

"On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet"

By Samuel Johnson

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and
markup by Students and Staff at the University of Virginia*

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On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet, ^{Levet}

Condemn'd to hope's delusive mine,
As we toil from day to day,
By sudden blasts, or slow decline,
Our social comforts drop away.

Well tried through many a varying year,
See Levet to the grave descend;
Officious, innocent, sincere,
Of ev'ry friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills affection's eye,
Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;
Nor, lettered arrogance, deny
Thy praise to merit unrefined.

When fainting nature call'd for aid,
And hov'ring death prepar'd the blow,
His vig'rous remedy display'd
The power of art without the show.

In misery's darkest caverns known,
His useful care was ever nigh,
Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan,
And lonely want retir'd to die.

No summons mock'd by chill delay,
No petty gain disdain'd by pride;
The modest wants of every day
The toil of ev'ry day supplied.

His virtues walk'd their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
And sure th' Eternal Maker found
The single talent well employ'd.

The busy day, the peaceful night,
Unfelt, uncounted, glided by;
His frame was firm, his powers were bright,
Tho' now his eightieth year was nigh.

Then with no throbbing fiery pain,
No cold gradations of decay,

Death broke at once the vital chain,
And freed his soul the nearest way.

Footnotes

Levet Samuel Johnson hated being alone. So from middle age onward, and particularly after the death of his wife Elizabeth in 1752, Johnson shared his house with a number of people, a group that included (at various times): Francis Barber, his Jamaica-born servant; Anna Williams, a blind poet who served as housekeeper and habitually stayed up to drink tea with Johnson before he went to bed; Elisabeth Desmoulins, the daughter of Johnson's godfather who had been a companion to his late wife; and Poll Carmichael, a Scottish-born woman who may have been a sex worker. It was an odd group, united largely in their dependence on Johnson and what seems to have been their mutual annoyance with each other. But collectively they maintained Johnson's household and kept him company.

The longest-standing member of Johnson's household was Robert Levet (1705-1782), who had a room in Johnson's house for decades, perhaps starting as early as the late 1740s. What we know of Levet comes primarily from Johnson's literary friends, who generally found their friendship to be inexplicable. Levet was not formally educated, and was by all accounts fairly uncouth; scarred by smallpox, he was physically unattractive as well. James Boswell quoted Johnson as saying that "Levet is a brutal fellow; but I have a good regard for him, for his brutality is in his manners and not in his mind." Johnson admired Levet's piety and generosity. Levet had spent some time in Paris, where he waited tables at coffeehouses frequented by physicians. He got interested in medicine; he listened in on conversations and attended some lectures. Upon his return to London in the 1740s, he set up a medical practice among the poor, which he continued to his death. Johnson remarked that Levet's patients often had nothing to pay him with but some gin, so he sometimes came home drunk after making his rounds; "perhaps the only man," Johnson said, "who ever became intoxicated through motives of prudence."

After Levet died of an apparent and unexpected heart attack in January 1782, Johnson wrote this moving elegy for his friend. Johnson never intended this poem for the press, but the manuscript made its way to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which published it in August 1783. Our text is taken from that printing.