

THE
VILLAGE PESTILENCE;

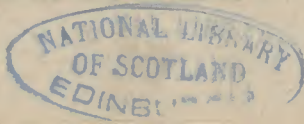
A POEM,

BY

THOMAS MACQUEEN.

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JAMES ARNOT.
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ИССОУЗЪА
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THE

VILLAGE PESTILENCE.

The evening Sun o'er Arran's lofty brow,
Serenely smiling, bade *our* world good night;
To many 'twas a last farewell—yea, ev'n
To some, whose vivid hearts, unhing'd from thought,
Seem'd flush'd and dancing with the cup of life.

The village-bell had clos'd the hours of toil,
Mechanics met, and stood in little groups
About the public corners of the town,
And laugh'd and spake of all the floating news,
Or mutter'd rude remarks on lively nymphs
Whom pride or business hurried o'er the street.
Uncomely tales of riots at the Fair,
Or ball-room broils, or tipsy lewdness, fell
Midst vulgar laughter on the listener's ear.
A few whose thirst had scarcely ceased to crave,
Slunk to the ale-house, and, in noisy mirth
Envelop'd all that elevates the man.

The Merchant, musing on his success, hung
 Across his counter, or, with some shrewd friend
 Whom lack of labour furnish'd with an hour,
 Convers'd with pertness on the mighty things
 That would be done in politics and trade.

The matron ply'd her thrift, the buxom maid
 Before her toilet self-adoring stood

Adjusting matters for the coming ball.

The thoughtless stripling, who suppos'd that life

Was made of sunshine and uninjur'd health,

Play'd off his little wicked pranks and jokes

On dizzy bacchanal, whose muddy head

Held frequent converse with his miry feet.

So things went on; so had they gone before.

The village seem'd all happiness and glee

And flush'd with hope of pleasures yet to come;

And ev'n the sinking sun appear'd replete

With smiles benignant from the fount of heav'n

That promis'd long felicity to man.

When lo! the shriek of terror, uncouth sound,

From yonder hovel wildly pierc'd the ear;

Its humble master, as by magic kill'd,

Had ceas'd to live, and scarcely knew he ail'd!

Another shriek proclaim'd another death!

Another! yea, a fourth! The plague went on!

Amazement spread! Conjecture, thin as air,

With many a ghostly shadow in her train,

Rose up to solve the problem why they died:

'Twas in the atmosphere—'Twas in the clothes—

The food—the blood—the lungs—the mind—'twas fear—

'Twas constitutional—contagions—mild—
 Severe—incurable—a simple thing—
 A mighty mystery we'er to be disclos'd.

Such were the vulgar theories pursu'd,
 All empty as the breath that gave them birth,
 And spite of all, the pestilence jogg'd on
 With silent step, and sudden death, and woe,
 And bitterness to many; and to all
 Dismay and terror. Men's hearts fail'd for fear,
 Suspended seem'd all labour and affairs,
 All human life stood still as petrified,
 And hung the head, and sigh'd a tropeless sigh,
 As though creation's final doom had come.
 Friends met upon the street and halted mute,
 Or, if they spake, 'twas with a shaking head,
 Half muttering "'Tis an awful time indeed ;"
 They parted with a nod, and met no more:
 For ere the next day's Sun had gone his round
 The lone note of the village-bell proclaim'd
 That one or both, should, in a little hour
 Be laid, to mingle with the dust of death.

The tender wife behind the curtains, clasp'd
 In love's embrace her lively spouse at ev'n,
 And with the rising ray of light, beheld
 The ghastly features of her lifeless lord.
 The husband saw the wife, whose healthy hand
 Had dress'd the meal of which he last partook,
 Lie struggling in the ravages of death.
 A few short hours were all that interven'd
 Between the strong, robust, athletic swain,

And the cold lump of dull unconscious clay.

The plague went on—and oh! what dire distress,
 And woe, and lamentation, and despair,
 And clouded brows, and melancholy dark,
 O'er all the village, spread! and still anon
 Deep wailings for the dead, and mingled groans
 Of agonised life expiring fast
 From many a dwelling came. Small sable groups
 Round many a door in sullen silence stood,
 With hand on mouth to ward contagion's breath,
 All mournful, waiting to convey the corpse
 To the lone mansions of the peaceful dead;
 Yet none approach'd the bier, save those few friends
 Whose sympathy was strong as love of life.
 All distant stood—yea, ev'n the Man of God,
He, who alone knew why the people died,
 And solv'd the problem with "'Tis heaven's decree!"
 His daily theme of happiness in heaven,
 And angel's harp, and glory's diadem,
 And righteous hope, that would be realised
 With strange unutterable things reserv'd
 For all who did believe, had made him deem
 Honours and riches, yea, and life itself
 Mere secondary things, vain trifles, trash,
 Vague bubbles, quite unworthy the regard
 Of dignified immortal things like man;
 Yet even *he* felt smitten with the dread—
 Forgot his calling and his trust in God—
 Refus'd to minister the gospel's balm
 To dying husband, or to widow'd wife.

The plague went on—and awful numbers died
 Of every age, and sex, and rank, and kind,
 The matron of threescore—the blooming maid—
 The sucking child—the babe within the womb
 Died while unborn—the foolish and the wise,
 The weak, the strong; the wicked and the good,
 The lusty tradesman and the sickly fop,
 The child of mis'ry and the man of wealth,
 The florid drunkard, and the sage who spurn'd
 The dazzling cup that held the poison'd draught;
 All fell alike before the dreadful scourge.

Died then the virtuous? yea, I knew him well,
 A man of stern unbending principle,
 With soul untutor'd to the yoke of pow'r,
 Unaw'd by wealth or popular renown;
 He pray'd and labour'd for the rights of all,
 Till even int'rest that supinely lulls
 The conscience of the high priest and the king
 Shrank from his being, as asham'd to meet
 Inflexible alliance to the truth.

And he is gone! the voice of heav'n—that breathes
 Upon the midnight wind—that sweeps his grave
 While I repeat this short expressive dirge
 "Peace to his ashes"—seems to say "Amen."

Unhappy village! what art thou become?
 Sad emblem of the fleeting things of life!
 What bosom bleeds not for thy cureless woes?

Deserted homes, and orphans' plaintive cries,
 And widow's tears, and deep parental throes,
 And solitary husband's stif'd groan,

Lead back the mind through time's encumber'd maze
 To Egypt's mourning for her foud first-born,
 Or Rama's wailing for her children slain.

The plague went on—Conjecture ceas'd, for now
 All theories seem'd vain—men only fear'd,
 Nor knew what 'twas they dreaded! 'Twas fear of fear.
 The grave physician, whose best feelings fell
 A sacrifice long since, before the shrine
 Of motley ills, who fatten'd on disease,
 And mark'd with apathetic unconcern
 The thousand thousand various forms of pain,
 That rack'd the carcase of humanity,
 Stood here without one scientific phrase,
 Observ'd the ravage of the strange unknown,
 Bluntly confess'd his ignorance and awe,
 And cross'd his arms, and said " 'Tis death! 'tis death!"

FINIS.

DAVID ARNOT, PRINTER, BETH.