

VOLTAIRE

POEM ON THE LISBON DISASTER;

Or an Examination of the Axiom, "All is Well"
Unhappy mortals! Dark and mourning earth!
Affrighted gathering of human kind!
Eternal lingering of useless pain!
Come, ye philosophers, who cry, "All's well,"
And contemplate this ruin of a world.
Behold these shreds and cinders of your race,
This child and mother heaped in common wreck,
These scattered limbs beneath the marble shafts—
A hundred thousand whom the earth devours,
Who, torn and bloody, palpitating yet,
Entombed beneath their hospitable roofs,
In racking torment end their stricken lives.
To those expiring murmurs of distress,
To that appalling spectacle of woe,
Will ye reply: "You do but illustrate
The iron laws that chain the will of God"?
Say ye, o'er that yet quivering mass of flesh:
"God is avenged: the wage of sin is death"?
What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice
Than London, Paris, or sunlit Madrid?
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.
Tranquil spectators of your brothers' wreck,
Unmoved by this repellent dance of death,
Who calmly seek the reason of such storms,
Let them but lash your own security;
Your tears will mingle freely with the flood.
When earth its horrid jaws half open shows,
My plaint is innocent, my cries are just.
Surrounded by such cruelties of fate,
By rage of evil and by snares of death.
Fronting the fierceness of the elements,
Sharing our ills, indulge me my lament.
...
God I respect, yet love the universe.
Not pride, alas, it is, but love of man,
To mourn so terrible a stroke as this.

Would it console the sad inhabitants
Of these aflame and desolated shores
To say to them: "Lay down your lives in peace;
For the world's good your homes are sacrificed;
Your ruined palaces shall others build,
For other peoples shall your walls arise;
The North grows rich on your unhappy loss;
Your ills are but a link in general law;
To God you are as those low creeping worms
That wait for you in your predestined tombs"?
What speech to hold to victims of such ruth!
Add not such cruel outrage to their pain.
Nay, press not on my agitated heart
These iron and irrevocable laws,
This rigid chain of bodies, minds, and worlds.
Dreams of the bloodless thinker are such thoughts.
God holds the chain: is not himself enchained;
By his indulgent choice is all arranged;
Implacable he's not, but free and just.
Why suffer we, then, under one so just?
There is the knot your thinkers should undo.
Think ye to cure our ills denying them?
All peoples, trembling at the hand of God,
Have sought the source of evil in the world.
When the eternal law that all things moves
Doth hurl the rock by impact of the winds,
With, lightning rends and fires the sturdy oak,
They have no feeling of the crashing blows;
But I, I live and feel, my wounded heart
Appeals for aid to him who fashioned it.
Children of that Almighty Power, we stretch
Our hands in grief towards our common sire.
The vessel, truly, is not heard to say:
"Why should I be so vile, so coarse, so frail?"
Nor speech nor thought is given unto it.
The urn that, from the potter's forming hand,
Slips and is shattered has no living heart
That yearns for bliss and shrinks from misery.
"This misery," ye say, "is others' good."
Yes; from my moldering body shall be born
A thousand worms, when death has closed my pain.
Fine consolation this in my distress!
Grim speculators on the woes of men,

Ye double, not assuage, my misery.
In you I mark the nerveless boast of pride
That hides its ill with pretext of content.
I am a puny part of the great whole.
Yes; but all animals condemned to live,
All sentient things, born by the same stern law,
Suffer like me, and like me also die.
The vulture fastens on his timid prey,
And stabs with bloody beak the quivering limbs:
All's well, it seems, for it. But in a while
An eagle tears the vulture into shreds;
The eagle is transfixed by shaft of man;
The man, prone in the dust of battlefield,
Mingling his blood with dying fellow-men,
Becomes in turn the food of ravenous birds.
Thus the whole world in every member groans:
All born for torment and for mutual death.
And o'er this ghastly chaos you would say
The ills of each make up the good of all!
What blessedness! And as, with quaking voice,
Mortal and pitiful, ye cry, "All's well,"
The universe belies you, and your heart
Refutes a hundred times your mind's conceit.
All dead and living things are locked in strife.
Confess it freely—evil stalks the land,
Its secret principle unknown to us.
Can it be from the author of all good?
Are we condemned to weep by tyrant law
Of black Typhon or barbarous Ahriman?
These odious monsters, whom a trembling world
Made gods, my spirit utterly rejects.
But how conceive a God supremely good,
Who heaps his favors on the sons he loves,
Yet scatters evil with as large a hand?
What eye can pierce the depth of his designs?
From that all-perfect Being came not ill:
And came it from no other, for he's lord:
Yet it exists. O stern and numbing truth!
O wondrous mingling of diversities!
A God came down to lift our stricken race:
He visited the earth, and changed it not!
...
Tis mockery to tell me all is well.

Like learned doctors, nothing do I know.
Plato has said that men did once have wings
And bodies proof against all mortal ill;
That pain and death were strangers to their world.
How have we fallen from that high estate!
Man crawls and dies: all is but born to die:
The world's the empire of destructiveness.
This frail construction of quick nerves and bones
Cannot sustain the shock of elements;
This temporary blend of blood and dust
Was put together only to dissolve;
This prompt and vivid sentiment of nerve
Was made for pain, the minister of death:
Thus in my ear does nature's message run.
and I reject.
And turn more hopefully to learned .
With even poised scale Bayle bids me doubt.
He, wise and great enough to need no creed,
Has slain all systems—combats even himself:
Like that blind conqueror of Philistines,
He sinks beneath the ruin he has wrought.
What is the verdict of the vastest mind?
Silence: the book of fate is closed to us.
Man is a stranger to his own research;
He knows not whence he comes, nor whither goes.
Tormented atoms in a bed of mud,
Devoured by death, a mockery of fate.
But thinking atoms, whose far-seeing eyes,
Guided by thought, have measured the faint stars,
Our being mingles with the infinite;
Ourselves we never see, or come to know.
This world, this theatre of pride and wrong,
Swarms with sick fools who talk of happiness.
With plaints and groans they follow up the quest,
To die reluctant, or be born again.
At fitful moments in our pain-racked life
The hand of pleasure wipes away our tears;
But pleasure passes like a fleeting shade,
And leaves a legacy of pain and loss.
The past for us is but a fond regret,
The present grim, unless the future's clear.
If thought must end in darkness of the tomb,
All will be well one day—so runs our hope.

All *now* is well, is but an idle dream.
The wise deceive me: God alone is right.
With lowly sighing, subject in my pain,
I do not fling myself 'against Providence.
Once did I sing, in less lugubrious tone,
The sunny ways of pleasure's genial rule;
The times have changed, and, taught by growing age,
And sharing of the frailty of mankind,
Seeking a light amid the deepening gloom,
I can but suffer, and will not repine.
A caliph once, when his last hour had come,
This prayer addressed to him he revered:
"To thee, sole and all-powerful king, I bear
What thou dost lack in thy immensity—
Evil and ignorance, distress and sin."
He might have added one thing further—hope.