

# The Dance of Death

By Gustave Flaubert

1838

"Many words for few things!"  
"Death ends all; judgment comes to all."

[This work may be called a prose poem. It is impregnated with the spirit of romanticism, which at the time of writing had a temporary but powerful hold on the mind of Gustave Flaubert.]

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## DEATH SPEAKS

At night, in winter, when the snow-flakes fall slowly from heaven like great white tears, I raise my voice; its resonance thrills the cypress trees and makes them bud anew.

I pause an instant in my swift course over earth; throw myself down among cold tombs; and, while dark-plumaged birds rise suddenly in terror from my side, while the dead slumber peacefully, while cypress branches droop low o'er my head, while all around me weeps or lies in deep repose, my burning eyes rest on the great white clouds, gigantic winding-sheets, unrolling their slow length across the face of heaven.

How many nights, and years, and ages have I journeyed thus! A witness of the universal birth and of a like decay; Innumerable are the generations I have garnered with my scythe. Like God, I am eternal! The nurse of Earth, I cradle it each night upon a bed both soft and warm. The same recurring feasts; the same unending toil! Each morning I depart, each evening I return, bearing within my mantle's ample folds all that my scythe has gathered. And then I scatter them to the four winds of Heaven!

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When the high billows run, when the heavens weep, and shrieking winds lash ocean into madness, then in the turmoil and the tumult do I fling myself upon the surging waves, and lo! the tempest softly cradles me, as in her hammock sways a queen. The foaming waters cool my weary feet, burning from bathing in the falling tears of countless generations that have clung to them in vain endeavour to arrest my steps.

Then, when the storm has ceased, after its roar has calmed me like a lullaby, I bow my head: the hurricane, raging in fury but a moment earlier dies instantly. No longer does it live, but neither do the men, the ships, the navies that lately sailed upon the bosom of the waters.

'Mid all that I have seen and known,--peoples and thrones, loves, glories, sorrows, virtues--what have I ever loved? Nothing--except the mantling shroud that covers me!

My horse! ah, yes! my horse! I love thee too! How thou rushest o'er the world! thy hoofs of steel resounding on the heads bruised by thy speeding feet. Thy tail is straight and crisp, thine eyes dart flames, the mane upon thy neck flies in the wind, as on we dash upon our maddened course. Never art thou weary! Never do we rest! Never do we sleep! Thy neighing portends war; thy smoking nostrils spread a pestilence that, mist-like, hovers over earth. Where'er my arrows fly, thou overturnest pyramids and empires, trampling crowns beneath thy hoofs; All men respect thee; nay, adore thee! To invoke thy favour, popes offer thee their triple crowns, and kings their sceptres; peoples, their secret sorrows; poets, their renown. All cringe and kneel before thee, yet thou rushest on over their prostrate forms.

Ah, noble steed! Sole gift from heaven! Thy tendons are of iron, thy head is of bronze. Thou canst pursue thy course for centuries as swiftly as if borne up by eagle's wings; and when, once in a thousand years, resistless hunger comes, thy food is human flesh, thy drink, men's tears. My steed! I love thee as Pale Death alone can love!

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Ah! I have lived so long! How many things I know! How many mysteries of the universe are shut within my breast!

Sometimes, after I have hurled a myriad of darts, and, after coursing o'er the world on my pale horse, have gathered many lives, a weariness assails me, and I long to rest.

But on my work must go; my path I must pursue; it leads through infinite space and all the worlds. I sweep away men's plans together with their triumphs, their loves together with their crimes, their very all.

I rend my winding-sheet; a frightful craving tortures me incessantly, as if some serpent stung continually within.

I throw a backward glance, and see the smoke of fiery ruins left behind; the darkness of the night; the agony of the world. I see the graves that are the work of these, my hands; I see the background of the past--'tis nothingness! My weary body, heavy head, and tired feet, sink, seeking rest. My eyes turn towards a glowing horizon, boundless, immense, seeming to grow increasingly in height and depth. I shall devour it, as I have devoured all else.

When, O God! shall I sleep in my turn? When wilt Thou cease creating? When may I, digging my own grave, stretch myself out within my tomb, and, swinging thus upon the world, list the last breath, the death-gasp, of expiring nature?

When that time comes, away my darts and shroud I'll hurl. Then shall I free my horse, and he shall graze upon the grass that grows upon the Pyramids, sleep in the palaces of emperors, drink the last drop of water from the sea, and snuff the odour of the last slow drop of blood! By day, by night, through the countless ages, he shall roam through fields eternal as the fancy takes him; shall leap with one great bound from Atlas to the Himalayas; shall course, in his insolent pride, from heaven to earth; disport himself by caracoling in the dust of crumbled empires; shall speed across the beds of dried-up oceans; shall bound o'er ruins of enormous cities; inhale the void with swelling chest, and roll and stretch at ease.

Then haply, faithful one, weary as I, thou finally shalt seek some precipice from which to cast thyself; shalt halt, panting before the mysterious ocean of infinity; and then, with foaming mouth, dilated nostrils, and extended neck turned towards the horizon, thou shalt, as I, pray for eternal sleep; for repose for thy fiery feet; for a bed of green leaves, whereon reclining thou canst close thy burning eyes forever. There,

waiting motionless upon the brink, thou shalt desire a power stronger than thyself to kill thee at a single blow--shalt pray for union with the dying storm, the faded flower, the shrunken corpse. Thou shalt seek sleep, because eternal life is torture, and the tomb is peace.

Why are we here? What hurricane has hurled us into this abyss? What tempest soon shall bear us away towards the forgotten planets whence we came?

Till then, my glorious steed, thou shalt run thy course; thou mayst please thine ear with the crunching of the heads crushed under thy feet. Thy course is long, but courage! Long time hast thou carried me: but longer time still must elapse, and yet we shall not age.

Stars may be quenched, the mountains crumble, the earth finally wear away its diamond axis; but we two, we alone are immortal, for the impalpable lives forever!

But to-day them canst lie at my feet, and polish thy teeth against the moss-grown tombs, for Satan has abandoned me, and a power unknown compels me to obey his will. Lo! the dead seek to rise from their graves.

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Satan, I love thee! Thou alone canst comprehend my joys and my deliriums. But, more fortunate than I, thou wilt some day, when earth shall be no more, recline and sleep within the realms of space.

But I, who have lived so long, have worked so ceaselessly, with only virtuous loves and solemn thoughts,--I must endure immortality. Man has his tomb, and glory its oblivion; the day dies into night but I--!

And I am doomed to lasting solitude upon my way, strewn with the bones of men and marked by ruins. Angels have fellow-angels; demons their companions of darkness; but I hear only sounds of a clanking scythe, my whistling arrows, and my speeding horse. Always the echo of the surging billows that sweep over and engulf mankind!

SATAN.

Dost thou complain,--thou, the most fortunate creature under heaven? The only, splendid, great, unchangeable, eternal one--like God, who is the only Being that equals thee! Dost thou repine, who some day in thy turn shalt disappear forever, after thou hast crushed the universe beneath thy horse's feet?

When God's work of creating has ceased; when the heavens have disappeared and the stars are quenched; when spirits rise from their retreats and wander in the depths with sighs and groans; then, what unpicturable delight for thee! Then shalt thou sit on the eternal thrones of heaven and of hell--shalt overthrow the planets, stars, and worlds--shalt loose thy steed in fields of emeralds and diamonds--shalt make his litter of the wings torn from the angels,--shalt cover him with the robe of righteousness! Thy saddle shall be broidered with the stars of the empyrean,--and then thou wilt destroy it! After thou hast annihilated everything, --when naught remains but empty space,--thy coffin shattered and thine arrows broken, then make thyself a crown of stone from heaven's highest mount, and cast thyself into the abyss of oblivion. Thy fall may last a million aeons, but thou shalt die at last. Because the world must end; all, all must die,--except Satan! Immortal more than God! I live to bring chaos into other worlds!

DEATH.

But thou hast not, as I, this vista of eternal nothingness before thee; thou dost not suffer with this death-like cold, as I.

SATAN.

Nay, but I quiver under fierce and unrelaxing hearts of molten lava, which burn the doomed and which e'en I cannot escape.

For thou, at least, hast only to destroy. But I bring birth and I give life. I direct empires and govern the affairs of States and of hearts.

I must be everywhere. The precious metals flow, the diamonds glitter, and men's names resound at my command. I whisper in the ears of women, of poets, and of statesmen, words of love, of glory, of ambition. With Messalina and Nero, at Paris and at Babylon, within the self-same moment do I dwell. Let a new island be discovered, I fly to it ere man can set foot there; though it be but a rock encircled by the sea, I am there in

advance of men who will dispute for its possession. I lounge, at the same instant, on a courtesan's couch and on the perfumed beds of emperors. Hatred and envy, pride and wrath, pour from my lips in simultaneous utterance. By night and day I work. While men ate burning Christians, I luxuriate voluptuously in baths perfumed with roses; I race in chariots; yield to deep despair; or boast aloud in pride.

At times I have believed that I embodied the whole world, and all that I have seen took place, in verity, within my being.

Sometimes I weary, lose my reason, and indulge in such mad follies that the most worthless of my minions ridicule me while they pity me.

No creature cares for me; nowhere am I loved,--neither in heaven, of which I am a son, nor yet in hell, where I am lord, nor upon earth, where men deem me a god. Naught do I see but paroxysms of rage, rivers of blood, or maddened frenzy. Ne'er shall my eyelids close in slumber, never my spirit find repose, whilst thou, at least, canst rest thy head upon the cool, green freshness of the grave. Yea, I must ever dwell amid the glare of palaces, must listen to the curses of the starving, or inhale the stench of crimes that cry aloud to heaven.

God, whom I hate, has punished me indeed! But my soul is greater even than His wrath; in one deep sigh I could the whole world draw into my breast, where it would burn eternally, even as I.

When, Lord, shall thy great trumpet sound? Then a great harmony shall hover over sea and hill. Ah! would that I could suffer with humanity; their cries and sobs should drown the sound of mine!

[\_Innumerable skeletons, riding in chariots, advance at a rapid pace, with cries of joy and triumph. They drag broken branches and crowns of laurel, from which the dried and yellow leaves fall continually in the wind and the dust.\_]

Lo, a triumphal throng from Rome, the Eternal City! Her Coliseum and her Capitol are now two grains of sands that served once as a pedestal; but Death has swung his scythe: the monuments have fallen. Behold! At their head comes Nero, pride of my heart, the greatest poet earth has known!

[\_Nero advances in a chariot drawn by twelve skeleton horses. With the sceptre in his hand, he strikes the bony backs of his steeds. He stands erect, his shroud flapping behind him in billowy folds. He turns, as if upon a racecourse; his eyes are flaming and he cries loudly:\_]

NERO.

Quick! Quick! And faster still, until your feet dash fire from the flinty stones and your nostrils fleck your breasts with foam. What! do not the wheels smoke yet? Hear ye the fanfares, whose sound reached even to Ostia; the clapping of the hands, the cries of joy? See how the populace shower saffron on my head! See how my pathway is already damp with sprayed perfume! My chariot whirls on; the pace is swifter than the wind as I shake the golden reins! Faster and faster! The dust clouds rise; my mantle floats upon the breeze, which in my ears sings "Triumph! triumph!" Faster and faster! Harken to the shouts of joy, list to the stamping feet and the plaudits of the multitude. Jupiter himself looks down on us from heaven. Faster! yea, faster still!

[\_Nero's chariot now seems to be drawn by demons: a black cloud of dust and smoke envelops him; in his erratic course he crashes into tombs, and the re-awakened corpses are crushed under the wheels of the chariot, which now turns, comes forward, and stops.\_]

NERO.

Now, let six hundred of my women dance the Grecian Dances silently before me, the while I lave myself with roses in a bath of porphyry. Then let them circle me, with interlacing arms, that I may see on all sides alabaster forms in graceful evolution, swaying like tall reeds bending over an amorous pool.

And I will give the empire and the sea, the Senate, the Olympus, the Capitol, to her who shall embrace me the most ardently; to her whose heart shall throb beneath my own; to her who shall enmesh me in her flowing hair, smile on me sweetest, and enfold me in the warmest clasp; to her who soothing me with songs of love shall waken me to joy and heights of rapture! Rome shall be still this night; no barque shall cleave the waters of the Tiber, since 'tis my wish to see the mirrored moon on its untroubled face and hear the voice of woman floating over it. Let

perfumed breezes pass through all my draperies! Ah, I would die, voluptuously intoxicated.

Then, while I eat of some rare meat, that only I may taste, let some one sing, while damsels, lightly draped, serve me from plates of gold and watch my rest. One slave shall cut her sister's throat, because it is my pleasure--a favourite with the gods--to mingle the perfume of blood with that of food, and cries of victims soothe my nerves.

This night I shall burn Rome. The flames shall light up heaven, and Tiber shall roll in waves of fire!

Then, I shall build of aloes wood a stage to float upon the Italian sea, and the Roman populace shall throng thereto chanting my praise. Its draperies shall be of purple, and on it I shall have a bed of eagles' plumage. There I shall sit, and at my side shall be the loveliest woman in the empire, while all the universe applauds the achievements of a god! And though the tempest roar round me, its rage shall be extinguished 'neath my feet, and sounds of music shall o'ercome the clamor of the waves!

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What didst thou say? Vindex revolts, my legions fly, my women flee in terror? Silence and tears alone remain, and I hear naught but the rolling of thunder. Must I die, now?

DEATH.

Instantly!

NERO.

Must I give up my days of feasting and delight, my spectacles, my triumphs, my chariots and the applause of multitudes?

DEATH.

All! All!

SATAN.

Haste, Master of the World! One comes--One who will put thee to the sword. An emperor knows how to die!

NERO.

Die! I have scarce begun to live! Oh, what great deeds I should accomplish--deeds that should make Olympus tremble! I would fill up the bed of hoary ocean and speed across it in a triumphal car. I would still live--would see the sun once more, the Tiber, the Campagna, the Circus on the golden sands. Ah! let me live!

DEATH.

I will give thee a mantle for the tomb, and an eternal bed that shall be softer and more peaceful than the Imperial couch.

NERO.

Yet, I am loth to die.

DEATH.

Die, then!

[\_He gathers up the shroud, lying beside him on the ground, and bears away Nero--wrapped in its folds.\_]