

and it is the same with Puritanesses, when they are pretty. Come, take a little oath for me on the cross; I won't ask anything more of you."

"On the cross," cried I, rising, for at that abhorred voice I had recovered all my strength, "on the cross I swear that no promise, no menace, no force, no torture, shall close my mouth! On the cross I swear to denounce you everywhere as a murderer, as a thief of honour, as a base coward! On the cross I swear, if I ever leave this place, to call down vengeance upon you from the whole human race!"

"Beware!" said the voice, in a threatening accent that I had never yet heard. "I have an extraordinary means which I will not employ but in the last extremity to close your mouth, or at least to prevent anyone from believing a word you may utter."

I mustered all my strength to reply to him with a burst of laughter. He saw that it was a merciless war between us—a war to the death.

"Listen!" said he. "I give you the rest of tonight and all day tomorrow. Reflect: promise to be silent, and riches, consideration, even honour, shall surround you; threaten to speak, and I will condemn you to infamy."

"You?" cried I. "You?"

"To interminable, ineffaceable infamy!"

"You?" repeated I. Oh, I declare to you, Felton, I thought him mad!

"Yes, yes, I!" replied he.

"Oh, leave me!" said I. "Begone, if you do not desire to see me dash my head against that wall before your eyes!"

"Very well, it is your own doing. Till tomorrow evening, then!"

"Till tomorrow evening, then!" replied I, allowing myself to fall, and biting the carpet with rage.'

Felton leaned for support upon a piece of furniture; and Milady saw, with the joy of a demon, that his strength would fail him perhaps before the end of her recital.

Chapter LVII

Means for Classical Tragedy



AFTER a moment of silence employed by Milady in observing the young man who listened to her, Milady continued her recital.

'It was nearly three days since I had eaten or drunk anything. I suffered frightful torments. At times there passed before me clouds which pressed my brow, which veiled my eyes; this was delirium.

When the evening came I was so weak that every time I fainted I thanked God, for I thought I was about to die.

In the midst of one of these swoons I heard the door open. Terror recalled me to myself.

He entered the apartment followed by a man in a mask. He was masked likewise; but I knew his step, I knew his voice, I knew him by that imposing bearing which hell has bestowed upon his person for the curse of humanity.

"Well," said he to me, "have you made your mind up to take the oath I requested of you?"

"You have said Puritans have but one word. Mine you have heard, and that is to pursue you—on earth to the tribunal of men, in heaven to the tribunal of God."

"You persist, then?"

"I swear it before the God who hears me. I will take the whole world as a witness of your crime, and that until I have found an avenger."

"You are a prostitute," said he, in a voice of thunder, "and you shall undergo the punishment of prostitutes! Branded in the eyes of the world

you invoke, try to prove to that world that you are neither guilty nor mad!”

Then, addressing the man who accompanied him, “Executioner,” said he, “do your duty.”

“Oh, his name, his name!” cried Felton. “His name, tell it me!”

“Then in spite of my cries, in spite of my resistance—for I began to comprehend that there was a question of something worse than death—the executioner seized me, threw me on the floor, fastened me with his bonds, and suffocated by sobs, almost without sense, invoking God, who did not listen to me, I uttered all at once a frightful cry of pain and shame. A burning fire, a red-hot iron, the iron of the executioner, was imprinted on my shoulder.”

Felton uttered a groan.

“Here,” said Milady, rising with the majesty of a queen, “here, Felton, behold the new martyrdom invented for a pure young girl, the victim of the brutality of a villain. Learn to know the heart of men, and henceforth make yourself less easily the instrument of their unjust vengeance.”

Milady, with a rapid gesture, opened her robe, tore the cambric that covered her bosom, and red with feigned anger and simulated shame, showed the young man the infaceable impression which dishonoured that beautiful shoulder.

“But,” cried Felton, “that is a *fleur-de-lis* which I see there.”

“And therein consisted the infamy,” replied Milady. “The brand of England!—it would be necessary to prove what tribunal had imposed it on me, and I could have made a public appeal to all the tribunals of the kingdom; but the brand of France!—oh, by that, by *that* I was branded indeed!”

This was too much for Felton.

Pale, motionless, overwhelmed by this frightful revelation, dazzled by the superhuman beauty of this woman who unveiled herself before him with an immodesty which appeared to him sublime, he ended by falling on his knees before her as the early Christians did before those pure and holy martyrs whom the persecution of the emperors gave up in the circus to the sanguinary sensuality of the populace. The brand disappeared; the beauty alone remained.

“Pardon! Pardon!” cried Felton, “oh, pardon!”

However perfect master he was over himself, my persecutor allowed a movement of anger to escape him. I could not see the expression of his countenance, but I felt the arm tremble upon which my hand was placed.

“Then you shall not leave this place,” said he.

“Very well,” cried I, “then the place of my punishment will be that of my tomb. I will die here, and you will see if a phantom that accuses is not more terrible than a living being that threatens!”

“You shall have no weapon left in your power.”

“There is a weapon which despair has placed within the reach of every creature who has the courage to use it. I will allow myself to die with hunger.”

“Come,” said the wretch, “is not peace much better than such a war as that? I will restore you to liberty this moment; I will proclaim you a piece of immaculate virtue; I will name you the Lucretia of England.”

“And I will say that you are the Sextus. I will denounce you before men, as I have denounced you before God; and if it be necessary that, like Lucretia, I should sign my accusation with my blood, I will sign it.”

“Ah!” said my enemy, in a jeering tone, “that’s quite another thing. My faith! everything considered, you are very well off here. You shall want for nothing, and if you let yourself die of hunger that will be your own fault.”

At these words he retired. I heard the door open and shut, and I remained overwhelmed, less, I confess it, by my grief than by the mortification of not having avenged myself.

He kept his word. All the day, all the next night passed away without my seeing him again. But I also kept my word with him, and I neither ate nor drank. I was, as I told him, resolved to die of hunger.

I passed the day and the night in prayer, for I hoped that God would pardon me my suicide.

The second night the door opened; I was lying on the floor, for my strength began to abandon me.

At the noise I raised myself up on one hand.

“Well,” said a voice which vibrated in too terrible a manner in my ear not to be recognized, “well! Are we softened a little? Will we not pay for our liberty with a single promise of silence? Come, I am a good sort of a prince,” added he, “and although I like not Puritans I do them justice;

Two hours passed away without anything fresh happening. Oh, my God! who could have said so the evening before? I began to fear that he would not come.

At length I saw the lamp rise softly, and disappear in the depths of the ceiling; my chamber was filled with darkness and obscurity, but I made a strong effort to penetrate this darkness and obscurity.

Nearly ten minutes passed; I heard no other noise but the beating of my own heart. I implored heaven that he might come.

At length I heard the well-known noise of the door, which opened and shut; I heard, notwithstanding the thickness of the carpet, a step which made the floor creak; I saw, notwithstanding the darkness, a shadow which approached my bed.

‘Haste! haste!’ said Felton; ‘do you not see that each of your words burns me like molten lead?’

‘Then,’ continued Milady, ‘then I collected all my strength; I recalled to my mind that the moment of vengeance, or rather, of justice, had struck. I looked upon myself as another Judith; I gathered myself up, my knife in my hand, and when I saw him near me, stretching out his arms to find his victim, then, with the last cry of agony and despair, I struck him in the middle of his breast.

The miserable villain! He had foreseen all. His breast was covered with a coat-of-mail; the knife was bent against it.

‘Ah, ah!’ cried he, seizing my arm, and wresting from me the weapon that had so badly served me, ‘you want to take my life, do you, my pretty Puritan? But that’s more than dislike, that’s ingratitude! Come, come, calm yourself, my sweet girl! I thought you had softened. I am not one of those tyrants who detain women by force. You don’t love me. With my usual fatuity I doubted it; now I am convinced. Tomorrow you shall be free.’

I had but one wish; that was that he should kill me.

‘Beware!’ said I, ‘for my liberty is your dishonour.’

‘Explain yourself, my pretty sibly!’

‘Yes; for as soon as I leave this place I will tell everything. I will proclaim the violence you have used toward me. I will describe my captivity. I will denounce this place of infamy. You are placed on high, my Lord, but tremble! Above you there is the king; above the king there is God!’

Milady read in his eyes *love! love!*

‘Pardon for what?’ asked she.

‘Pardon me for having joined with your persecutors.’

Milady held out her hand to him.

‘So beautiful! so young!’ cried Felton, covering that hand with his kisses.

Milady let one of those looks fall upon him which make a slave of a king.

Felton was a Puritan; he abandoned the hand of this woman to kiss her feet.

He no longer loved her; he adored her.

When this crisis was past, when Milady appeared to have resumed her self-possession, which she had never lost; when Felton had seen her recover with the veil of chastity those treasures of love which were only concealed from him to make him desire them the more ardently, he said, ‘Ah, now! I have only one thing to ask of you; that is, the name of your true executioner. For to me there is but one; the other was an instrument, that was all.’

‘What, brother!’ cried Milady, ‘must I name him again? Have you not yet divined who he is?’

‘What?’ cried Felton, ‘he—again he—always he? What—the truly guilty?’

‘The truly guilty,’ said Milady, ‘is the ravager of England, the persecutor of true believers, the base ravisher of the honour of so many women—he who, to satisfy a caprice of his corrupt heart, is about to make England shed so much blood, who protects the Protestants today and will betray them tomorrow—’

‘Buckingham! It is, then, Buckingham!’ cried Felton, in a high state of excitement.

Milady concealed her face in her hands, as if she could not endure the shame which this name recalled to her.

‘Buckingham, the executioner of this angelic creature!’ cried Felton. ‘And thou hast not hurried thy thunder at him, my God! And thou hast left him noble, honoured, powerful, for the ruin of us all!’

‘God abandons him who abandons himself,’ said Milady.

‘But he will draw upon his head the punishment reserved for the damned!’ said Felton, with increasing exultation. ‘He wills that human vengeance should precede celestial justice.’

‘Men fear him and spare him.’

‘I,’ said Felton, ‘I do not fear him, nor will I spare him.’

The soul of Milady was bathed in an infernal joy.

‘But how can Lord de Winter, my protector, my father,’ asked Felton, ‘possibly be mixed up with all this?’

‘Listen, Felton,’ resumed Milady, ‘for by the side of base and contemptible men there are often found great and generous natures. I had an affianced husband, a man whom I loved, and who loved me—a heart like yours, Felton, a man like you. I went to him and told him all; he knew me, that man did, and did not doubt an instant. He was a nobleman, a man equal to Buckingham in every respect. He said nothing; he only girded on his sword, wrapped himself in his cloak, and went straight to Buckingham Palace.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Felton; ‘I understand how he would act. But with such men it is not the sword that should be employed; it is the poniard.’

‘Buckingham had left England the day before, sent as ambassador to Spain, to demand the hand of the Infanta for King Charles I, who was then only Prince of Wales. My affianced husband returned.

“Hear me,” said he; “this man has gone, and for the moment has consequently escaped my vengeance; but let us be united, as we were to have been, and then leave it to Lord de Winter to maintain his own honour and that of his wife.”’

‘Lord de Winter!’ cried Felton.

‘Yes,’ said Milady, ‘Lord de Winter; and now you can understand it all, can you not? Buckingham remained nearly a year absent. A week before his return Lord de Winter died, leaving me his sole heir. Whence came the blow? God who knows all, knows without doubt; but as for me, I accuse nobody.’

‘Oh, what an abyss; what an abyss!’ cried Felton.

‘Lord de Winter died without revealing anything to his brother. The terrible secret was to be concealed till it burst, like a clap of thunder, over the head of the guilty. Your protector had seen with pain this marriage of his elder brother with a portionless girl. I was sensible that I could look

standly around us, breathed it into my mind. In short, what shall I say to you, Felton?’ continued Milady, in the tone of a woman accusing herself of a crime. ‘This idea occurred to me, and did not leave me; it is of this homicidal thought that I now bear the punishment.’

‘Continue, continue!’ said Felton; ‘I am eager to see you attain your vengeance!’

‘Oh, I resolved that it should take place as soon as possible. I had no doubt he would return the following night. During the day I had nothing to fear.

When the hour of breakfast came, therefore, I did not hesitate to eat and drink. I had determined to make believe sup, but to eat nothing. I was forced, then, to combat the fast of the evening with the nourishment of the morning.

Only I concealed a glass of water, which remained after my breakfast, thirst having been the chief of my sufferings when I remained forty-eight hours without eating or drinking.

The day passed away without having any other influence on me than to strengthen the resolution I had formed; only I took care that my face should not betray the thoughts of my heart, for I had no doubt I was watched. Several times, even, I felt a smile on my lips. Felton, I dare not tell you at what idea I smiled; you would hold me in horror—’

‘Go on! go on!’ said Felton; ‘you see plainly that I listen, and that I am anxious to know the end.’

‘Evening came; the ordinary events took place. During the darkness, as before, my supper was brought. Then the lamp was lighted, and I sat down to table. I only ate some fruit. I pretended to pour out water from the jug, but I only drank that which I had saved in my glass. The substitution was made so carefully that my spies, if I had any, could have no suspicion of it.

After supper I exhibited the same marks of languor as on the preceding evening; but this time, as I yielded to fatigue, or as if I had become familiarized with danger, I dragged myself toward my bed, let my robe fall, and lay down.

I found my knife where I had placed it, under my pillow, and while feigning to sleep, my hand grasped the handle of it convulsively.

I felt instinctively that someone approached me; it is said that the doomed wretch in the deserts of America thus feels the approach of the serpent.

I wished to make an effort; I attempted to cry out. By an incredible effort of will I even raised myself up, but only to sink down again immediately, and to fall into the arms of my persecutor.'

'Tell me who this man was!' cried the young officer.

Milady saw at a single glance all the painful feelings she inspired in Felton by dwelling on every detail of her recital; but she would not spare him a single pang. The more profoundly she wounded his heart, the more certainly he would avenge her. She continued, then, as if she had not heard his exclamation, or as if she thought the moment was not yet come to reply to it.

'Only this time it was no longer an inert body, without feeling; that the villain had to deal with. I have told you that without being able to regain the complete exercise of my faculties, I retained the sense of my danger. I struggled, then, with all my strength, and doubtless opposed, weak as I was, a long resistance, for I heard him cry out, "These miserable Puritans! I knew very well that they tired out their executioners, but I did not believe them so strong against their lovers!"'

Alas! this desperate resistance could not last long. I felt my strength fail, and this time it was not my sleep that enabled the coward to prevail, but my swoon.'

Felton listened without uttering any word or sound, except an inward expression of agony. The sweat streamed down his marble forehead, and his hand, under his coat, tore his breast.

'My first impulse, on coming to myself, was to feel under my pillow for the knife I had not been able to reach; if it had not been useful for defence, it might at least serve for expiation.

But on taking this knife, Felton, a terrible idea occurred to me. I have sworn to tell you all, and I will tell you all. I have promised you the truth; I will tell it, were it to destroy me.'

'The idea came into your mind to avenge yourself on this man, did it not?' cried Felton.

'Yes,' said Milady. 'The idea was not that of a Christian, I knew; but without doubt, that eternal enemy of our souls, that lion roaring con-

for no support from a man disappointed in his hopes of an inheritance. I went to France, with a determination to remain there for the rest of my life. But all my fortune is in England. Communication being closed by the war, I was in want of everything. I was then obliged to come back again. Six days ago, I landed at Portsmouth.'

'Well?' said Felton.

'Well; Buckingham heard by some means, no doubt, of my return. He spoke of me to Lord de Winter, already prejudiced against me, and told him that his sister-in-law was a prostitute, a branded woman. The noble and pure voice of my husband was no longer here to defend me. Lord de Winter believed all that was told him with so much the more ease that it was his interest to believe it. He caused me to be arrested, had me conducted hither, and placed me under your guard. You know the rest. The day after tomorrow he banishes me, he transports me; the day after tomorrow he exiles me among the infamous. Oh, the train is well laid; the plot is clever. My honour will not survive it! You see, then, Felton, I can do nothing but die. Felton, give me that knife!'

And at these words, as if all her strength was exhausted, Milady sank, weak and languishing, into the arms of the young officer, who, intoxicated with love, anger, and voluptuous sensations hitherto unknown, received her with transport, pressed her against his heart, all trembling at the breath from that charming mouth, bewildered by the contact with that palpitating bosom.

'No, no,' said he. 'No, you shall live honoured and pure; you shall live to triumph over your enemies.'

Milady put him from her slowly with her hand, while drawing him nearer with her look; but Felton, in his turn, embraced her more closely, imploring her like a divinity.

'Oh, death, death!' said she, lowering her voice and her eyelids, 'oh, death, rather than shame! Felton, my brother, my friend, I conjure you!'

'No,' cried Felton, 'no; you shall live and you shall be avenged.'

'Felton, I bring misfortune to all who surround me! Felton, abandon me! Felton, let me die!'

'Well, then, we will live and die together!' cried he, pressing his lips to those of the prisoner.

Several strokes resounded on the door; this time Milady really pushed him away from her.

'Hark,' said she, 'we have been overheard! Someone is coming! All is over! We are lost!'

'No,' said Felton; it is only the sentinel warning me that they are about to change the guard."

'Then run to the door, and open it yourself.'

Felton obeyed; this woman was now his whole thought, his whole soul. He found himself face to face with a sergeant commanding a watch-patrol.

'Well, what is the matter?' asked the young lieutenant.

'You told me to open the door if I heard anyone cry out,' said the soldier; 'but you forgot to leave me the key. I heard you cry out, without understanding what you said. I tried to open the door, but it was locked inside; then I called the sergeant.'

'And here I am,' said the sergeant.

Felton, quite bewildered, almost mad, stood speechless.

Milady plainly perceived that it was now her turn to take part in the scene. She ran to the table, and seizing the knife which Felton had laid down, exclaimed, 'And by what right will you prevent me from dying?'

'Great God!' exclaimed Felton, on seeing the knife glitter in her hand.

At that moment a burst of ironical laughter resounded through the corridor. The baron, attracted by the noise, in his chamber gown, his sword under his arm, stood in the doorway.

'Ah,' said he, 'here we are, at the last act of the tragedy. You see, Felton, the drama has gone through all the phases I named; but be easy, no blood will flow.'

Milady perceived that all was lost unless she gave Felton an immediate and terrible proof of her courage.

'You are mistaken, my Lord, blood will flow; and may that blood fall back on those who cause it to flow!'

Felton uttered a cry, and rushed toward her. He was too late; Milady had stabbed herself.

But the knife had fortunately, we ought to say skilfully, come in contact with the steel busk, which at that period, like a cuirass, defended the chests of women. It had glided down it, tearing the robe, and had penetrated

the shadows, the table sink through the floor; a quarter of an hour later it reappeared, bearing my supper. In an instant, thanks to the lamp, my chamber was once more lighted.

I was determined to eat only such things as could not possibly have anything soporific introduced into them. Two eggs and some fruit composed my repast; then I drew another glass of water from my protecting fountain, and drank it.

At the first swallow, it appeared to me not to have the same taste as in the morning. Suspicion instantly seized me. I paused, but I had already drunk half a glass.

I threw the rest away with horror, and waited, with the dew of fear upon my brow.

No doubt some invisible witness had seen me draw the water from that fountain, and had taken advantage of my confidence in it, the better to assure my ruin, so coolly resolved upon, so cruelly pursued.

Half an hour had not passed when the same symptoms began to appear; but as I had only drunk half a glass of the water, I contended longer, and instead of falling entirely asleep, I sank into a state of drowsiness which left me a perception of what was passing around me, while depriving me of the strength either to defend myself or to fly.

I dragged myself toward the bed, to seek the only defence I had left—my saving knife; but I could not reach the bolster. I sank on my knees, my hands clasped round one of the bedposts; then I felt that I was lost.'

Felton became frightfully pale, and a convulsive tremor crept through his whole body.

'And what was most frightful,' continued Milady, her voice altered, as if she still experienced the same agony as at that awful minute, 'was that at this time I retained a consciousness of the danger that threatened me; was that my soul, if I may say so, waked in my sleeping body; was that I saw, that I heard. It is true that all was like a dream, but it was not the less frightful.

I saw the lamp ascend, and leave me in darkness; then I heard the well-known creaking of the door although I had heard that door open but twice.

you only a single time. Adieu, my charmer; I will wait to pay you my next visit till you are in a better humour.”

At these words he blew a whistle; the globe of fire which lighted the room reascended and disappeared. I found myself again in complete darkness. The same noise of a door opening and shutting was repeated the instant afterward; the flaming globe descended afresh, and I was completely alone.

This moment was frightful; if I had any doubts as to my misfortune, these doubts had vanished in an overwhelming reality. I was in the power of a man whom I not only detested, but despised—of a man capable of anything, and who had already given me a fatal proof of what he was able to do.’

‘But who, then, was this man?’ asked Felton.

‘I passed the night on a chair, starting at the least noise, for toward midnight the lamp went out, and I was again in darkness. But the night passed away without any fresh attempt on the part of my persecutor. Day came; the table had disappeared, only I had still the knife in my hand.

This knife was my only hope.

I was worn out with fatigue. Sleeplessness inflamed my eyes; I had not dared to sleep a single instant. The light of day reassured me; I went and threw myself on the bed, without parting with the envenoming knife, which I concealed under my pillow.

When I awoke, a fresh meal was served.

This time, in spite of my terrors, in spite of my agony, I began to feel a devouring hunger. It was forty-eight hours since I had taken any nourishment. I ate some bread and some fruit; then, remembering the narcotic mixed with the water I had drunk, I would not touch that which was placed on the table, but filled my glass at a marble fountain fixed in the wall over my dressing table.

And yet, notwithstanding these precautions, I remained for some time in a terrible agitation of mind. But my fears were this time ill-founded; I passed the day without experiencing anything of the kind I dreaded.

I took the precaution to half empty the *cantife*, in order that my suspicions might not be noticed.

The evening came on, and with it darkness; but however profound was this darkness, my eyes began to accustom themselves to it. I saw, amid

slantingly between the flesh and the ribs. Milady’s robe was not the less stained with blood in a second.

Milady fell down, and seemed to be in a swoon.

Felton snatched away the knife.

‘See, my Lord,’ said he, in a deep, gloomy tone, ‘here is a woman who was under my guard, and who has killed herself!’

‘Be at ease, Felton,’ said Lord de Winter. ‘She is not dead; demons do not die so easily. Be tranquil, and go wait for me in my chamber.’

‘But, my Lord—’

‘Go, sir, I command you!’

At this injunction from his superior, Felton obeyed; but in going out, he put the knife into his bosom.

As to Lord de Winter, he contented himself with calling the woman who waited on Milady, and when she was come, he recommended the prisoner, who was still fainting, to her care, and left them alone.

Meanwhile, all things considered and notwithstanding his suspicions, as the wound might be serious, he immediately sent off a mounted man to find a physician.

to fall at every instant. Although I had eaten nothing since the evening before, my fears prevented my feeling hunger.

No noise from without by which I could measure the time reached me; I only supposed it must be seven or eight o'clock in the evening, for it was in the month of October and it was quite dark.

All at once the noise of a door, turning on its hinges, made me start. A globe of fire appeared above the glazed opening of the ceiling, casting a strong light into my chamber; and I perceived with terror that a man was standing within a few paces of me.

A table, with two covers, bearing a supper ready prepared, stood, as if by magic, in the middle of the apartment.

That man was he who had pursued me during a whole year, who had vowed my dishonour, and who, by the first words that issued from his mouth, gave me to understand he had accomplished it the preceding night.'

'Scoundrel!' murmured Felton.

'Oh, yes, scoundrel!' cried Milady, seeing the interest which the young officer, whose soul seemed to hang on her lips, took in this strange recital. 'Oh, yes, scoundrel! He believed, having triumphed over me in my sleep, that all was completed. He came, hoping that I would accept my shame, as my shame was consummated; he came to offer his fortune in exchange for my love.'

All that the heart of a woman could contain of haughty contempt and disdainful words, I poured out upon this man. Doubtless he was accustomed to such reproaches, for he listened to me calm and smiling, with his arms crossed over his breast. Then, when he thought I had said all, he advanced toward me; I sprang toward the table, I seized a knife, I placed it to my breast.

"Take one step more," said I, "and in addition to my dishonour, you shall have my death to reproach yourself with."

There was, no doubt, in my look, my voice, my whole person, that sincerity of gesture, of attitude, of accent, which carries conviction to the most perverse minds, for he paused.

"Your death?" said he; "oh, no, you are too charming a mistress to allow me to consent to lose you thus, after I have had the happiness to possess