The Wife of Number 4,237

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1886

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I.

The train had just arrived at the station of N—–, an out-of-the-way place on one of the branches of the South-Eastern system. The few travellers alighted—three men and a woman—and stood on the platform, waiting till the way was deal- to cross to the other side and make their way out.

The men belonged in the vicinity and knew each other. They talked together, while the woman—a young brunette, thin and poorly dressed in black—stood apart, leaning on the railing. Her eyes roved over the surrounding country and seemed to seek the object of her journey.

On the right and the left she saw gently-sloping hills covered with forests; before her, a large plain, covered with meadows, clumps of trees, green fields which ran up the hillsides and outlined themselves in emerald green on the dark background of the forests of fir-trees. A rivulet wound through the plain. One would have said that it had imposed on itself the task of visiting each of the farm-houses whose roofs glistened in the sunlight, carrying to each the freshness of its limpid waters. Then it entered a shaded defile, between other hills, and disappeared in the bluish mists of the morning.

Meanwhile, the train had lazily moved on; the way was clear, and the travellers could leave. Once outside, they dispersed in various directions.

The new arrival gave them time to get away; then she approached a peasant in a blue blouse, who was lighting his pipe, and asked him the way to the central prison.

"Only keep to this road lined with lindens, you will not miss it," said the peasant, while he examined with a scrutinizing look the troubled features of the young woman. "As soon as you have passed the copse on the right, you will see a great wall: that is the external wall. Follow that, it will lead you to the entrance.

"You come to see some one in prison?" ventured he.

"Yes."

"A relative, doubtless?"

"Yes, sir."

And she hurried to gain the designated road, quickening her pace.

The peasant followed her with his look. He thought for a moment of overtaking her and talking a little as they walked together; but she was already far away. He shook his head, and went into the cafe at the station.

The woman walked very fast. Whether it was emotion or the sharpness of the morning air, she shivered under her woollen dress; but she did not think to put on a knit neck-handkerchief which she carried in her hand with a little wicker basket.

The wind brought her the perfumed air of meadows and trees which were hastening to profit by a late spring-time to expand their foliage. The copse on the right sent her by puffs the penetrating odor of young fir-trees.

"Oh how good it is here!" she exclaimed, taking deep breaths of the pure air of the beautiful morning. She admired the fields, the meadows, the rapid waters of the stream which flowed by the side of the road. "What limpid water!" she thought; "all around endless forests; this is real country!"

And, full of admiration, she involuntarily slackened her steps. After the infectious air of the suffocating streets of the great city, after the dust of the work-shop, the country had so much

more charm for her; and she breathed with all her lungs. In the face of nature, she forgot for a moment her troubles.

A gold-finch was pouring forth his morning song in the thicket, and the young woman had already taken a few steps to one side to discover the little singer, when she perceived behind the trees an immense gray wall which rose before her.

Formidable, sombre, this mass of stone extended quite beyond her view, running through the valley and climbing the hill. A whole world, speechless, stupefied, stagnated within its enclosure.

The flash of cheerfulness which had kindled for a moment in the large eyes of the poor woman was extinguished instantly at the sight of this mass of stone.

"He is there, behind this wall," she said to herself; "he never sees the water or the verdure; nothing of all this exists for him." And she rushed along the road, accelerating her steps, forcing herself by a rapid walk to stifle the sobs ready to shake her breast.

"He must not see me weep," she stammered; "it would trouble him too much: he could never bear my tears."

But the rebellious tears ran over her cheeks; they fell on her breast, slipping over her dress, dispersing in little drops. She hurried along to stifle them under a powerful effort of the will.

"How long it is, this wall!" She had been following it twenty minutes, and she could not see the end.

At last she saw the buttresses, an embrasure, and the vaulted door—the only egress of this formidable masonry. The young woman wiped her eyes, dried them with her handkerchief, and entered a vast court. However, she had not yet reached the prison, they told her. The prison! she could not see it, for there were two more walls to clear before reaching the prisoners' quarters. She must ring at a second door-way, and apply at the clerk's office.

Trembling, she crossed the threshold of the door which had just been indicated to her, and spoke at last to a guard.

"Would you be willing to tell me, sir, to whom I ought to apply to see my husband ... Jean Tissot," added she, blushing and presenting her marriage certificate.

"To the director, madam. He is away today, but there is his substitute."

"Can I see him at once?"

"In a quarter of an hour he will return from the pretorium; I will give him your papers. Wait here on the bench."

The quarter hour, the half hour passed,—the wife of a prisoner is accustomed to waiting,—and seated on a bench in a sombre ante-room, the young woman tried to recall all that she had to say to her husband. So many things, and the interview is so short,—hardly a half hour!

How many times, lying in her attic, had she not repeated all that she would say to him; each word had engraved itself in her memory, and now she had forgotten everything ...

"I shall tell him first how I love him,—infinitely, more now than before; if I still live, it is only for him.

"He must know nothing of all I have suffered during these eighteen months; I work, I am well ... my rent is paid ... what else? I have forgotten everything; why did I not write it all on a scrap of paper?"

The thread of her thought was broken; she asked herself in what condition she would find him.

"Eighteen months since I saw him! They say that they are poorly fed, that they have to work much too hard. He will be pale, he will have that cadaverous look that I have seen in the prisoners at the jail."

She shudders at this idea, but a moment after she sees already her Jean happy, the smile—that good smile—on his lips, when they have announced to him that his little Julie is there, that he is going to see' her immediately; and she feels happy at the thought of having brought him a moment of happiness.

How he expected her for the New Year!

And she mentally reread this letter. She knew it by heart, this letter which he had written her on learning that he would not see her.

She had them, nevertheless,—the hundred francs necessary for the voyage. She had been saving for a whole year on her salary of forty-two *sous* a day. A whole year of privations, during which she refused herself everything, stinting herself in food and in fire which she lighted so rarely in winter. Yes, she had them in December, when that terrible sickness came to spoil all her plans.

"A simple gash, a finger cut with a silk thread, and what horrible suffering! I thought I should die; what is it that they put in this silk to make people suffer so much? More than a month lost, and how the money was eaten up! ... It was all to begin over again!"

Meanwhile the director has returned: a man lean, dry, still young, who has not even condescended to give a look to the visitor, in going to his office. There is a going and coming of guards; they have gone to look for the head guard.

"A minute more," the poor woman thinks; and she resumes her place on the bench. Every time they open a door, she believes she will see her husband.

At least, the interview will not take place under the same conditions as at the jail. A shudder seizes her at the recollection of those men put in a cage like wild beasts.

"But the beasts have only one grating, and there they have two, more than a yard apart. No way of touching even a finger. Two gratings, a mesh of iron wire, and a guard between us! Perfect darkness t I could not even see his features. Five men in each cage, ten women and children before them! The women weeping, the men screaming as loud as they can to make themselves heard in the uproar of the calls of the guards, of raps on doors, of a hundred men and women talking at once under one vault,—what a hell!"

"Come this way, madam, the director wishes to speak with you," said a guard.

She enters the office.

A tall man, with hard features, glassy eyes and blonde mustache, receives her standing, speaking to the chief guard:

"You are sure it is Number 4,237? in the hospital quarter? That is the one! Sick? Can he not go down to the *parloir?*"

"No, sir."

"Madam, your husband is sick, in the infirmary. You cannot see him for some days yet."

"Sick? What is the matter with him?" cries the poor woman. "But then I will go to the infirmary!"

She is almost content to escape this horrible *parloir*.

"Impossible. Absolutely impossible! It is contrary to the rules. The law is the same for all: a woman never enters the prisons. You will see him when he is well again."

"But I come from a long distance, sir; I can stay here only a few days."

“He need not have got into prison! This is the rule; I can do nothing about it. No interview till he can go down to the *parloir*.”

“I beg you, sir …. Is he seriously ill? What is the matter?”

“Inflammation of the chest, vomiting of blood,—or something or other of that sort.”

“But if he could only see me, oh! you would see how that would give him strength … He is sick because he has not seen me for so long a time, … he will recover” …

“I have already told you, madam, that it is impossible. What do you want me to do about it? It is contrary to the rules.”

“My Jean, my dear one! … If you only knew how he loves me; I am everything to him … What must I do, tell me, in order to get permission? But it is my husband, sir, and I, his wife, have not the right to see him? …. What, have we done, then, that they should make us suffer so much?”

The sobs broke her voice; a cry of pain escaped from this feeble breast.

The director knew not what to say: he pulled his mustache impatiently. The head guard—a man with gray hair, hardened by a long service, but who rarely had business with women—fixed his eyes on the director’s embroidered cap thrown on the table.

“The rules are opposed to it… the law … the law for all,” stammered the director.

Then he took refuge in his office.

The woman remained alone with the head guard; she went toward him.

“Sir, you are a father, you ought to understand me … You have, perhaps, a daughter married … Who knows, if one day … Jean is also an honest man … I beg you, let me see my husband.”

And she sank down on a chair. Her sobs choked her; she wrung her hands.

The old guard was put completely out of countenance. He twirled his whistle in his hands, but what could be done? Call the other guards? What was the use? His whole experience of thirty years did not help him in the least; he felt himself disarmed.

At last, an idea seemed to bring him light.

“Return tomorrow,” said he, in a low voice, throwing a glance at the door of the office. “The director will return this evening; perhaps he will act on his own responsibility … This is an inspector, he would not dare … I will speak to the physician. Tomorrow morning, be here at nine o’clock, speak to the director … This way, this way,” added he, aloud, pushing gently towards the door the tottering woman.

With haggard eyes, Julie let herself be led by the arm. She sobbed no more, she trembled in every limb, and her colorless lips launched this malediction.

“Be cursed, heartless men, with your rules and your laws, made to break hearts!”

II.

Julie Tissot had roamed all day in the vicinity of the prison. These words: “inflammation of the chest, vomiting of blood,” rang in her ears; thoughts, scraps of incoherent thoughts, pursued each other in her head, without her being able to stop at any of them.

Sometimes she saw her husband dying, his eyes wide open, alone, abandoned in a great room, vainly calling his Julie to give him water, then falling back exhausted on his bed,—and a sombre despair took possession of the poor woman.

She walked, walked straight on, without knowing where she was going… A moment later she threw off her torpor, her brain refused to admit that Jean, so strong, so robust, so full of energy,

was struck with this terrible sickness. He would get up again as soon as he should see her; she would give him courage, recall him to life. And dreams of happiness unfolded before her eyes, carrying her on their wings.

The mist was already settling on the valley, when the humidity of the evening and the frights of an empty stomach reminded her that she must seek a shelter for the night. She directed her steps towards the village, crossed it once, then again, before deciding to enter a little inn which she had perceived on entering the hamlet.

Timidly, noiselessly, she went into the low and dark cafe of the inn, and waited till the proprietress, occupied at the other end of the hall, should notice her.

Contrary to her expectations, she was well received by the bourgeoise,—a woman already old, who carried cheerfully the weight of her completed fifty years and her obesity. They see so much misery in the hamlet of the central prison, they witness so much suffering, that the friends of the prisoners are generally pretty well received.

"But you too, poor girl, you are sick; you need rest very much," she said to her, when Julie explained that she had come to see her husband, but, he being sick, she might perhaps remain eight or ten days.

While talking with her customers, the old woman tried to make her swallow some spoonfuls of soup and a few drops of wine. But Julie could take nothing: after twenty-two hours of travelling, of expectation and blasted hopes, the bread seemed bitter, the wine sharp. She hurried up to her room, hoping to find a moment of repose in her bed. But, when she entered the room, she went to the open window and stood there motionless.

A shapeless mass of buildings, added during the centuries one after another, work-shops blackened with smoke and crowned by high chimneys, a whole city, but a city dead, hushed, without the least sign of life, rose before her. Beyond the exterior wall, which sent here and there steely reflections in the moonlight, she saw endless rows of grated windows, strongly lighted. One would have said they might be palaces illuminated for a festival; they were the dormitories of a thousand prisoners. Julie tried to guess which was Jean's window. She pressed her burning forehead against the window; her eyes tried to penetrate space, to pierce the walls, to discover the sick man's bed.

He is there; a single wall separates them. She might take care of him, bring a ray of light into his sad existence, whisper in his ear one of those sweet words which he has not heard in so long a time and which would encourage the man bowed down under the weight of this sad life. But the barbarous law is there,—putting between them impenetrable walls, bristling with soldiers ready to fire.

Oh, yes, the law! It does not fail, poor Julie, to destroy the happiness of a family, under the pretext of correcting men.

"Jean, Jean, my love!" she calls in the silence of the night. For sole answer, the cry of "Sentinel, attention!" rises every quarter hour, dying away in the distance and then returning, always so menacing.

"If he should die," thought Julie, "I shall not survive him. I have no one in the world, not a single heart to whom I am dear. With him gone, the last hope vanished, what would be left to me? The poor pity of a few neighbors?—No! he alone attaches me to life!"

Julie was of an impressionable, loving nature. Up to the present time, she had always loved, she had always been loved, and life without affection seemed to her harder than death. In her childhood she had been cared for and petted as much as the poverty of her parents would permit.

Her father, a miner in one of the pits of a great company, serious, often grave, had always a caressing word for his little Julie,—as gay and full of life as a bird.

Her mother, until the sickness which kept her to her bed for long years, had been able to provide for the household out of the meagre wages of her husband. Julie always had her little neat apron and some dainties in her basket, when she ran to school.

She was fifteen years old when her mother fell sick, a sickness from which she never recovered. This first serious sorrow transformed Julie. From a girl, gay and rebellious, she became serious and industrious. Her great black eyes acquired then an expression of pensive gravity.

The task now fell upon her of conducting the little household, of doing her best to fill her mother's place by her father's side. You should have seen how grateful he was to her in consequence, with what tenderness he caressed his child's pretty head. They were more than a father and daughter: they were two friends.

From time to time, on Sundays, the young people of the village held a little fete in the large hall of the inn.

They danced to the music of the violin, and some ribbon-weavers in the vicinity were invited to these fetes. There Julie made the acquaintance of Jean Tissot, a fine boy, with a sprightly face, expressive eyes, and a black mustache. They finished by loving each other.

The young people were happy. Only one thing threw a shadow over their happiness,—the military service which Jean had still before him. But everything seemed to smile on them, and the day when the lots were drawn, Jean came to announce that he had a good number; he had only one year to serve. How happy that evening was at the miner's. It was the occasion of a little fete. Julie, beaming with happiness, was still more beautiful than ever.

It was decided that the marriage should take place on Jean's return.

They would not leave her father's house. It would be a little far for Jean; he certainly could not come to breakfast; but Julie would fix his basket for him every morning, she would go to meet him, and in the evening they would all reunite about this same table. All a dream of happiness—a dream!

This was at the beginning of the autumn. A heavy heat weighed on the village: not a breath to refresh the stifling air. The evening before, the father had returned more serious than usual. He had seen the old miners shake their heads on leaving the pits. "It smells bad in the mine," they said. Foreseeing an explosion of firedamp, they looked anxiously at the sky, longing for a gust of wind from the east.

But the east wind did not come the next day. Not a breath of air in the morning, when the anxious father left the house, giving his wife and child a longer and more tender embrace than usual.

At four o'clock, a rumbling noise was heard. In less than a quarter of an hour, the women, pale, with haggard eyes, were already around the shaft, striving to read their destinies in the black depths of the abyss. Preparations were being made for the work of rescue.

Two hours passed before they had news from below, brought by men blackened with smoke, bruised, who could hardly believe in the happiness of seeing again the blue sky. They said that about thirty men must have been buried by the explosion: Julie's father was among the number.

Three days, three times twenty-four hours, passed before they succeeded in opening a way. The women were beside themselves.

During these three days, Julie remained there, seated on a heap of that mineral, every cartful of which is stained with human blood. Neither the rain which began to fall in torrents nor the entreaties of Jean could make her quit her post. She had even forgotten her mother.

When the basket began to bring up the corpses, the distracted women broke the chain of sentries and rushed towards the abyss, uttering heart-rending cries when they saw again, disfigured, calcined, these same faces which, three days before, had smiled at them on leaving. Certain bodies were recognizable only by the clothes: among others Julie's father, whose head had been crushed by a mass of rock.

"Dear father, my love," she cried, covering with kisses his icy-cold breast. Jean drew her away by force: he feared lest he might see her also grow rigid on the corpse.

With her head pressed against the window, Julie saw all these horrible scenes pass again before her eyes.

She resumed the thread of her memories.

A month passed before she could return to her occupations. Misery menaced the fireside. Then Jean left for military service. To support her mother it became necessary to seek work.

A cousin of Jean—he had no other relatives—persuaded Julie to leave the village for the city, where she could find occupation. She learned the trade of winder, and was soon working by the side of her cousin.

The separation of the young people had been painful.

"You will not forget me during my absence?" said the young man. "You will wait for me? It is happily only a year; it will not be long. Be patient a little while. As soon as I return, we will be married; I will take care of you, my beauty; you will rest from all that you have suffered."

"Can you doubt it?" answered Julie. "Never, no, never, can anyone take your place in my heart."

"Take care, Julie. If you should love another, you know that I would be capable of anything: of killing you, you, and of putting an end to my own life."

"Why do you say that, Jean, dear? You do not know me. Go, since it must be, and return as quickly as possible. Your Julie will wait for you. But you, take care that, with your hot head, no misfortune comes to you: I could not survive you!" …

The young people passed the whole day together in this way. driving away the anxieties of the separation by dreams of happiness after the return.

The year was painful. A day of twelve hours in a little stifling work shop, under the superintendence of a bigoted old woman; the poverty that is inevitable on wages of forty *sous* a day; the revolting advances of the employer's son,—one must bear everything to avoid being put out on the street. But she had the sweet words of her mother and Jean's letters, which the atmosphere of the barracks had not been able to soil with its fetid breath.

At last, the year had passed. Jean had returned, and a life of peaceful happiness began for the three. Julie worked no more in the shop; Jean, who made a good living, demanded that she should rest a little and care for her mother. This lasted some months, a year of happiness.

All the little details of these months that had passed so happily, sprang up again in Julie's memory. They were so happy, and everything had been so brutally shattered.

She shuddered at the recollection of the evening when they came to tell her that her husband had been carried away to the police station: that, quarrelling with an overseer, he had almost killed him with a knife.

"Jean, Jean, why did you do this?" murmured Julie. "How happy we might have been without this!"

And immediately the image of her cousin rose before her, a child on her hands,—the child of this overseer, a rascal who had abandoned her after having seduced her,—and Julie hastened to say:

"No, no, forgive me for having dared to make you, even in my thought, this reproach. Alone in the world, without relatives, were you not bound to take her part?"

And she sees the court-room: an indifferent public, come to seek impressions and something to gossip about; her cousin, pale and trembling in a corner of the witness bench; her husband between two policemen. Before him, the judges, somnolent, fair-spoken, tranquil; an attorney-general, choleric, furious at having obtained only six years' confinement for a child-murderess of eighteen years, who had just been tried before the same court.

Her husband's voice, tranquil, assured, a little tired, still resounded in her ears. What could he say more? That he was his cousin's sole defender, that he had done what he ought to do? An advocate would have talked an hour; he confined himself to relating what this overseer was, what his cousin had suffered.

But the attorney-general made a long speech. He spoke of the immorality of the working-classes, he insisted on the need of reacting, of treating the turbulent rigorously; he dwelt especially on the resistance Jean had made at the moment of his arrest, and he begged the judges to give him five years' imprisonment.

Jean was condemned to three years in prison.

The old mother could not endure this sorrow: they carried her to the cemetery a fortnight after the sentence. The handsome fellow was shaved, dressed in ignoble garb, and sent to the central prison.

The moon was already descending towards the horizon. One moment more, and it would disappear behind the forests which covered the summit of the hills. The silent night enveloped the prison and the hamlet. A thick mist, heavy and cold, was condensing in the valley and covering it with a veil, effacing the sharp lines of the heavy buildings.

Julie did not feel it penetrate her clothes, her flesh, her bones: the fatigue of the journey, the emotions of the day, had had their effect. With her head bent forward on her arm, she slept, still leaning against the window open to the cold night breezes.

III.

At five o'clock Julie was up; at seven o'clock she was already ringing at the grated door of the prison.

"Has the director returned?" was her first question, as soon as the porter appeared behind the grating with his bunch of keys.

Yes, he had returned. But he would not be there before eight o'clock,—and the porter started to go back to his lodge.

Julie begged him to let her enter, to wait at the clerk's office. Dreading to lose a single minute, she wished to see the director as soon as he arrived. And she resumed her place on the bench, mute witness of so much suffering. All expectation, she was ready to spring up each time that she heard a door open.

Nine o'clock, ten o'clock. No director. They said that he had gone directly to the pretorium. Guards came and went, exchanged words in a slang peculiar to their calling, of which Julie could comprehend nothing. She still waited, each moment seeming an eternity.

She caught at last some words in the conversation of two guards; one of them came from the hospital, and she accosted him at once.

"Tell me, sir, what must I do to speak with the director? I have come to see my husband, but I have not yet obtained a permit."

"And who is your husband?"

"Jean Tissot: he was in the hospital yesterday."

"In which shop did he work?"

"In the correction quarter, in the shop where they make mother-of-pearl articles."

"Jean Tissot? correction quarter? number 4,237?"

"Yes, yes. that is the one."

"But why do you wish to be allowed to see him? He is to be buried in an hour. Do you not know that he died yesterday?"

A terrible cry, escaping from the poor woman's breast, made the guard recoil. Her knees bent, she felt herself giving way, when she perceived the chief guard who had evinced some sympathy for her the day before. She ran towards him, with the secret hope that he would contradict this terrible news.

Unhappily, it was only too true. It was precisely to invite Madam to go to the clerk's office and receive twenty-two francs which remained of Jean Tissot's money that the chief guard had come. There were also his effects …

Julie did not hear. Pale as a sheet, her eyes dilated, she leaned against the door, trying to articulate some words. They hardly succeeded in comprehending her, when she said in a stifled voice:

"You will let me say adieu? …"

Absolutely impossible. The regulations were opposed to it.

"At one o'clock you will see the funeral procession. Keep near that gate, by the side of the guard-house; I will show it to you. You can follow the procession as far as the cemetery."

Julie followed the guard, without a word, to the guard-house. There she sank down on the outer steps.

No sobs, no tears. Motionless, like one of those statues on which the sculptors of the middle ages have fixed the sufferings of a humanity given over to pestilence, famine, and the stake, she fixed her dry, undeviating eyes on the door by which was to go out all that was dearest to her in the world.

She saw nothing, heard nothing. The passers-by stared at her, opened their eyes wide, on seeing this expression of anguish. A child stopped, and wished to accost her, but recoiled before this fixed gaze. The soldiers of the guard went on talking and jesting by her side. Julie did not notice them; she saw only the door-way.

Suddenly she trembled and with a bound threw herself towards the door, behind which a grave voice chanted the prayer for the dead.

The folding doors opened. At the head of the procession, a prisoner, in brown jacket and pantaloons, with gray hair floating in the wind, advanced slowly, carrying a great cross and trying to recite in a composed voice the Latin of the prayer. A priest, in white, followed him, looking out with an indifferent eye on the court which opened before him. Four prisoners, also

in brown jackets, brown caps without binding falling over their eyes, marched in step with their heavy wooden shoes, carrying the coffin covered with a gray cloth, and a large white cross.

Four other prisoners, glad to get outside the walls, followed them to relieve the bearers. Two guards, with blue cloaks over their shoulders, were talking with the man who had opened the door for them.

No one else,—not a friend, not a comrade from the work-shop who might have been allowed to follow the procession. A great black dog,—the undertaker's,—with drooping head, brought up the rear, and he alone seemed to be penetrated with the gravity of the moment.

With a heart-rending cry, Julie threw herself towards the coffin.

"Jean! Jean dear! if I could only see you!" she cried.

With one movement she snatched away the pall and uncovered the white pine coffin. She tried to lift the lid. Two guards seized her by the arms, removing her gently.

"Be quiet, the bier is nailed."

"Let me see him, let me just embrace him one last time," implored Julie, struggling. "Wretches! to kill a man, and not even permit one to give him a last adieu!"

"Come! come! no noise!" replied a guard, while the coffin, re-covered with the gray cloth, moved on, tossing heavily on the men's shoulders. "There must be no outcry here! You must keep quiet, if you wish to be permitted to follow the procession."

Julie suddenly comprehended the horrible reality. Since her Jean had entered those walls, he belonged to her no more. Even dead, she had no right in him: an outside, brutal force had taken possession of him, and could even prevent his wife from following him to his last resting-place.

Without saying a word, Julie disengaged herself from the guard: she rejoined the procession, and placed herself by the side of the dog. Her suffering face suddenly took an expression of fixed determination; was a plan ripening in her head?

The cemetery was divided into two parts: one for the administration, the other for the prisoners. Here, crosses, flowers, protected by railings; there, ran uncultivated field, three large deep trenches, serving as common graves. They deposited the coffin on the edge of one of these trenches.

Julie did not approach. She, here, was only a stranger; she held herself aloof.

She saw the coffin descend into the trench, where there was still room for other unfortunates. She became all attention when the grave-diggers set to work; all her heart-strings quivered each time that a shovel-full fell heavily on the coffin. She counted them, and seemed to measure with her eyes the bed which was being piled up.

She did not approach the grave till the grave-diggers had finished their work, and then fell on her knees upon the freshly-disturbed earth, which still bore traces of the wooden shoes.

The guards, the priest, moved by this silent grief, drew back a few steps. Now, left alone, she could abandon herself to her grief. An absolute silence reigned all about her…

But it was necessary to return: they were going to close the cemetery …

The priest approached Julie, who rose and suddenly recoiled. He tried to speak to her of a world where there would be neither pleasures nor pains; she did not listen; she only understood that she could not remain any longer, that she must leave. The same force still interposed.

She started in fact, and took a few steps on the road, but returned to seat herself on a little stone-post at the gate of the cemetery.

“Oh! I will see him!” she said. “ Not to let me see him when he was sick! Not to let me make my last farewell! I must see him … But they could bury some one else and tell me that it was Jean?”

And she recollects that there was a Jacques Tissot in their village. What a resemblance in names, and how easy to mistake the number!

And it seems to her now that it really is Jacques Tissot who is in a pine coffin. Jean is as well as he has been all these eighteen months; he is there, behind those walls, and he does not even mistrust that his Julie, dying of sorrow, is so near him.

But her thoughts become confused. Another idea has been born; it grows, takes root, obtrudes itself, and drives away all others.

“And if they have buried him alive?” she asks herself. “ They said that he was sick. Sick people have fainting-fits; they might have taken him for dead. Dead yesterday, buried today! … But he may be in a state of lethargy.”

All her blood freezes at this thought, and she recalls stories she had heard in her childhood of an old lady buried alive, who revived when a thief disinterred her to get her ring.

She halts decisively at this idea.

“No, I will not let you die: I will restore you, I will dig you up.”

She no longer doubts that Jean is buried alive, and all her thoughts are directed towards one object,—to dig up the coffin, open it, see Jean. In a few minutes, her plan had ripened with the rapidity of delirium. She will go and conceal herself in the woods, and as soon as it is night, she will make her way into the cemetery. She will climb up on this stone-post; the railing is low; she can climb over it. She has seen where they put the shovel, and she can quickly clear away the earth. Her eyes glisten with a wild joy at this resolve.

Poor Julie! You do not know that, if you could open the coffin, you would recoil terrified. You do not know that this forehead which you covered with kisses so tender has been crushed with a hammer and that the broken skull has let the gray mass of the brain ooze out; that the heart which beat for you is torn out, cut in pieces, and crammed, pell-mell with the intestines, into this breast on which you rested so comfortably your pretty brown head …

No, Julie knows nothing of all this, and, alone, abandoned by all the world, every one occupied with his petty affairs—alone, without a single heart to help her, her frenzy goes on increasing.

She goes into the woods. She seeks, but does not find a hiding-place safe enough to crouch in till evening: the trees are too thinly-scattered, the bushes are too bare. There is a cave filled with brambles: there she will hide herself, without perceiving that the thorns tear her hands and cheeks.

“If he only does not suffocate before night!”—that is her only thought; but she recalls again the old woman disinterred by the thief, the two miners buried with her father: after three days they were still alive.

In her delirium, the poor Julie does not dare to move from her den. She is tormented with thirst, but:—”They will see me, they will prevent me,” she thinks, and puts leaves on her tongue to add fuel to the flame which is devouring her.

At last, night approaches; some stars shine through the branches. Julie, holding her breath, quits her refuge and glides through the brush-wood. The briers tear her hands, she does not feel them. Very soon she loses comb and hat; her black tresses, floating over her shoulders, catch in the bushes.

The noise of a dead branch which falls, of a bird which stirs in the confusion, fills her with terror. All the tales of ghosts which she has heard in her childhood, all the superstitions of a village of miners, reappear before her eyes. Each tree seems a monster ready to smother her in its clutches.

The moon is shining as she leaves the forest. She descends the hill and stops fifty steps away from the cemetery, not daring to approach it; her dress in rags, her hair full of dead branches, drops of blood on her livid cheeks, she tries to walk, to run, but remains fastened to the spot. The fields, the woods, seem to flutter about her, peopled with fantastic beings: all is confusion in her head.

A night-bird's sad plaint is heard,—it is Jean who is calling her! Then she makes a superhuman effort and throws herself towards the gate. She is already climbing the post, her hand touches the edge of the railing, she is ready to get over it.

But at this moment she perceives a great black cross stationed in front of the gate. For her this is an immense, black, hairy being, extending his arms. He grows larger, approaches, his arms lengthen, stretch out … She does not breathe or budge. Now the arms touch her, clasp her, stifle her … A feeble cry, and Julie falls. The moon illumines with its mild beams this pale face contracted with pain and suffering.

The next morning a peasant perceived her. He approached and spoke to her; she responded only in incoherent words. Her whole body was burning, consumed by fever. They carried her to the hospital of the neighboring village.

Her delirium was terrible. She tore the bands by which they tried to keep her on the bed. She fell on her knees before the nurse, begging her to let her see her Jean.

"I am his wife," she said. "If you only knew how he loves me. We are two, alone in the world … No one … I am everything to him … I will cure him"

Then, rising, she leaped forward and seized the nun by the throat, crying:

"Ah! wretches,—not to see him! Not even when sick! not even when dead! Infamous assassins! Wicked rules!"

Four days later they carried her to the cemetery, as they had carried Jean. There was not even the dog to follow her,—the only being whose sad eyes had testified a regret for this life, broken off in the midst of its dreams of happiness. The same indifference, the same abandonment, as for Number 4237.

Sophie Kropotkin
The Wife of Number 4,237
1886

Retrieved on 30th May 2024 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Based on Sophie Kropotkin's own experience with her husband at Clairvaux prison. Translated for *Liberty* by Sarah E. Holmes.

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