

DEATH OF SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

Sir Fulke Greville (1554–1628)

October 1586

When that unfortunate stand was to be made before Zutphen to stop the issuing out of the Spanish army from a streict, with what alacrity soever he went to actions of honour, yet remembering that upon just grounds the ancient sages describe the worthiest persons to be ever best armed, he had completely put on his. But meeting the Marshal of the Camp lightly armed—whose honour in that art would not suffer this un-envious Themistocles to sleep—the unspotted emulation of his heart to venture without any inequality made him cast off his cuisses, and so, by the secret influence of destiny, to disarm that part where God—it seems—had resolved to strike him. Thus they go on, every man in the head of his own troop; and the weather being misty, fell unawares upon the enemy, who had made a strong stand to receive them near to the very walls of Zutphen; by reason of which accident their troops fell not only unexpectedly to be engaged within the level of the great shot that played from the ramparts, but more fatally within shot of their muskets, which were laid in ambush within their own trenches.

Now whether this were a desperate cure in our leaders for a desperate disease, or whether misprision, neglect, audacity, or what else induced it, it is no part of my office to determine, but only to make the narration clear, and deliver rumor, as it passed then, without any stain or enamel.

Howsoever, by this stand an unfortunate hand out of those fore-spoken trenches, broke the bone of Sir Philip's thigh with a musket-shot. The horse he rode upon was rather furiously choleric than bravely proud, and so forced him to forsake the field, but not his back, as the noblest and fittest bier to carry a martial commander to his grave. In which sad progress, passing along by the rest of the army, where his uncle¹ the general was, and being thirsty with excess of bleeding, he called for drink, which was presently brought him. But as he was putting the bottle to his mouth, he saw a poor soldier carried along who had eaten his last at the same feast, gastly casting up his eyes at the bottle. Which Sir Philip perceiving, took it from his head before he drank and delivered it to the poor man, with these words, "Thy necessity is yet greater than mine."

And when he had pledged this poor soldier, he was presently carried to Arnheim, where the principal surgeons of the camp attended for him; some mercinarily out of gain, others for honour to their art, but the most of them with a true zeal—compounded of love and reverence—to do him good and, as they thought—many nations in him. When they began to dress his wound, he both by way of charge and advice told them that while his strength was yet entire, his body free from fever, and his mind able to endure, they might freely use their art, cut, and search to the bottom. For besides his hope of health, he would make this further profit of the pains which he must suffer, that they should bear witness they had indeed a sensible natured man under their hands, yet one to whom a stronger spirit had given power above himself, either to do or suffer. But if they should now neglect their art, and renew torments in the declination of nature, their ignorance or over-tenderness would prove a kind of tyranny to their friend, and consequently a blemish to their reverend science.

With love and care well mixed, they began the cure, and continued it some sixteen days, not with hope, but rather such confidence of his recovery as the joy of their hearts over-flowed their discretion, and made them spread the intelligence of it to the Queen, and all his noble friends here in England, where it was received, not as private, but as public good news.

Only there was one owl among all the birds, which though looking with no less zealous eyes than the rest, yet saw and presaged more despair. I mean an excellent surgeon of the Count Hollock's, who although the Count himself lay at that instant hurt in the throat with a musket shot, yet did he neglect his own extremity to save his friend, and to that end had sent him to Sir Philip. This surgeon notwithstanding—out of love to his

¹ Robert Dudley (1532–1588), Earl of Leicester

master—returning one day to dress his wound, the Count cheerfully asked him how Sir Philip did? And being answered with a heavy countenance that he was not well, at these unexpected words the worthy prince—as having more sense of his friend’s wounds, than his own—in a distracted passion cries out, “Away villain, never see my face again till you bring better news of that man’s recovery, for whose redemption many such as I were happily lost.”

This honourable act I relate to give the world one modern example; first, that greatness of heart is not dead everywhere, and then that war is both a fitter mold to fashion it, and stage to act it on, than peace can be, and lastly that the reconciliation of enemies may prove safe and honourable where the cement on either side is worth. So as this Florentine precept concerning reconciled enemies deserves worthily to be buried with worthies, the author of it, or at least the practice it cried down and banished, to reign amongst barbarous heathen spirits who, while they think life the uttermost of all things, hold it safe in no body that their own errors make doubtful to them. And such seems every man that moves any passion but pleasure, in those intricate natures.

Now after the sixteenth day was past, and the very shoulder-bones of this delicate patient worn through his skin with constant and obedient posturing his body to their art; he judiciously observing the pangs his wound stung him with by fits, together with many other symptoms of decay, few or none of recovery, began rather to submit his body to these artists than any further to believe in them. During which suspense, he one morning lifting up the clothes for change and ease of his body, smelt some extraordinary noisom savor about him, differing from oils and salves, as he conceived. And, either out of natural delicacy or at least care not to offend others, grew a little troubled with it; which they that sat by perceiving besought him to let them know what sudden indisposition he felt? Sir Philip ingenuously told it, and desired them as ingenuously to confess, whether they felt any such noisom thing or no? They all protested against it upon their credits. Whence Sir Philip presently gave this severe doom upon himself; that it was inward mortification, and a welcome messenger of death.

Shortly after, when the surgeons came to dress him, he acquainted them with these piercing intelligences between him and his mortality. Which though they opened by authority of books, paralleling of accidents and other artificial probabilities; yet moved they no alteration in this man, who judged too truly of his estate, and from more certain grounds than the vanity of opinion in erring artistes could possibly pierce into. So that afterward, how freely soever he left his body subject to their practice, and continued a patient beyond exception, yet did he not change his mind, but as having utterly cast off all hope or desire of recovery, made and divided that little span of life which was left him in this manner.

First, he called the ministers unto him, who were all excellent men of divers nations, and before them made such a confession of Christian faith as no book but the heart can truly and feelingly deliver. Then desired them to accompany him in prayer, wherein he besought leave to lead the assembly in respect—as he said—that the secret sins of his own heart were best known to himself, and out of that true sense, he more properly instructed to apply the eternal Sacrifice of our Saviour’s passion and merits to him. His religious zeal prevailed with this humbly devout, and afflicted company; in which well-chosen progress of his, howsoever they were all moved, and those sweet motions witnessed by sighs and tears, even interrupting their common devotion; yet could no man judge in himself, much less in others, whether this rack of heavenly agony, whereupon they all stood, was forced by reason of sorrow for him, or admiration of him ; the fire of this phoenix being hardly able out of any ashes to produce his equal, as they conceived.

Here this first mover stayed the motions in every man by staying himself. Whether to give rest to that frail wounded flesh, of his unable to bear the bent of eternity so much affected any longer; or whether to abstract that spirit more inwardly, and by chewing as it were the cud of meditation, to imprint these excellent images in his soul, who can judge but God? Notwithstanding, in this change—it would seem—there was little or no change in the object. For instantly after prayer, he entreated his choir of divine philosophers about him to

deliver the opinion of the ancient heathen touching the immortality of the soul. First, to see what true knowledge she retains of her own essence, out of the light of herself; then to parallel with it the most pregnant authorities of the Old and New Testament, as supernatural revelations sealed up from our flesh, for the divine light of faith to reveal and work by. Not that he wanted instruction or assurance; but because this fixing of a lover's thoughts upon those eternal beauties was not only a cheering up of his decaying spirits, but as it were a taking possession of that immortal inheritance, which was given unto him by his brother-hood in Christ.

The next change used was the calling for his will, which though at first sight it may seem a descent from heaven to earth again; yet he that observes the distinction of those offices which he practiced in bestowing his own shall discern that as the soul of man is all in all and all in every part, so was the goodness of his nature equally dispersed into the greatest and least actions of his too short life. Which will of his will ever remain for a witness to the world that those sweet and large, even dying affections in him, could no more be contracted with the narrowness of pain, grief, and sickness than any sparkle of our immortality can be privately buried in the shadow of death.

Here again this restless soul of his—changing only the air, and not the cords of her harmony—calls for music; especially that song which himself had entitled, *La Cuisse Rompue*. Partly—as I conceive by the name—to show that the glory of mortal flesh was shaken in him. And by the music itself to fashion and enfranchise his heavenly soul into that everlasting harmony of angels, whereof these concords were a kind of terrestrial echo. And in this supreme, or middle orb of contemplation, he blessedly went on, within a circular motion, to the end of all flesh.

The last scene of this tragedy, was the parting of the two brothers; the weaker showing infinite strength in suppressing sorrow, and the stronger infinite weakness in expressing it. So far did invaluable worthiness in the dying brother enforce the living² to descend beneath his own worth, and by abundance of childish tears bewail the public in his particular loss. Yea, so far was his true remission of mind transformed into ejulation that Sir Philip—in whom all earthly passion did even as it were flash, like lights ready to burn out—recall those spirits together with a strong virtue, but weak voice; mildly blaming him for relaxing the frail strengths left to support him; in this finale combat of separation at hand. And to stop this natural torrent of affection in both, took his leave, in these admonishing words:

Love my memory, cherish my friends. Their faith to me may assure you they are honest. But above all, govern your will and affections by the will and Word of your Creator; in me, beholding the end of this world, with all her vanities.

And with this farewell, desired the company to lead him away. Here the noble gentleman ended the too-short line of his life; in which path whosoever is not confident that he walked the next way to eternal rest will be found to judge uncharitably.

Alexander B. Grosart, ed., *The Works in Verse and Prose of the Right Honourable Lord Brooke* (1870), IV:129–140.

² Robert Sidney (1563–1626)