unpolluted blood I pour,
To you that spirit which ye gave restore!
I ask no lazy pleasures to possess,
No long eternity of happiness; -
But if unstain'd by voluntary guilt,
At your great call this being I have spilt,
For all the wrongs which innocent I share,
For all I've suffer'd, and for all I dare;
O lead me to that spot, that sacred shore,
Where souls are free, and men oppress no more!"