

‘Go out this way,’ said she, opening a small private door, ‘and come back at eleven o’clock; we will then terminate this conversation. Kitty will conduct you to my chamber.’

The poor girl almost fainted at hearing these words.

‘Well, mademoiselle, what are you thinking about, standing there like a statue? Do as I bid you: show the chevalier out; and this evening at eleven o’clock—you have heard what I said.’

‘It appears that these appointments are all made for eleven o’clock,’ thought d’Artagnan; ‘that’s a settled custom.’

Milady held out her hand to him, which he kissed tenderly.

‘But,’ said he, as he retired as quickly as possible from the reproaches of Kitty, ‘I must not play the fool. This woman is certainly a great liar. I must take care.’

Chapter XXXVII

Milady’s Secret



d’ARTAGNAN left the hôtel instead of going up at once to Kitty’s chamber, as she endeavoured to persuade him to do—and that for two reasons: the first, because by this means he should escape reproaches, recriminations, and prayers; the second, because he was not sorry to have an opportunity of reading his own thoughts and endeavouring, if possible, to fathom those of this woman.

What was most clear in the matter was that d’Artagnan loved Milady like a madman, and that she did not love him at all. In an instant d’Artagnan perceived that the best way in which he could act would be to go home and write Milady a long letter, in which he would confess to her that he and De Wardes were, up to the present moment absolutely the same, and that consequently he could not undertake, without committing suicide, to kill the Comte de Wardes. But he also was spurred on by a ferocious desire of vengeance. He wished to subdue this woman in his own name; and as this vengeance appeared to him to have a certain sweetness in it, he could not make up his mind to renounce it.

He walked six or seven times round the Place Royale, turning at every ten steps to look at the light in Milady’s apartment, which was to be seen through the blinds. It was evident that this time the young woman was not in such haste to retire to her apartment as she had been the first.

At length the light disappeared. With this light was extinguished the last irresolution in the heart of d’Artagnan. He recalled to his mind the details of the first night, and with a beating heart and a brain on fire he re-entered the hôtel and flew toward Kitty’s chamber.

The poor girl, pale as death and trembling in all her limbs, wished to delay her lover; but Milady, with her ear on the watch, had heard the noise d'Aragnan had made, and opening the door, said, 'Come in.'

All this was of such incredible immodesty, of such monstrous effrontery, that d'Aragnan could scarcely believe what he saw or what he heard. He imagined himself to be drawn into one of those fantastic intrigues one meets in dreams. He, however, darted not the less quickly toward Milady, yielding to that magnetic attraction which the loadstone exercises over iron.

As the door closed after them Kitry rushed toward it. Jealousy, fury, offended pride, all the passions in short that dispute the heart of an outraged woman in love, urged her to make a revelation; but she reflected that she would be totally lost if she confessed having assisted in such a machination, and above all, that d'Aragnan would also be lost to her forever. This last thought of love counselled her to make this last sacrifice.

D'Aragnan, on his part, had gained the summit of all his wishes. It was no longer a rival who was beloved; it was himself who was apparently beloved. A secret voice whispered to him, at the bottom of his heart, that he was but an instrument of vengeance, that he was only caressed till he had given death; but pride, but self-love, but madness silenced this voice and stifled its murmurs. And then our Gascon, with that large quantity of conceit which we know he possessed, compared himself with De Wardes, and asked himself why, after all, he should not be beloved for himself?

He was absorbed entirely by the sensations of the moment. Milady was no longer for him that woman of fatal intentions who had for a moment terrified him; she was an ardent, passionate mistress, abandoning herself to love which she also seemed to feel. Two hours thus glided away. When the transports of the two lovers were calmer, Milady, who had not the same motives for forgetfulness that d'Aragnan had, was the first to return to reality, and asked the young man if the means which were on the morrow to bring on the encounter between him and De Wardes were already arranged in his mind.

But d'Aragnan, whose ideas had taken quite another course, forgot himself like a fool, and answered gallantly that it was too late to think about duels and sword thrusts.

This coldness toward the only interests that occupied her mind terrified Milady, whose questions became more pressing.

'I know it because yesterday Monsieur de Wardes, in a saloon where I was, showed a ring which he said he had received from you.'

'Wretch!' cried Milady.

The epithet, as may be easily understood, resounded to the very bottom of d'Aragnan's heart.

'Well?' continued she.

'Well, I will avenge you of this wretch,' replied d'Aragnan, giving himself the airs of Don Japhet of Armenia.

'Thanks, my brave friend!' cried Milady; 'and when shall I be avenged?'

'Tomorrow—immediately—when you please!'

Milady was about to cry out, 'Immediately,' but she reflected that such precipitation would not be very gracious toward d'Aragnan.

Besides, she had a thousand precautions to take, a thousand counsels to give to her defender, in order that he might avoid explanations with the count before witnesses. All this was answered by an expression of d'Aragnan's, 'Tomorrow,' said he, 'you will be avenged, or I shall be dead.'

'No,' said she, 'you will avenge me; but you will not be dead. He is a coward.'

'With women, perhaps; but not with men. I know something of him.'

'But it seems you had not much reason to complain of your fortune in your contest with him.'

'Fortune is a courtesan; favourable yesterday, she may turn her back tomorrow.'

'Which means that you now hesitate?'

'No, I do not hesitate; God forbid! But would it be just to allow me to go to a possible death without having given me at least something more than hope?'

Milady answered by a glance which said, 'Is that all?—speak, then.' And then accompanying the glance with explanatory words, 'That is but too just,' said she, tenderly.

'Oh, you are an angel!' exclaimed the young man.

'Then all is agreed?' said she.

'Except that which I ask of you, dear love.'

'But when I assure you that you may rely on my tenderness?'

'I cannot wait till tomorrow.'

'Silence! I hear my brother. It will be useless for him to find you here.' She rang the bell and Kitry appeared.

'Yes, you must; see what confidence I have in you!'

'You overwhelm me with joy. What is his name?'

'You know him.'

'Indeed.'

'Yes.'

'It is surely not one of my friends?' replied d'Aragnan, affecting hesitation in order to make her believe him ignorant.

'If it were one of your friends you would hesitate, then?' cried Milady; and a threatening glance darted from her eyes.

'Not if it were my own brother!' cried d'Aragnan, as if carried away by his enthusiasm.

Our Gascon promised this without risk, for he knew all that was meant.

'I love your devotedness,' said Milady.

'Alas, do you love nothing else in me?' asked d'Aragnan.

'I love you also, *you*,' said she, taking his hand.

The warm pressure made d'Aragnan tremble, as if by the touch that fever which consumed Milady attacked himself.

'You love me, you!' cried he. 'Oh, if that were so, I should lose my reason!' And he folded her in his arms. She made no effort to remove her lips from his kisses; only she did not respond to them. Her lips were cold; it appeared to d'Aragnan that he had embraced a statue.

He was not the less intoxicated with joy, electrified by love. He almost believed in the tenderness of Milady; he almost believed in the crime of De Wardes. If De Wardes had at that moment been under his hand, he would have killed him.

Milady seized the occasion.

'His name is —' said she, in her turn.

'De Wardes; I know it,' cried d'Aragnan.

'And how do you know it?' asked Milady, seizing both his hands, and endeavouring to read with her eyes to the bottom of his heart.

D'Aragnan felt he had allowed himself to be carried away, and that he had committed an error.

'Tell me, tell me, I say,' repeated Milady, 'how do you know it?'

'How do I know it?' said d'Aragnan.

'Yes.'

Then d'Aragnan, who had never seriously thought of this impossible duel, endeavoured to turn the conversation; but he could not succeed. Milady kept him within the limits she had traced beforehand with her irresistible spirit and her iron will.

D'Aragnan fancied himself very cunning when advising Milady to renounce, by pardoning De Wardes, the furious projects she had formed.

But at the first word the young woman started, and exclaimed in a sharp, bantering tone, which sounded strangely in the darkness, 'Are you afraid, dear Monsieur d'Aragnan?'

'You cannot think so, dear love!' replied d'Aragnan; 'but now, suppose this poor Comte de Wardes were less guilty than you think him?'

'At all events,' said Milady, seriously, 'he has deceived me, and from the moment he deceived me, he merited death.'

'He shall die, then, since you condemn him!' said d'Aragnan, in so firm a tone that it appeared to Milady an undoubted proof of devotion. This reassured her.

We cannot say how long the night seemed to Milady, but d'Aragnan believed it to be hardly two hours before the daylight peeped through the window blinds, and invaded the chamber with its paleness. Seeing d'Aragnan about to leave her, Milady recalled his promise to avenge her on the Comte de Wardes.

'I am quite ready,' said d'Aragnan; 'but in the first place I should like to be certain of one thing.'

'And what is that?' asked Milady.

'That is, whether you really love me?'

'I have given you proof of that, it seems to me.'

'And I am yours, body and soul!'

'Thanks, my brave lover; but as you are satisfied of my love, you must, in your turn, satisfy me of yours. Is it not so?'

'Certainly; but if you love me as much as you say,' replied d'Aragnan, 'do you not entertain a little fear on my account?'

'What have I to fear?'

'Why, that I may be dangerously wounded — killed even.'

'Impossible!' cried Milady, 'you are such a valiant man, and such an expert swordsman.'

'You would not, then, prefer a method,' resumed d'Artagnan, 'which would equally avenge you while rendering the combat useless?'

Milady looked at her lover in silence. The pale light of the first rays of day gave to her clear eyes a strangely frightful expression.

'Really,' said she, 'I believe you now begin to hesitate.'

'No, I do not hesitate; but I really pity this poor Comte de Wardes, since you have ceased to love him. I think that a man must be so severely punished by the loss of your love that he stands in need of no other chastisement.'

'Who told you that I loved him?' asked Milady, sharply.

'At least, I am now at liberty to believe, without too much fatuity, that you love another,' said the young man, in a caressing tone, 'and I repeat that I am really interested for the count.'

'You?' asked Milady.

'Yes, I.'

'And why *you*?'

'Because I alone know—'

'What?'

'That he is far from being, or rather having been, so guilty toward you as he appears.'

'Indeed!' said Milady, in an anxious tone; 'explain yourself, for I really cannot tell what you mean.'

And she looked at d'Artagnan, who embraced her tenderly, with eyes which seemed to burn themselves away.

'Yes, I am a man of honour,' said d'Artagnan, determined to come to an end, 'and since your love is mine, and I am satisfied I possess it—for I do possess it, do I not?'

'Entirely; go on.'

'Well, I feel as if transformed—a confession weighs on my mind.'

'A confession!'

'If I had the least doubt of your love I would not make it, but you love me, my beautiful mistress, do you not?'

'Without doubt.'

'Then if through excess of love I have rendered myself culpable toward you, you will pardon me?'

'Perhaps.'

'Avenge me of that infamous De Wardes,' said Milady, between her teeth, 'and I shall soon know how to get rid of you—you double idiot, you animated sword blade!'

'Fall voluntarily into my arms, hypocritical and dangerous woman,' said d'Artagnan, likewise to himself, 'after having abused me with such effrontery, and afterward I will laugh at you with him whom you wish me to kill.'

D'Artagnan lifted up his head.

'I am ready,' said he.

'You have understood me, then, dear Monsieur d'Artagnan,' said Milady.

'I could interpret one of your looks.'

'Then you would employ for me your arm which has already acquired so much renown?'

'Instantly!'

'But on my part,' said Milady, 'how should I repay such a service? I know these lovers. They are men who do nothing for nothing.'

'You know the only reply that I desire,' said d'Artagnan, 'the only one worthy of you and of me!'

And he drew nearer to her.

She scarcely resisted.

'Interested man!' cried she, smiling.

'Ah,' cried d'Artagnan, really carried away by the passion this woman had the power to kindle in his heart, 'ah, that is because my happiness appears so impossible to me; and I have such fear that it should fly away from me like a dream that I pant to make a reality of it.'

'Well, merit this pretended happiness, then!'

'I am at your orders,' said d'Artagnan.

'Quite certain?' said Milady, with a last doubt.

'Only name to me the base man that has brought tears into your beautiful eyes!'

'Who told you that I had been weeping?' said she.

'It appeared to me—'

'Such women as I never weep,' said Milady.

'So much the better! Come, tell me his name!'

'Remember that his name is all my secret.'

'Yet I must know his name.'

'Nothing,' replied Milady.

'The devil!' thought d'Arragnan. 'The note is changed. Is she going to fall in love with me, by chance, this fair inconstant; and will she be disposed to give me myself another sapphire like that which she gave me for De Wardes?'

D'Arragnan rapidly drew his seat nearer to Milady's.

'Well, now,' she said, 'let us see what you would do to prove this love of which you speak.'

'All that could be required of me. Order; I am ready.'

'For everything?'

'For everything,' cried d'Arragnan, who knew beforehand that he had not much to risk in engaging himself thus.

'Well, now let us talk a little seriously,' said Milady, in her turn drawing her armchair nearer to d'Arragnan's chair.

'I am all attention, madame,' said he.

Milady remained thoughtful and undecided for a moment; then, as if appearing to have formed a resolution, she said, 'I have an enemy.'

'You, madame!' said d'Arragnan, affecting surprise; 'is that possible, my God?—good and beautiful as you are!'

'A mortal enemy.'

'Indeed!'

'An enemy who has insulted me so cruelly that between him and me it is war to the death. May I reckon on you as an auxiliary?'

D'Arragnan at once perceived the ground which the vindictive creature wished to reach.

'You may, madame,' said he, with emphasis. 'My arm and my life belong to you, like my love.'

'Then,' said Milady, 'since you are as generous as you are loving—'

She stopped.

'Well?' demanded d'Arragnan.

'Well,' replied Milady, after a moment of silence, 'from the present time, cease to talk of impossibilities.'

'Do not overwhelm me with happiness,' cried d'Arragnan, throwing himself on his knees, and covering with kisses the hands abandoned to him.

D'Arragnan tried with his sweetest smile to touch his lips to Milady's, but she evaded him.

'This confession,' said she, growing paler, 'what is this confession?'

'You gave De Wardes a meeting on Thursday last in this very room, did you not?'

'No, no! It is not true,' said Milady, in a tone of voice so firm, and with a countenance so unchanged, that if d'Arragnan had not been in such perfect possession of the fact, he would have doubted.

'Do not lie, my angel,' said d'Arragnan, smiling; 'that would be useless.'

'What do you mean? Speak! you kill me.'

'Be satisfied; you are not guilty toward me, and I have already pardoned you.'

'What next? what next?'

'De Wardes cannot boast of anything.'

'How is that? You told me yourself that that ring—'

'That ring I have! The Comte de Wardes of Thursday and the d'Arragnan of today are the same person.'

The imprudent young man expected a surprise, mixed with shame—a slight storm which would resolve itself into tears; but he was strangely deceived, and his error was not of long duration.

Pale and trembling, Milady repulsed d'Arragnan's attempted embrace by a violent blow on the chest, as she sprang out of bed.

It was almost broad daylight.

D'Arragnan detained her by her night dress of fine India linen, to implore her pardon; but she, with a strong movement, tried to escape. Then the cambric was torn from her beautiful shoulders; and on one of those lovely shoulders, round and white, d'Arragnan recognized, with inexpressible astonishment, the *fleur-de-lis*—that indelible mark which the hand of the infamous executioner had imprinted.

'Great God!' cried d'Arragnan, loosing his hold of her dress, and remaining mute, motionless, and frozen.

But Milady felt herself denounced even by his terror. He had doubtless seen all. The young man now knew her secret, her terrible secret—the secret she concealed even from her maid with such care, the secret of which all the world was ignorant, except himself.

She turned upon him, no longer like a furious woman, but like a wounded panther.

'Ah, wretch!' cried she, 'you have basely betrayed me, and still more, you have my secret! You shall die.'

And she flew to a little inlaid casket which stood upon the dressing table, opened it with a feverish and trembling hand, drew from it a small poniard, with a golden haft and a sharp thin blade, and then threw herself with a bound upon d'Artagnan.

Although the young man was brave, as we know, he was terrified at that wild countenance, those terribly dilated pupils, those pale cheeks, and those bleeding lips. He recoiled to the other side of the room as he would have done from a serpent which was crawling toward him, and his sword coming in contact with his nervous hand, he drew it almost unconsciously from the scabbard. But without taking any heed of the sword, Milady endeavoured to get near enough to him to stab him, and did not stop till she felt the sharp point at her throat.

She then tried to seize the sword with her hands; but d'Artagnan kept it free from her grasp, and presenting the point, sometimes at her eyes, sometimes at her breast, compelled her to glide behind the bedstead, while he aimed at making his retreat by the door which led to Kitty's apartment.

Milady during this time continued to strike at him with horrible fury, screaming in a formidable way.

As all this, however, bore some resemblance to a duel, d'Artagnan began to recover himself little by little.

'Well, beautiful lady, very well,' said he; 'but, *pardieu*, if you don't calm yourself, I will design a second *flour-de-lis* upon one of those pretty cheeks!'

'Scoundrel, infamous scoundrel!' howled Milady.

But d'Artagnan, still keeping on the defensive, drew near to Kitty's door. At the noise they made, she in overturning the furniture in her efforts to get at him, he in screening himself behind the furniture to keep out of her reach, Kitty opened the door. D'Artagnan, who had unceasingly manoeuvred to gain this point, was not at more than three paces from it. With one spring he flew from the chamber of Milady into that of the maid, and quick as lightning, he slammed to the door, and placed all his weight against it, while Kitty pushed the bolts.

intentionally diminished, but the young woman could not conceal the traces of the fever which had devoured her for two days.

D'Artagnan approached her with his usual gallantry. She then made an extraordinary effort to receive him, but never did a more distressed countenance give the lie to a more amiable smile.

To the questions which d'Artagnan put concerning her health, she replied, 'Bad, very bad.'

'Then,' replied he, 'my visit is ill-timed; you, no doubt, stand in need of repose, and I will withdraw.'

'No, no!' said Milady. 'On the contrary, stay, Monsieur d'Artagnan; your agreeable company will divert me.'

'Oh, oh!' thought d'Artagnan. 'She has never been so kind before. On guard!'

Milady assumed the most agreeable air possible, and conversed with more than her usual brilliancy. At the same time the fever, which for an instant abandoned her, returned to give lustre to her eyes, colour to her cheeks, and vermillion to her lips. D'Artagnan was again in the presence of the Circe who had before surrounded him with her enchantments. His love, which he believed to be extinct but which was only asleep, awoke again in his heart. Milady smiled, and d'Artagnan felt that he could damn himself for that smile. There was a moment at which he felt something like remorse.

By degrees, Milady became more communicative. She asked d'Artagnan if he had a mistress.

'Alas!' said d'Artagnan, with the most sentimental air he could assume, 'can you be cruel enough to put such a question to me—to me, who, from the moment I saw you, have only breathed and sighed through you and for you?'

Milady smiled with a strange smile.

'Then you love me?' said she.

'Have I any need to tell you so? Have you not perceived it?'

'It may be; but you know the more hearts are worth the capture, the more difficult they are to be won.'

'Oh, difficulties do not affright me,' said d'Artagnan. 'I shrink before nothing but impossibilities.'

'Nothing is impossible,' replied Milady, 'to true love.'

'Nothing, madame?'

Your very grateful,

MILADY CLARK

'That's all very simple,' said d'Arragnan; 'I expected this letter. My credit rises by the fall of that of the Comte de Wardes.'

'And will you go?' asked Kitty.

'Listen to me, my dear girl,' said the Gascon, who sought for an excuse in his own eyes for breaking the promise he had made Athos; 'you must understand it would be impolitic not to accept such a positive invitation. Milady, not seeing me come again, would not be able to understand what could cause the interruption of my visits, and might suspect something; who could say how far the vengeance of such a woman would go?'

'Oh, my God!' said Kitty, 'you know how to represent things in such a way that you are always in the right. You are going now to pay your court to her again, and if this time you succeed in pleasing her in your own name and with your own face, it will be much worse than before.'

Instinct made poor Kitty guess a part of what was to happen. D'Arragnan reassured her as well as he could, and promised to remain insensible to the seductions of Milady.

He desired Kitty to tell her mistress that he could not be more grateful for her kindnesses than he was, and that he would be obedient to her orders. He did not dare to write for fear of not being able—to such experienced eyes as those of Milady—to disguise his writing sufficiently.

As nine o'clock sounded, d'Arragnan was at the Place Royale. It was evident that the servants who waited in the ante-chamber were warned, for as soon as d'Arragnan appeared, before even he had asked if Milady were visible, one of them ran to announce him.

'Show him in,' said Milady, in a quick tone, but so piercing that d'Arragnan heard her in the ante-chamber.

He was introduced.

'I am at home to nobody,' said Milady; 'observe, to *nobody*.'

The servant went out.

D'Arragnan cast an inquiring glance at Milady. She was pale, and looked fatigued, either from tears or want of sleep. The number of lights had been

Then Milady attempted to tear down the door-case, with a strength apparently above that of a woman; but finding she could not accomplish this, she in her fury stabbed at the door with her poniard, the point of which repeatedly glittered through the wood. Every blow was accompanied with terrible imprecations.

'Quick, Kitty, quick!' said d'Arragnan, in a low voice, as soon as the bolts were fast, 'let me get out of the hôtel; for if we leave her time to turn round, she will have me killed by the servants.'

'But you can't go out so,' said Kitty; 'you are naked.'

'That's true,' said d'Arragnan, then first thinking of the costume he found himself in, 'that's true. But dress me as well as you are able, only make haste; think, my dear girl, it's life and death!'

Kitty was but too well aware of that. In a turn of the hand she muffled him up in a flowered robe, a large hood, and a cloak. She gave him some slippers, in which he placed his naked feet, and then conducted him down the stairs. It was time. Milady had already rung her bell, and roused the whole hôtel. The porter was drawing the cord at the moment Milady cried from her window, 'Don't open!'

The young man fled while she was still threatening him with an impotent gesture. The moment she lost sight of him, Milady tumbled fainting into her chamber.

Chapter XXXVI

Dream of Vengeance



HAT evening Milady gave orders that when M. d'Artagnan came as usual, he should be immediately admitted; but he did not come.

The next day Kitty went to see the young man again, and related to him all that had passed on the preceding evening. D'Artagnan smiled; this jealous anger of Milady was his revenge.

That evening Milady was still more impatient than on the preceding evening. She renewed the order relative to the Gascon; but as before she expected him in vain.

The next morning, when Kitty presented herself at d'Artagnan's, she was no longer joyous and alert as on the two preceding days; but on the contrary sad as death.

D'Artagnan asked the poor girl what was the matter with her; but she, as her only reply, drew a letter from her pocket and gave it to him.

This letter was in Milady's handwriting; only this time it was addressed to M. d'Artagnan, and not to M. de Wardes.

He opened it and read as follows:

Dear M. d'Artagnan,

It is wrong thus to neglect your friends, particularly at the moment you are about to leave them for so long a time. My brother-in-law and myself expected you yesterday and the day before, but in vain. Will it be the same this evening?