

THE SOLDIER'S TALE

Music by
Igor Stravinsky
English Version by
Donald Pippin
(1991, 1996)

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The Soldier's Tale

Stravinsky

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A small platform stage, with a stool (or barrel) on either side. The Narrator sits on one of the stools in front of a small table on which is a jug of white wine. The orchestra is on the other side of the stage.

PART I

Music: "Marching Song"

NARRATOR *(during music)*
On a dusty, country road, we see
A soldier marching wearily.
A two-week leave is all he's got —
One precious day already shot.
Out of sorts, grimy, stiff and sore,
Still many miles to go before
He's standing at his own front door.

The curtain rises. As the music continues. The scene represents the bank of a stream. The Soldier enters and stops. Music ends.

NARRATOR Ah! Here the breeze is cool and sweet ...
A fitting place to rest the feet.

(Soldier sits)
Join the army! What a joke!
Always marching, always broke,
(opens knapsack)
His few belongings scattered, tossed
About — Good grief! St. Joseph lost!
(A small medallion, that's to say,
His patron saint in gold inlay.)

Ah, here it is ... And from the knapsack spill
Spare bullets, papers, what you will.
A watch, some bills, a mirror black
With grime he pulls from the capacious sack,
Not overlooking, by the way,
A photograph of his fiancée.
To plumb the depths, he digs within,
Pulls out a beat-up violin.

SOLDIER *(tuning fiddle)*
A piece of junk, not worth a dime!
You have to tune it every time.

He begins to play. Music: "Airs by a Stream." The Devil enters, a little old man with a butterfly net. Unnoticed by the Soldier, he stops, listens, then approaches the Soldier from behind. Music ends.

DEVIL Give me your violin.

SOLDIER No!

DEVIL Then sell it.

SOLDIER No!

DEVIL I've got a book I'll trade for it.

SOLDIER Can't read.

DEVIL Who can? It matters not a whit.
Think nothing of it. Heavens! Why
Take on a task so dull and dry?
Unlike those tomes that weight the shelf,
My clever book will read itself.
More than a book, a treasure chest!
You pick it up, it does the rest.
You need but open, then behold
A private fortune, wealth untold,
Securities, hard money, GOLD!

SOLDIER Well, maybe I'll just have a look.

DEVIL Go right ahead. Here, take the book.

He hands the book to the Soldier, who begins to read, moving his lips and following the words with one finger.

NARRATOR The GNP, the price index —
What's this? No violence, no sex?

SOLDIER I can't make heads or tails of it.

DEVIL (He's somewhat backward, let's admit.)

SOLDIER But sir! You say this book's a gold mine. No offense,
But man to man, my fiddle's hardly worth two cents.

DEVIL Which proves me honest to a fault.
"Big-hearted Sam" I have been called.
You've got a bargain; you're in luck!
If you have half an ounce of pluck,
Grab fate and fortune by the wrist.

SOLDIER All right, all right. If you insist.

He gives the fiddle to the Devil and goes back to his reading.

NARRATOR Financial news, stock market rates
For Friday, June the fifth ... Now what's
Today? Hm, May the first ... Ye Gods!
A foolproof way to beat the odds!
The future comes to you! Why wait?
You lift the curtain in advance
And thus repeal the law of chance.

DEVIL (*abruptly, after trying in vain to play the fiddle*)
Oh, rats! You'll have to come home with me!

SOLDIER What for? Why should I?

DEVIL Well, you see,
I can't seem to make the fiddle work.
These wayward fingers go berserk.
To play the instrument like you,
I'll need a lesson, maybe two.
So, come! You'll teach me all you know,
Then bright and early, home you go!

SOLDIER Where do you live? How far from here?

DEVIL Close by. Come, come! The choice is clear:
You want the book, or do you not?

SOLDIER A two-week pass is all I've got.
With time so short, I'm not so sure.

DEVIL Nonsense! What's a slight detour?
My coach, though not a Cadillac,
In no time gets us there and back.

SOLDIER My fiancée is expecting me.

DEVIL She'll greet you all the more eagerly.

SOLDIER You'll put me up?

DEVIL The perfect host!
Bed and board — three days at most!
A paid vacation, that's the plan,
Then home again, a self-made man.

SOLDIER The menu?

DEVIL Name your own request.

SOLDIER And drink?

DEVIL A dry champagne, the best!
SOLDIER I'll need a smoke.
DEVIL None finer than a
 Cigar imported from Havana.

The curtain falls

NARRATOR With doubts and scruples swept aside,
 The prick of conscience mollified,
 Our juvenile accepts the plan
 Suggested by the nice old man.
 They reach his stately mansion, where
 The dainties on the bill of fare,
 Surpassing expectation far,
 Are rounded off with a cigar.

 Our hero's hosted, banqueted,
 Exactly as the old man said,
 Who, by the way, is soon enough
 Playing the fiddle up to snuff.
 Going from pretty bad to so-so,
 Presto! A violin virtuoso!
 And lucky Joseph's book has made
 Him more than happy with the trade.

 Two days slip by, and come the third;
 The old boy says: "Have I kept my word?
 My promises have all been met?"
 The Soldier nods, replies, "You bet."
 "A good night's sleep? No complaints, I hope?"
 And Joseph's terse reply is "Nope."
 "Then off we go, it's home for you!
 My waiting carriage we'll climb into."
 Off like the wind! And in a flash,
 Poor Joseph's face has turned to ash.

NARRATOR The carriage soars into the air;
 Our hero clutches at his hair.
 Benumbed, half-paralyzed with fright,
 He hears the old man: "Hold on tight!"
 He grabs his seat, he holds his breath,
 Awaits the plunge to instant death.

 "You're satisfied? Well satisfied?"
 Joseph, bounced from side to side,
 Far above field, church and town,
 Cries, "Hey! Look out! Slow down, slow down!"
 His teeth on edge, his forehead mopped ...
 How long? Who knows? ... Time stopped.

Music: "Marching Song", as at the beginning.

NARRATOR Back on the dusty, country road,
We leave this thrilling episode,
Rejoin the Soldier on his way
To his mother and to his fiancée.
Straight ahead, no more delay.
At last, if just a little late,
He opens up his own front gate.

Music stops.

SOLDIER Yes, here I am! Home safe and sound!
A minute, let me look around —
The broken fence, the apple tree ...
“Ah, Mrs. Miller! Look, it's me!”
No smile, no word of welcome. Queer.
It's obvious she didn't hear.
But who's that coming round the bend?
It's good old Lou, my honest friend!
“Hey, buddy, look! Surprise, surprise!
Don't tell me you don't recognize ...
It's Joseph, Joseph! Home at last!”
Why does he turn away so fast?
I'll take a walk about the town;
I need some time to settle down ...

Yes, there's the tavern, as before,
The village green, the corner store,
The steeple with the weathervane ...
Has everybody gone insane?
These crazy folk! They stare almost
As if they're looking at a ghost.
“Good to be back! Long time no see!
It's Joseph ... You remember me.”

NARRATOR Some bolt, some bursting into tears;
Oak doors slam shut when he appears.
Oh, well! So much for celebrating!
Back home at least dear Mom is waiting.
Alas, the lady screams and faints
While calling on the holy saints.
Nonplused, and frankly somewhat vexed,
He visits his fiancée next,
His confidence now on the skids ...
Good Lord! Married! ... Two kids!

Dead silence.

SOLDIER (*dully*) You devil! Oh, you dirty lout!
You think that I've not found you out?
Oh, yes! I know you now, though I'm
Ashamed to say, it took some time.

(*loudly*)
Three days, indeed! No, no! Ten years!
So that explains the slamming doors,
The hostile looks, the tears!
A ghost, a spook — that's me — comes back
To give his friends a heart attack,

(*softly*)
To walk about the earth again,
A phantom barred from living men.

(*pause, then loudly*)
You devil! You Beelzebub!
I listened, though. Ah, there's the rub!
But I was hungry, tired, hot.
Does that excuse me? It does not!
I'd never even met the guy,
Yet fell in line, don't ask me why.
How could anybody be so dumb?
Instead of saying, "Beat it, chum,"
I fell in line, don't ask me why;
I'd never even met the guy ...

The curtain rises. A village belfry is seen in the distance. The Devil appears, disguised as a cattle merchant. In the middle of the stage, leaning on his cane, he waits.

SOLDIER I should have marched on straight ahead;
To say the least, I might have said,
Away! You are no friend of mine!"
But did I? No! I fell in line.
A fool! I was swindled, taken in,
Tricked into selling my violin.
Oh, woe is me! Oh, what to do?
Oh, what on earth am I to do?

Music: "Pastorale." The curtain falls. Music ends. Curtain rises. Same scene. The Devil is still there, in the same position.

SOLDIER You creepy, crawling snake! It's you!

DEVIL (*not moving*) Well, well! Another rendezvous.

SOLDIER You fiend! You Mephistopheles!

DEVIL A little deference, if you please.
Do I detect some slight upheaval?
You hurt my feelings. What! Me, evil?
There, there! Let's take the larger view;

Go on with what you intend to do.
You've not forgotten, I daresay,
The book I gave you the other day?

SOLDIER

It's in my kit.

DEVIL

Ah, yes! No doubt.
Then what's the whining all about?
You're in clover, if perchance you care
To become a multi-millionaire.
But first, be a soldier, just for once ...
You owe it to our audience.
RIGHT FACE! ATTENTION! That's it.

(Indicating the sword.)

Put that away. Get rid of the kit.
Over there! RIGHT FACE! ATTENTION!
Take off the cap. Put this one on.
The latest style! You want the best.
Remove the khaki; button the vest.
ABOUT FACE! We've not yet done.
HOLD RANK! RIGHT FACE! ATTEN — TION!
The book, where did you put it? What ...
Oh, yes, you told me. I forgot.
Go fetch it, dig inside the pack —

The Soldier rummages, pulls out various objects, the mirror, the medallion.

No, just the book. Now hand it back.
I warn you, it must not come to harm.
And not like that, but under the arm.
The book's a fortune, not a toy —
Under the arm, that's right, my boy.

He takes the violin from his own pocket.

I've got mine here. You've got yours there.
To each his own — all fair and square.

He leads the Soldier out. The stage is empty for a moment. Music, the same as at the beginning of the scene. The curtain falls. The music ends.

NARRATOR

He reads the book, his profits soar,
His shares increase; he reads some more.
Yes, time itself he overtakes,
Side-stepping the ill-starred mistakes
Assumed to be our daily lot;
The more he reads, the more he's got.
At first a humble merchant, soon
He's money-lender, then tycoon.
It helps on Tuesday to peruse
The highs and lows of Thursday's news.
Where lesser mortals grope and guess,
He's blessed with guaranteed success.

The book provides the magic key
To infinite prosperity.
Beyond the dreams of avarice,
Goods, gold and silver soon are his,
Jewels, paintings, stables, castles —
The holy grail without the hassles.
To giddy heights you too could climb
Were you on such good terms with time.

One idle evening near sundown
He takes a stroll about the town,
Where people, birds and flowers share
The sweetly scented summer air.
As children play and linnets sing,
He thinks: "I'm the man with everything."
His pockets full, his spirits high,
He smiles at every passerby,
And revels in the friendly sound
Of talk and laughter making the round.

Each night thereafter he repeats
His tour of genial, lively streets.
By Saturday he's had enough
Of children playing blind-man's buff.
He's able to resist the charm
Of lovers strolling arm in arm.
In fact, one might go on to say
He's listless, moody, bored, blasé.

NARRATOR (or SOLDIER?)

Yes, I have everything, it's true,
So what is left for me to do?
How is it, these have-nothings have
The simple nourishment I crave?
I'm rich, but where, oh where to find
The missing thread, the ties that bind?
If I have everything, how come
My empty heart is cold and numb?
Who cares for butter on his bread
When the appetite itself is dead?

No, I have nothing! They have all!
Oh, Satan! Why did I heed your call?
It's you that led me into this
Unbounded, barren, dark abyss.
The book has got to tell me more:
To regain the nothing I had before.

(telephone rings)

Hello? Long distance? Singapore?
Don't sell at once. Hold out for more.

(a knock)

From Tokyo, a telegram.
Aha! A royal flush! Grand slam!

Curtain rises. The Soldier, seated at his desk, is thumbing through the book.

SOLDIER The seven seas belong to me!
I live in prison, and my jailer keeps the key.
I'm envied, as no man before —
An outcast, starving, freezing, pounding at the door.
I'm rich — yes, rich beyond the range of calculation!
A dead man living in damnation.

The Devil, dressed as an old clothes' woman, pops his head in from the left, unseen by the Soldier.

DEVIL (*in normal voice*)
So much remorse, so much chagrin
For a lousy, two-bit violin.

SOLDIER (*looking up*)
Just go away, leave me alone!
A waste of breath, I should have known.
I bravely start by saying no,
Then wind up going with the flow.
This time I'll not cave in, I can't!

He throws the book to the floor. The Devil pops his head in from the other side.

DEVIL (*in falsetto*) May one come in?

SOLDIER What do you want?

DEVIL A private word or two — no more.

(hands him the book)
Here, sir. A little book left lying on the floor.

SOLDIER What else?

DEVIL Outside I have a sack
Of odds and ends, of bric a brac,
Some rarities you have to see ...

SOLDIER No thanks.

DEVIL I beg on bended knee!

SOLDIER (*pulling out a purse*)
I've work to do. Take this and go.

DEVIL One has one's dignity, you know.
I, a beggar crying out for aid?
No, no! I live by honest trade.
I've got my knapsack at the door;
The contents, oh, do let's explore!

He leaves abruptly, then returns with the Soldier's knapsack, which he places on the floor.

Just look! A watch! Some novelties,
Fine laces guaranteed to please.
A necklace! No? I never try
To force a gentleman to buy.
You're single, yes? Or am I wrong?
This ring I'll sell you for a song.
You shake the head. Well, let's keep going —
A mirror I'm embarrassed showing.
But this medallion! St. Joseph! Your namesake!
The gold is absolutely genuine, not fake.
And here's a photograph, with frame —
Some lady, I once knew the name.
Still no? But wait! 'Twould be a sin
To pass up this sweet violin.

He pulls out the Soldier's violin, displaying it to the audience. The Soldier rises abruptly. The Devil, facing the audience, talks over his shoulder as he walks away.

SOLDIER How much? How much? I'll buy! I'll make amends ...

DEVIL One hates to haggle with old friends.
Here, try it out. You'll like the tone.
The price we'll settle later on ...

The Soldier seizes the violin. He tries to play, but the violin remains silent.

Music: "Little Airs by the Stream." The Soldier turns around. The Devil has disappeared. The Soldier hurls the violin into the wings, then returns to his desk, as the music continues. He picks up the book and tears it into a thousand pieces. The curtain falls. The music ends.

PART II

Music: "Marching Song" as at the beginning of Part I.

NARRATOR *(during music)*
This country road by now we know;
The Soldier on the march also.
Marching, marching as before,
But homeward bound, alas! No more.
Recurrent landmarks we can see —
A brook, a bridge, an age-old tree.
Where is he headed for? Beats me.

Music stops.

And don't ask him; he couldn't say,
Only that he had to get away.
His wealth had grown too great to bear
(A burden some would gladly share.)

And so he's off to find a cure
In being virtuous and poor.
A man reborn, he's off the hook,
And rid of that infernal book.
It's torn to smithereens. He's back
To nothing, not even his old knapsack.

Reprise: "Marching Song."

NARRATOR

So down the wearisome country road
He goes. Not back to his old abode,
Ah, no! For uncharted regions bound,
Our haunted hero breaks new ground.
He journeys onward, come what may,
Having marched already many a day.

Music stops

Another country, a new frontier
Confronts our former financier.
A village looms in sight. Well, well!
It's bound to have a cheap hotel.
It does indeed; he finds the bar,
Orders a beer, another, then a cigar.
Then what to do? His thirst allayed,
He turns to watch the passing parade
Through muslin curtained windows looking on the square,
Where multi-colored leaves dance in the autumn air.

And suddenly the beat of drum
Is followed by a lively hum,
As banners wave and trumpets call.
A proclamation! Listen, all!
A message full of dread we bring:
Alas, the daughter of the king
Is gravely ill and sinking fast,
Each breath now feared to be her last.
She never leaves her bed, too weak
To swallow food or even speak.
Our king — a king and loving father both,
Has sworn a solemn, sacred oath:
“The man who makes her well again
Shall be the heir to my domain.
Restore her former vigor, and
That day you gain my daughter's hand.”

As Joseph listens to the end,
A man comes in, says “Howdy, friend.
You don't know me, but here's a clue:
I was a soldier, same as you.
I see you sitting here, looking grim:
I say to myself, ‘Better talk to him ...
Strictly for his own benefit;
He could use some cheering up a bit.’

Silence. The Soldier bows his head and remains still. The Devil walks around the table.

DEVIL This violin have you forgot?
 It once was yours, but now it's not.
 You failed to reckon on the cost.
 My friend, you'll lose, because you're lost!

Silence. The Soldier still does not move.

DEVIL The seven, the ten, the queen of hearts!
 So victory is in the cards,
 Just waiting for the follow-through ... !
 I've got the instrument, not you.

He circles round the Soldier, flourishing the violin.

SOLDIER *(dully)* Again he's got me by the throat.
 My chances are at best remote.
 Me, I have nothing, nothing at all ...

The Narrator addresses the Soldier directly.

NARRATOR Brace up! The Devil yet may fall.
 Land on him, rub his nose in the dust.
 Go for the groin, if you must.
 Just say to yourself, "I can, I can!"

SOLDIER *(not moving)*
 Impossible! He's not a man.

NARRATOR Now let's be blunt. Here's how it is:
 He's got control because you still have money of his.

The Soldier raises his head and looks at the Narrator.

 Get rid of the gold, and to begin,
 Propose a game. He's bound to win.

SOLDIER And I'm home free, hip hip hooray!
 (to Devil)
 Sir, I've got money. Come, let's play!

DEVIL How's that?

SOLDIER I said, let's have a game.

DEVIL My favorite way to pass the time.

NARRATOR *(to Soldier)*
 He'll win the pot; he's got the clout.
 And you will lose, but he'll lose out.

SOLDIER *(emptying his pockets)*
 Here's copper, gold and silver, too.

DEVIL *(placing the violin across his knees)*
 Well, well!

SOLDIER How much?

DEVIL Ten cents will do.

SOLDIER A dollar a point, not a penny less!

DEVIL Just as you like; I acquiesce.

The Soldier shuffles, the Devil cuts.

 Before your funds go up in smoke,
 I warn you, play is not a joke.

They play. The Devil wins.

 The book, the fiddle, both long gone,
 And the downward path goes on and on.

They play. The Devil wins.

DEVIL Your few remaining pennies — poof!
 You'll find yourself without a roof,
 Feeling the pinch of poverty
 Hunger and cold, c-o-l-d.

They play. The Devil wins.

 A homeless beggar on the street,
 “Spare change! Please, just a bite to eat!”

They play. The Devil wins again.

NARRATOR *(to Soldier)*
 Put up ten bucks.

SOLDIER Let's go for ten!

DEVIL You're mad ... insane!

NARRATOR Come, raise the ante once again.

SOLDIER Fifty!

DEVIL *(already with some difficulty)*
 Say, take it easy. Not so rash.
 I win again ...

NARRATOR Stake all your cash.

SOLDIER *(emptying his pockets)*
 Here's all I've got.

DEVIL *(getting up slowly)*
 The game ... is through!
 The ace ... the ace of spades ... and you?

SOLDIER The Queen of Hearts!

DEVIL It's me ... me again. *(he totters)*

NARRATOR You see, it works!

The Soldier pushes away his chair, puts his hands on his thighs, and bends forward, examining the Devil who is swaying more and more.

NARRATOR The Devil's grip is on the wane.
 He's falling, but there's more to do.
 A little drink should bring him to.
 You'll want to toast his health, of course.

The Soldier approaches the Devil with a glass, which the Devil tries to push away. The Soldier forces him to drink.

SOLDIER Yes, have a drink, to reinforce
 The shattered nerves, relieve the load.
 To long life! Now one for the road!

DEVIL The nerve! ...

NARRATOR He's falling, fading fast.

And indeed the Devil falls back in his chair, and his body sinks forward across the table.

SOLDIER My days in custody are past!
 May I reclaim this piece of wood?

He starts to take the violin; the Devil twitches.

NARRATOR He moves! One more will do him good.

The Soldier again empties a glass down the Devil's throat.

SOLDIER Out like a light! Seven ... eight ... nine ... ten.

NARRATOR And you can claim your own again.

The Soldier takes the violin, and standing beside the Devil, begins to play. Music: "Little Concert." The Devil falls from his chair. The curtain falls.

NARRATOR *(during "Little Concert")*
 Princess, rejoice! And rest assured,
 You're on the way to being cured.
 A new-made man has come to call,

A man now capable of all.
Your life and health he can restore
Because he's found himself once more.
Delivered from the chains of hell,
He's free to make you free as well.

End of "Little Concert."

The curtain rises. The chamber of the Princess, who is lying on her bed, without moving. The Soldier enters and begins to play. Music. She opens her eyes, turns her head towards the Soldier, and smiles.

Dances: Tango. Valse. Rag-time. At the end of the music, the Soldier and the Princess fall into each other's arms.

Horrible shrieks from off-stage. The Devil enters, dressed as a devil. He is crawling on all fours. He circles round the Soldier, at times seeming to implore him for the violin, at other times trying to snatch it away from him, as the Soldier threatens him with the bow.

The Princess takes refuge behind the Soldier, moving as he moves, in order to stay hidden behind him. The Devil, sometimes falling back, sometimes springing forward, accelerates his movements.

The Soldier has an idea. He begins to play the violin. Music. The Devil is compelled to dance. Contortions. He tries to hold his legs still with his hands, but is no less bewitched. He falls down, exhausted. The music ends.

The Soldier takes the Princess by the hand. It is evident that she is no longer afraid. At a sign from the Soldier, she takes the devil by one paw, and the two of them drag him off stage. They return, once again to fall into each other's arms. Music: "Little Chorale."

The Devil suddenly pops his head round from the back. Music: "Devils Song."

DEVIL (during music)

You've won for now, but I can wait.
The realm you inherit is not great;

The Soldier and the Princess turn toward the Devil, then go back to their embrace.

Its borders limit and confine.
The day you cross them, you are mine.

Same business for the Soldier and the Princess.

Accept these limits; otherwise,
Your wife falls sick again; this time she dies.
Set foot upon that fatal path —
Watch out! Beware the Devil's wrath!
I seldom brag, I seldom boast,
But on my rack I'll see you roast.

Same business. First bars of the "Grand Chorale", as the curtain falls.

NARRATOR Take heed: You must not seek to add
To what you have, what you once had,
Nor seek to be, if you prefer,
Both what you are and what you were.
However grand, however proud,
To have it all is not allowed.
Your lot contains one happiness;
To look for more brings less, far less.

Reprise: "Chorale."

“All's mine!” reflects our lucky guy.
One day his wife says with a sigh,
“I know so little about you, dear.
Before we met ... I long to hear ...”

Reprise: "Chorale."

“There's nothing much to tell,” says he.
“Lived in a village — Mom and me,
A valley many miles from here.
Just where, I'm not exactly clear.
Good Lord, how many years it's been!
Oh, yes! I was a soldier then.
I started home, with two weeks pay,
And somehow or other, lost the way ...”

Reprise and End of "Chorale."

NARRATOR “Suppose ... Suppose we go there ...”
“Out of bounds, dear heart.”
“But we'll be there and back before we start,
And no one even has to know.
You need a change. Oh, do let's go!
We can! We must! 'Twill do you good
To see your dear old neighborhood.
Besides, my sweet, you can't deny
You want it just as much as I.”

“Come, give me a little kiss,” he says.
“No, not until you answer yes.”
He thinks it over, says “Why not?
My aged Mom I'd like a lot
To see; perhaps she'll recognize
Her son this time, grown old and maybe wise.
We'll bring her back to live with us!
That clinches it! Perfection plus!
To all my present blessings add
The everything that once I had.”

At this moment, the Devil, in a magnificent red costume, crosses in front of the curtain.

The two set out; they're nearly there.
You can almost see the village square.

He's first to reach the home frontier;
She's fallen behind. "Do hurry, dear."

The Devil crosses again.

He calls to her, he turns around ...

The curtain rises. The village spire and the frontier post, as in Scene II.

The Soldier enters, beckoning to his wife. He walks forward, and reaches the frontier post. The Devil appears in front of him. He has the violin again, and begins to play. Music: "The Devil's Triumphal March."

The Soldier hangs his head. He begins to follow the Devil, very slowly, but without resistance.

A voice calls from the wings. He stops for a moment. At the insistence of the Devil, the Devil and the Soldier leave the stage. The voice calls for the last time. The curtain falls. The music ends.

END OF THE SOLDIER'S TALE