

Death and the Soldier

By Eugene Field

A soldier, who had won imperishable fame on the battlefields of his country, was confronted by a gaunt stranger, clad all in black and wearing an impenetrable mask.

"Who are you that you dare to block my way?" demanded the soldier.

Then the stranger drew aside his mask, and the soldier knew that he was Death.

"Have you come for me?" asked the soldier. "If so, I will not go with you; so go your way alone."

But Death held out his bony hand and beckoned to the soldier.

"No," cried the soldier, resolutely; "my time is not come. See, here are the histories I am writing--no hand but mine can finish them--I will not go till they are done!"

"I have ridden by your side day and night," said Death; "I have hovered about you on a hundred battlefields, but no sight of me could chill your heart till now, and now I hold you in my power. Come!"

And with these words Death seized upon the soldier and strove to bear him hence, but the soldier struggled so desperately that he prevailed against Death, and the strange phantom departed alone. Then when he had gone the soldier found upon his throat the imprint of Death's cruel fingers--so fierce had been the struggle. And nothing could wash away the marks--nay, not all the skill in the world could wash them away, for they were disease, lingering, agonizing, fatal disease. But with quiet valor the soldier returned to his histories, and for many days thereafter he toiled upon them as the last and best work of his noble life.

"How pale and thin the soldier is getting," said the people. "His hair is whitening and his eyes are weary. He should not have undertaken the histories--the labor is killing him."

They did not know of his struggle with Death, nor had they seen the marks upon the soldier's throat. But the physicians who came to him, and saw the marks of Death's cruel fingers, shook their heads and said the soldier could not live to complete the work upon which his whole heart was set. And the soldier knew it, too, and many a time he paused in his writing and laid his pen aside and bowed his head upon his hands and strove for consolation in the thought of the great fame he had already won. But there was no consolation in all this. So when Death came a second time he found the soldier weak and trembling and emaciated.

"It would be vain of you to struggle with me now," said Death. "My poison is in your veins, and, see, my dew is on your brow. But you are a brave man, and I will not bear you with me till you have asked one favor, which I will grant."

"Give me an hour to ask the favor," said the soldier. "There are so many things--my histories and all--give me an hour that I may decide what I shall ask."

And as Death tarried, the soldier communed with himself. Before he closed his eyes forever, what boon should he ask of Death? And the soldier's thoughts sped back over the years, and his whole life came to him like a lightning flash--the companionship and smiles of kings, the glories of government and political power, the honors of peace, the joys of conquest, the din of battle, the sweets of a quiet home life upon a western prairie, the gentle devotion of a wife, the clamor of noisy boys, and the face of a little girl--ah, there his thoughts lingered and clung.

"Time to complete our work--our books--our histories," counselled Ambition. "Ask Death for time to do this last and crowning act of our great life."

But the soldier's ears were deaf to the cries of Ambition; they heard another voice--the voice of the soldier's heart--and the voice whispered: "Nellie--Nellie--Nellie." That was all--no other words but those, and the soldier struggled to his feet and stretched forth his hands and called to Death; and, hearing him calling, Death came and stood before him.

"I have made my choice," said the soldier.

"The books?" asked Death, with a scornful smile.

"No, not them," said the soldier, "but my little girl--my Nellie! Give me a lease of life till I have held her in these arms, and then come for me and I will go!"

Then Death's hideous aspect was changed; his stern features relaxed and a look of pity came upon them. And Death said, "It shall be so," and saying this he went his way.

Now the soldier's child was far away--many, many leagues from where the soldier lived, beyond a broad, tempestuous ocean. She was not, as you might suppose, a little child, although the soldier spoke of her as such. She was a wife and a mother; yet even in her womanhood she was to the soldier's heart the same little girl the soldier had held upon his knee many and many a time while his rough hands weaved prairie flowers in her soft, fair curls. And the soldier called her Nellie now, just as he did then, when she sat on his knee and prattled of her dolls. This is the way of the human heart.

It having been noised about that the soldier was dying and that Nellie had been sent for across the sea, all the people vied with each other in soothing the last moments of the famous man, for he was beloved by all and all were bound to him by bonds of patriotic gratitude, since he had been so brave a soldier upon the battlefields of his country. But the soldier did not heed their words of sympathy; the voice of fame, which, in the past, had stirred a fever in his blood and fallen most pleasantly upon his ears, awakened no emotion in his bosom now. The soldier thought only of Nellie, and he awaited her coming.

An old comrade came and pressed his hand, and talked of the times when they went to the wars together; and the old comrade told of this battle and of that, and how such a victory was won and such a city taken. But the soldier's ears heard no sound of battle now, and his eyes could see no flash of sabre nor smoke of war.

So the people came and spoke words of veneration and love and hope, and so with quiet fortitude, but with a hungry heart, the soldier waited for Nellie, his little girl.

She came across the broad, tempestuous ocean. The gulls flew far out from land and told the winds, and the winds flew further still and said to

the ship: "Speed on, O ship! speed on in thy swift, straight course, for you are bearing a treasure to a father's heart!"

Then the ship leapt forward in her pathway, and the waves were very still, and the winds kept whispering "Speed on, O ship," till at last the ship was come to port and the little girl was clasped in the soldier's arms.

Then for a season the soldier seemed quite himself again, and people said "He will live," and they prayed that he might. But their hopes and prayers were vain. Death's seal was on the soldier, and there was no release.

The last days of the soldier's life were the most beautiful of all--but what a mockery of ambition and fame and all the grand, pretentious things of life they were! They were the triumph of a human heart, and what is better or purer or sweeter than that?

No thought of the hundred battlefields upon which his valor had shown conspicuous came to the soldier now--nor the echo of his eternal fame--nor even yet the murmurs of a sorrowing people. Nellie was by his side, and his hungry, fainting heart fed on her dear love and his soul went back with her to the years long ago.

Away beyond the western horizon upon the prairie stands a little home over which the vines trail. All about it is the tall, waving grass, and over yonder is the swale with a legion of chattering blackbirds perched on its swaying reeds and rushes. Bright wild flowers bloom on every side, the quail whistles on the pasture fence, and from his home in the chimney corner the cricket tries to chirrup an echo to the lonely bird's call. In this little prairie home we see a man holding on his knee a little girl, who is telling him of her play as he smooths her fair curls or strokes her tiny velvet hands; or perhaps she is singing him one of her baby songs, or asking him strange questions of the great wide world that is so new to her; or perhaps he binds the wild flowers she has brought into a little nosegay for her new gingham dress, or--but we see it all, and so, too, does the soldier, and so does Nellie, and they hear the blackbird's twitter and the quail's shrill call and the cricket's faint echo, and all about them is the sweet, subtle, holy fragrance of memory.

And so at last, when Death came and the soldier fell asleep forever, Nellie, his little girl, was holding his hands and whispering to him of those days. Hers were the last words he heard, and by the peace that rested on

his face when he was dead you might have thought the soldier was dreaming of a time when Nellie prattled on his knee and bade him weave the wild flowers in her curls.