

# Stronger Than Death

By Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

Who shall tell the story  
As it was?  
Write it with the heart's blood?  
(Pale ink, alas!)  
Speak it with the soul's lips,  
Or be dumb?  
Tell me, singers fled, and  
Song to come!

No answer; like a shell the silence curls,  
And far within it leans a whisper out,  
Breathless and inarticulate, and whirls  
And dies as dies an ailing dread or doubt.

And I — since there is found none else than I,  
No stronger, sweeter voice than mine, to tell  
This tale of love that cannot stoop to die —  
Were fain to be the whisper in the shell;

Were fain to lose and spend myself within  
The sacred silence of one mighty heart,  
And leaning from it, hidden there, to win  
Some finer ear that, listening, bends apart.

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“Fly for your lives!” The entrails of the earth  
Trembled, resounding to the cry,  
That, like a chasing ghost, around the mine  
Crept ghastly: “The pit's on fire!  
Fly!”

The shaft, a poisoned throat whose breath was death,  
Like hell itself grown sick of sin,  
Hurled up the men; haggard and terrible;  
Leaping upon us through the din

That all our voices made; and back we shrank  
From them as from the starting dead;  
Recoiling, shrieked, but knew not why we shrieked;  
And cried, but knew not what we said.

And still that awful mouth did toss them up:  
“The last is safe! The last is sound!”  
We sobbed to see them where they sunk and crawled,  
Like beaten hounds, upon the ground.

Some sat with lolling, idiot head, and laughed;  
One reached to clutch the air away  
His gasping lips refused; some cursed; and one  
Knelt down—but he was old—to pray.

We huddled there together all that night,  
Women and men from the wild Town;  
I heard a shrill voice cry, “We all are up,  
But some—ye have forgot—are down!”

“Who is forgot?” We stared from face to face;  
But answering through the dark, she said  
(It was a woman): “Eh, ye need not fret;  
None is forgot except the dead.

“The buried dead asleep there in the works—  
Eh, Lord! It must be hot below!  
Ye’ll keep ’em waking all the livelong night,  
To set the mine a-burning so!”

And all the night the mine did burn and burst,  
As if the earth were but a shell  
Through which a child had thrust a finger-touch,  
And, peal on dreadful peal, the bell,

The miner’s ’larum, wrenched the quaking air;  
And through the flaring light we saw  
The solid forehead of the eternal hill  
Take on a human look of awe;

As if it were a living thing, that spoke  
And flung some protest to the sky,  
As if it were a dying thing that saw,  
But could not tell, a mystery.

The bells ran ringing by us all that night.  
The bells ceased jangling with the morn.  
About the blackened works,—sunk, tossed, and rent,—  
We gathered in the foreign dawn;

Women and men, with eyes askance and strange,  
Fearing, we knew not what, to see.  
Against the hollowed jaws of the torn hill,  
Why creep the miners silently?

From man to man, a whisper chills: "See, see,  
The sunken shaft of Thirty-one!  
The earth, a traitor to her trust, has fled  
And turned the dead unto the sun.

"And here—O God of life and death! Thy work,  
Thine only, this!" With foreheads bare,  
We knelt, and drew him, young and beautiful,  
Thirty years dead, into the air.

Thus had he perished; buried from the day;  
By the swift poison caught and slain;  
By the kind poison unmarred, rendered fair  
Back to the upper earth again—

The warm and breathing earth that knew him not;  
And men and women wept to see—  
For kindred had he none among us all—  
How lonely even the dead may be.

We wept, I say; we wept who knew him not;  
But sharp, a tearless woman sprang  
From out the crowd (that quavering voice I knew),  
And terrible her cry outrang:

"I pass, I pass ye all! Make way! Stand back!  
Mine is the place ye yield," she said.  
"He was my lover once—my own, my own;  
Oh, he was mine, and he is dead!"

Women and men, we gave her royal way;  
Proud as young joy the smile she had.  
We knew her for a neighbor in the Town,  
Unmated, solitary, sad.

Youth, hope, and love, we gave her silent way,  
Calm as a sigh she swept us all;  
Then swiftly, as a word leans to a thought,  
We saw her lean to him, and fall

Upon the happy body of the dead—

An aged woman, poor and gray.  
Bright as the day, immortal as young Love,  
And glorious as life, he lay.

Her shrunken hands caressed his rounded cheek,  
Her white locks on his golden hair  
Fell sadly. "O love!" she cried with shriveled lips,  
"O love, my love, my own, my fair!

"See, I am old, and all my heart is gray.  
They say the dead are aye forgot—  
There, there, my sweet! I whisper, leaning low,  
That all these women hear it not.

"Deep in the darkness there, didst think on me?  
High in the heavens, have ye been true?  
Since I was young, and since you called me fair,  
I never loved a man but you.

And here, my boy, you lie, so safe, so still" —  
But there she hushed; and in the dim,  
Cool morning, timid as a bride, but calm  
As a glad mother, gathered him

Unto her heart. And all the people then,  
Women and men, and children too,  
Crept back, and back, and back, and on,  
Still as the morning shadows do.

And left them in the lifting dawn—they two,  
On her sad breast, his shining head  
Stirred softly, as were he the living one,  
And she had been the moveless dead.

And yet we crept on, back, and back, and on  
The distance widened like the sky,  
Between our little restlessness,  
And Love so godlike that it could not die.