

# **The Dance of Death**

**by**

**Gustave Flaubert**

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# The Dance of Death

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

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[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

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