

Milady for some time examined with increasing terror that pale face, framed with black hair and whiskers, the only expression of which was icy impassibility. Then she suddenly cried, 'Oh, no, no!' rising and retreating to the very wall. 'No, no! it is an infernal apparition! It is not he! Help, help!' screamed she, turning towards the wall, as if she would tear an opening with her hands.

'Who are you, then?' cried all the witnesses of this scene.

'Ask that woman,' said the man in the red cloak, 'for you may plainly see she knows me!'

'The executioner of Lille, the executioner of Lille!' cried Milady, a prey to insensate terror, and clinging with her hands to the wall to avoid falling.

Everyone drew back, and the man in the red cloak remained standing alone in the middle of the room.

'Oh, grace, grace, pardon!' cried the wretch, falling on her knees.

The unknown waited for silence, and then resumed, 'I told you well that she would know me. Yes, I am the executioner of Lille, and this is my history.'

All eyes were fixed upon this man, whose words were listened to with anxious attention.

'That woman was once a young girl, as beautiful as she is today. She was a nun in the convent of the Benedictines of Templenar. A young priest, with a simple and trustful heart, performed the duties of the church of that convent. She undertook his seduction, and succeeded; she would have seduced a saint.

Their vows were sacred and irrevocable. Their connection could not last long without ruining both. She prevailed upon him to leave the country; but to leave the country, to fly together, to reach another part of France, where they might live at ease because unknown, money was necessary. Neither had any. The priest stole the sacred vases, and sold them; but as they were preparing to escape together, they were both arrested.

Eight days later she had seduced the son of the jailer, and escaped. The young priest was condemned to ten years of imprisonment, and to be branded. I was executioner of the city of Lille, as this woman has said. I was obliged to brand the guilty one; and he, gentlemen, was my brother!

I then swore that this woman who had ruined him, who was more than his accomplice, since she had urged him to the crime, should at least share his punishment. I suspected where she was concealed. I followed her, I caught

her, I bound her; and I imprinted the same disgraceful mark upon her that I had imprinted upon my poor brother.

The day after my return to Lille, my brother in his turn succeeded in making his escape; I was accused of complicity, and was condemned to remain in his place till he should be again a prisoner. My poor brother was ignorant of this sentence. He rejoined this woman; they fled together into Berry, and there he obtained a little curacy. This woman passed for his sister.

The Lord of the estate on which the chapel of the curacy was situated saw this pretend sister, and became enamoured of her—amorous to such a degree that he proposed to marry her. Then she quitted him she had ruined for him she was destined to ruin, and became the Comtesse de la Fère—'

All eyes were turned towards Athos, whose real name that was, and who made a sign with his head that all was true which the executioner had said.

'Then,' resumed he, 'mad, desperate, determined to get rid of an existence from which she had stolen everything, honour and happiness, my poor brother returned to Lille, and learning the sentence which had condemned me in his place, surrendered himself, and hanged himself that same night from the iron bar of the loophole of his prison.

To do justice to them who had condemned me, they kept their word. As soon as the identity of my brother was proved, I was set at liberty.

That is the crime of which I accuse her; that is the cause for which she was branded.'

'Monsieur d'Arragnan,' said Athos, 'what is the penalty you demand against this woman?'

'The punishment of death,' replied d'Arragnan.

'My Lord de Winter,' continued Athos, 'what is the penalty you demand against this woman?'

'The punishment of death,' replied Lord de Winter.

'Messieurs Porthos and Aramis,' repeated Athos, 'you who are her judges, what is the sentence you pronounce upon this woman?'

'The punishment of death,' replied the Musketeers, in a hollow voice.

Milady uttered a frightful shriek, and dragged herself along several paces upon her knees toward her judges.

Athos stretched out his hand toward her.

‘Charlotte Backson, Comtesse de la Fère, Milady de Winter,’ said he, ‘your crimes have wearied men on earth and God in heaven. If you know a prayer, say it—for you are condemned, and you shall die.’

At these words, which left no hope, Milady raised herself in all her pride, and wished to speak; but her strength failed her. She felt that a powerful and implacable hand seized her by the hair, and dragged her away as irrevocably as fatality drags humanity. She did not, therefore, even attempt the least resistance, and went out of the cottage.

Lord de Winter, d’Aragnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis, went out close behind her. The lackeys followed their masters, and the chamber was left solitary, with its broken window, its open door, and its smoky lamp burning sadly on the table.

him kill the duke. And at this moment, perhaps, Felton is paying with his head for the crime of this fury!’

A shudder crept through the judges at the revelation of these unknown crimes.

‘That is not all,’ resumed Lord de Winter. ‘My brother, who made you his heir, died in three hours of a strange disorder which left livid traces all over the body. My sister, how did your husband die?’

‘Horror!’ cried Porthos and Aramis.

‘Assassin of Buckingham, assassin of Felton, assassin of my brother, I demand justice upon you, and I swear that if it be not granted to me, I will execute it myself.’

And Lord de Winter ranged himself by the side of d’Aragnan, leaving the place free for another accuser.

Milady let her head sink between her two hands, and tried to recall her ideas, whirling in a mortal vertigo.

‘My turn,’ said Athos, himself trembling as the lion trembles at the sight of the serpent—‘my turn. I married that woman when she was a young girl; I married her in opposition to the wishes of all my family; I gave her my wealth, I gave her my name; and one day I discovered that this woman was branded—this woman was marked with a *fleur-de-lis* on her left shoulder.’

‘Oh,’ said Milady, raising herself, ‘I defy you to find any tribunal which pronounced that infamous sentence against me. I defy you to find him who executed it.’

‘Silence!’ said a hollow voice. ‘It is for me to reply to that!’ And the man in the red cloak came forward in his turn.

‘What man is that? What man is that?’ cried Milady, suffocated by terror, her hair loosening itself, and rising above her livid countenance as if alive.

All eyes were turned towards this man—for to all except Athos he was unknown.

Even Athos looked at him with as much stupefaction as the others, for he knew not how he could in any way find himself mixed up with the horrible drama then unfolded.

After approaching Milady with a slow and solemn step, so that the table alone separated them, the unknown took off his mask.

The four lackeys guarded the door and the window.

Milady had sunk into a chair, with her hands extended, as if to conjure this terrible apparition. Perceiving her brother-in-law, she uttered a terrible cry.

‘What do you want?’ screamed Milady.

‘We want,’ said Athos, ‘Charlotte Backson, who first was called Comtesse de la Fère, and afterwards Milady de Winter, Baroness of Sheffield.’

‘That is I! that is I!’ murmured Milady, in extreme terror; ‘what do you want?’

‘We wish to judge you according to your crime,’ said Athos; ‘you shall be free to defend yourself. Justify yourself if you can. M. d’Arragnan, it is for you to accuse her first.’

D’Arragnan advanced.

‘Before God and before men,’ said he, ‘I accuse this woman of having poisoned Constance Bonacieux, who died yesterday evening.’

He turned towards Porthos and Aramis.

‘We bear witness to this,’ said the two Musketeers, with one voice.

D’Arragnan continued: ‘Before God and before men, I accuse this woman of having attempted to poison me, in wine which she sent me from Villeroy, with a forged letter, as if that wine came from my friends. God preserved me, but a man named Brisemont died in my place.’

‘We bear witness to this,’ said Porthos and Aramis, in the same manner as before.

‘Before God and before men, I accuse this woman of having urged me to the murder of the Baron de Wardes; but as no one else can attest the truth of this accusation, I attest it myself. I have done.’ And d’Arragnan passed to the other side of the room with Porthos and Aramis.

‘Your turn, my Lord,’ said Athos.

The baron came forward.

‘Before God and before men,’ said he, ‘I accuse this woman of having caused the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham.’

‘The Duke of Buckingham assassinated!’ cried all present, with one voice. ‘Yes,’ said the baron, ‘assassinated. On receiving the warning letter you wrote to me, I had this woman arrested, and gave her in charge to a loyal servant. She corrupted this man; she placed the poniard in his hand; she made

Chapter LXVI

Execution



It was near midnight; the moon, lessened by its decline, and reddened by the last traces of the storm, arose behind the little town of Armentières, which showed against its pale light the dark outline of its houses, and the skeleton of its high belfry. In front of them the Lys rolled its waters like a river of molten tin; while on the other side was a black mass of trees, profiled on a stormy sky, invaded by large coppery clouds which created a sort of twilight amid the night. On the left was an old abandoned mill, with its motionless wings, from the ruins of which an owl threw out its shrill, periodical, and monotonous cry. On the right and on the left of the road, which the dismal procession pursued, appeared a few low, stunted trees, which looked like deformed dwarfs crouching down to watch men travelling at this sinister hour.

From time to time a broad sheet of lightning opened the horizon in its whole width, darted like a serpent over the black mass of trees, and like a terrible scimitar divided the heavens and the waters into two parts. Not a breath of wind now disturbed the heavy atmosphere. A deathlike silence oppressed all nature. The soil was humid and glittering with the rain which had recently fallen, and the refreshed herbs sent forth their perfume with additional energy.

Two lackeys dragged Milady, whom each held by one arm. The executioner walked behind them, and Lord de Winter, d’Arragnan, Porthos, and Aramis walked behind the executioner. Planchet and Bazin came last.

The two lackeys conducted Milady to the bank of the river. Her mouth was mute; but her eyes spoke with their inexpressible eloquence, supplicating by turns each of those on whom she looked.

Being a few paces in advance she whispered to the lackeys, 'A thousand pistoles to each of you, if you will assist my escape; but if you deliver me up to your masters, I have near at hand avengers who will make you pay dearly for my death.'

Grimaud hesitated. Mousqueton trembled in all his members.

Athos, who heard Milady's voice, came sharply up. Lord de Winter did the same.

'Change these lackeys,' said he; 'she has spoken to them. They are no longer sure.'

Planchet and Bazin were called, and took the places of Grimaud and Mousqueton.

On the bank of the river the executioner approached Milady, and bound her hands and feet.

Then she broke the silence to cry out, 'You are cowards, miserable assassins—ten men combined to murder one woman. Beware! If I am not saved I shall be avenged.'

'You are not a woman,' said Athos, coldly and sternly. 'You do not belong to the human species; you are a demon escaped from hell, whither we send you back again.'

'Ah, you virtuous men!' said Milady; 'please to remember that he who shall touch a hair of my head is himself an assassin.'

'The executioner may kill, without being on that account an assassin,' said the man in the red cloak, rapping upon his immense sword. 'This is the last judge; that is all. *Nachricht*, as say our neighbours, the Germans.'

And as he bound her while saying these words, Milady uttered two or three savage cries, which produced a strange and melancholy effect in flying away into the night, and losing themselves in the depths of the woods.

'If I am guilty, if I have committed the crimes you accuse me of,' shrieked Milady, 'take me before a tribunal. You are not judges! You cannot condemn me!'

'I offered you Tyburn,' said Lord de Winter. 'Why did you not accept it?' 'Because I am not willing to die!' cried Milady, struggling. 'Because I am too young to die!'

'The woman you poisoned at Bethune was still younger than you, madame, and yet she is dead,' said d'Arragnan.

At this moment a man who had been crouching in a ditch jumped up and came towards them. It was Mousqueton. He pointed his finger to the lighted window.

'She is there,' said he.

'And Bazin?' asked Athos.

'While I watched the window, he guarded the door.'

'Good!' said Athos. 'You are good and faithful servants.'

Athos sprang from his horse, gave the bridle to Grimaud, and advanced toward the window, after having made a sign to the rest of the troop to go toward the door.

The little house was surrounded by a low, quickset hedge, two or three feet high. Athos sprang over the hedge and went up to the window, which was without shutters, but had the half-curtains closely drawn.

He mounted the skirting stone that his eyes might look over the curtain.

By the light of a lamp he saw a woman, wrapped in a dark mantle, seated upon a stool near a dying fire. Her elbows were placed upon a mean table, and she leaned her head upon her two hands, which were white as ivory.

He could not distinguish her countenance, but a sinister smile passed over the lips of Athos. He was not deceived; it was she whom he sought.

At this moment a horse neighed. Milady raised her head, saw close to the panes the pale face of Athos, and screamed.

Athos, perceiving that she knew him, pushed the window with his knee and hand. The window yielded. The squares were broken to shivers; and Athos, like the spectre of vengeance, leaped into the room.

Milady rushed to the door and opened it. More pale and menacing than Athos, d'Arragnan stood on the threshold.

Milady recoiled, uttering a cry. D'Arragnan, believing she might have means of flight and fearing she should escape, drew a pistol from his belt; but Athos raised his hand.

'Put back that weapon, d'Arragnan!' said he; 'this woman must be tried, not assassinated. Wait an instant, my friend, and you shall be satisfied. Come in, gentlemen.'

D'Arragnan obeyed; for Athos had the solemn voice and the powerful gesture of a judge sent by the Lord himself. Behind d'Arragnan entered Porthos, Aramis, Lord de Winter, and the man in the red cloak.

D'Arragnan took off his hat, and could not be persuaded to make use of his cloak. He found pleasure in feeling the water trickle over his burning brow and over his body, agitated by feverish shudders.

The moment the little troop passed Goskal and were approaching the Post, a man sheltered beneath a tree detached himself from the trunk with which he had been confounded in the darkness, and advanced into the middle of the road, putting his finger on his lips.

Athos recognized Grimaud.

'What's the manner?' cried Athos. 'Has she left Armentières?'

Grimaud made a sign in the affirmative. D'Arragnan ground his teeth.

'Silence, d'Arragnan!' said Athos. 'I have charged myself with this affair. It is for me, then, to interrogate Grimaud.'

'Where is she?' asked Athos.

Grimaud extended his hands in the direction of the Lys. 'Far from here?' asked Athos.

Grimaud showed his master his forefinger bent.

'Alone?' asked Athos.

Grimaud made the sign yes.

'Gentlemen,' said Athos, 'she is alone within half a league of us, in the direction of the river.'

'That's well,' said d'Arragnan. 'Lead us, Grimaud.'

Grimaud took his course across the country, and acted as guide to the cavalcade.

At the end of five hundred paces, more or less, they came to a rivulet, which they forded.

By the aid of the lightning they perceived the village of Erquinheim.

'Is she there, Grimaud?' asked Athos.

Grimaud shook his head negatively.

'Silence, then!' cried Athos.

And the troop continued their route.

Another flash illuminated all around them. Grimaud extended his arm, and by the bluish splendour of the fiery serpent they distinguished a little isolated house on the banks of the river, within a hundred paces of a ferry.

One window was lighted.

'Here we are!' said Athos.

'I will enter a cloister; I will become a nun,' said Milady.
'You were in a cloister,' said the executioner, 'and you left it to ruin my brother.'

Milady uttered a cry of terror and sank upon her knees. The executioner took her up in his arms and was carrying her toward the boat.

'Oh, my God!' cried she, 'my God! are you going to drown me?'

These cries had something so heartrending in them that M. d'Arragnan, who had been at first the most eager in pursuit of Milady, sat down on the stump of a tree and hung his head, covering his ears with the palms of his hands; and yet, notwithstanding, he could still hear her cry and threaten.

D'Arragnan was the youngest of all these men. His heart failed him.

'Oh, I cannot behold this frightful spectacle!' said he. 'I cannot consent that this woman should die thus!'

Milady heard these few words and caught at a shadow of hope.

'D'Arragnan, d'Arragnan!' cried she; 'remember that I loved you!'

The young man rose and took a step toward her.

But Athos rose likewise, drew his sword, and placed himself in the way.

'If you take one step farther, d'Arragnan,' said he, 'we shall cross swords together.'

D'Arragnan sank on his knees and prayed.

'Come,' continued Athos, 'executioner, do your duty.'

'Willingly, monseigneur,' said the executioner; 'for as I am a good Catholic, I firmly believe I am acting justly in performing my functions on this woman.'

'That's well.'

Athos made a step toward Milady.

'I pardon you,' said he, 'the ill you have done me. I pardon you for my blasted future, my lost honour, my defiled love, and my salvation forever compromised by the despair into which you have cast me. Die in peace!'

Lord de Winter advanced in his turn.

'I pardon you,' said he, 'for the poisoning of my brother, and the assassination of his Grace, Lord Buckingham. I pardon you for the death of poor Felton; I pardon you for the attempts upon my own person. Die in peace!'

'And I,' said M. d'Arragnan. 'Pardon me, madame, for having by a trick unworthy of a gentleman provoked your anger; and I, in exchange, pardon you

the murder of my poor love and your cruel vengeance against me. I pardon you, and I weep for you. Die in peace!

'I am lost!' murmured Milady in English. 'I must die!'

Then she arose of herself, and cast around her one of those piercing looks which seemed to dart from an eye of flame.

She saw nothing; she listened, and she heard nothing.

'Where am I to die?' said she.

'On the other bank,' replied the executioner.

Then he placed her in the boat, and as he was going to set foot in it himself, Athos handed him a sum of silver.

'Here,' said he, 'is the price of the execution, that it may be plain we act as judges.'

'That is correct,' said the executioner; 'and now in her turn, let this woman see that I am not fulfilling my trade, but my debt.'

And he threw the money into the river.

The boat moved off toward the left-hand shore of the Lys, bearing the guilty woman and the executioner; all the others remained on the right-hand bank, where they fell on their knees.

The boat glided along the ferry rope under the shadow of a pale cloud which hung over the water at that moment.

The troop of friends saw it gain the opposite bank; the figures were defined like black shadows on the red-tinted horizon.

Milady, during the passage had contrived to untie the cord which fastened her feet. On coming near the bank, she jumped lightly on shore and took to flight. But the soil was moist; on reaching the top of the bank, she slipped and fell upon her knees.

She was struck, no doubt, with a superstitious idea; she conceived that heaven denied its aid, and she remained in the attitude in which she had fallen, her head drooping and her hands clasped.

Then they saw from the other bank the executioner raise both his arms slowly; a moonbeam fell upon the blade of the large sword. The two arms fell with a sudden force; they heard the hissing of the scimitar and the cry of the victim, then a truncated mass sank beneath the blow.

Chapter LXV Trial



It was a stormy and dark night; vast clouds covered the heavens, concealing the stars; the moon would not rise till midnight.

Occasionally, by the light of a flash of lightning which gleamed along the horizon, the road stretched itself before them, white and solitary; the flash extinct, all remained in darkness.

Every minute Athos was forced to restrain d'Aragnan, constantly in advance of the little troop, and to beg him to keep in the line, which in an instant he again departed from. He had but one thought—to go forward; and he went.

They passed in silence through the little village of Festubert, where the wounded servant was, and then skirted the wood of Richebourg. At Herlier, Planchet, who led the column, turned to the left.

Several times Lord de Winter, Porthos, or Aramis tried to talk with the man in the red cloak; but to every interrogation which they put to him he bowed, without response. The travellers then comprehended that there must be some reason why the unknown preserved such a silence, and ceased to address themselves to him.

The storm increased, the flashes succeeded one another more rapidly, the thunder began to growl, and the wind, the precursor of a hurricane, whistled in the plumes and the hair of the horsemen.

The cavalcade trotted on more sharply.

A little before they came to Fromelles the storm burst. They spread their cloaks. There remained three leagues to travel, and they did it amid torrents of rain.

man could be; nevertheless, they felt convinced that all was as it should be, as it was done by the order of Athos.

At nine o'clock, guided by Planchet, the little cavalcade set out, taking the route the carriage had taken.

It was a melancholy sight—that of these six men, travelling in silence, each plunged in his own thoughts, sad as despair, gloomy as chastisement.

The executioner then took off his red cloak, spread it upon the ground, laid the body in it, threw in the head, tied all up by the four corners, lifted it on his back, and entered the boat again.

In the middle of the stream he stopped the boat, and suspending his burden over the water cried in a loud voice, 'Let the justice of God be done!' and he let the corpse drop into the depths of the waters, which closed over it.

Three days afterward the four Musketeers were in Paris; they had not exceeded their leave of absence, and that same evening they went to pay their customary visit to M. de Tréville.

'Well, gentlemen,' said the brave captain, 'I hope you have been well amused during your excursion.'

'Prodigiously,' replied Athos in the name of himself and his comrades.

Planchet went in search of the postillion who had driven her, and found him. He had taken the lady as far as Fromelles; and from Fromelles she had set out for Armentières. Planchet took the crossroad, and by seven o'clock in the morning he was at Armentières.

There was but one tavern, the Post. Planchet went and presented himself as a lackey out of a place, who was in search of a situation. He had not chatted ten minutes with the people of the tavern before he learned that a woman had come there alone about eleven o'clock the night before, had engaged a chamber, had sent for the master of the hôtel, and told him she desired to remain some time in the neighbourhood.

Planchet had no need to learn more. He hastened to the rendezvous, found the lackeys at their posts, placed them as sentinels at all the outlets of the hôtel, and came to find Athos, who had just received this information when his friends returned.

All their countenances were melancholy and gloomy, even the mild countenance of Aramis.

'What is to be done?' asked d'Aragnan.

'To wait!' replied Athos.

Each retired to his own apartment.

At eight o'clock in the evening Athos ordered the horses to be saddled, and Lord de Winter and his friends notified that they must prepare for the expedition.

In an instant all five were ready. Each examined his arms, and put them in order. Athos came down last, and found d'Aragnan already on horseback, and growing impatient.

'Patience!' cried Athos; 'one of our party is still wanting.'

The four horsemen looked round them with astonishment, for they sought vainly in their minds to know who this other person could be.

At this moment Planchet brought out Athos's horse; the Musketeer leaped lightly into the saddle.

'Wait for me,' cried he, 'I will soon be back,' and he set off at a gallop.

In a quarter of an hour he returned, accompanied by a tall man, masked, and wrapped in a large red cloak.

Lord de Winter and the three Musketeers looked at one another inquiringly. Neither could give the others any information, for all were ignorant who this