

Scene I

An Apartment in the Castle of Petrella

Enter CENCI

Cenci. She comes not; yet I left her even now
Vanquished and faint. She knows the penalty
Of her delay: yet what if threats are vain?
Am I not now within Petrella's moat?
Or fear I still the eyes and ears of Rome?
Might I not drag her by the golden hair?
Stamp on her? Keep her sleepless till her brain
Be overworn? Tame her with chains and famine?
Less would suffice. Yet so to leave undone
What I most seek! No, 'tis her stubborn will
Which by its own consent shall stoop as low
As that which drags it down.

Enter LUCRETIA

The Cenci

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1819

Act IV

Giacomo. It is my wife complaining in her sleep:
I doubt not she is saying bitter things
Of me; and all my children round her dreaming
That I deny them sustenance.

Orsino. Whilst he
Who truly took it from them, and who fills
Their hungry rest with bitterness, now sleeps
Lapped in bad pleasures, and triumphantly
Mocks thee in visions of successful hate
Too like the truth of day.

Giacomo. If e'er he wakes
Again, I will not trust to hireling hands...

Orsino. Why, that were well. I must be gone; good-night:
When next we meet—may all be done!

Giacomo. And all
Forgotten: Oh, that I had never been! [*Exeunt.*]

Contents

Dramatis Personæ	7
Act I	8
Scene I	9
Scene II	13
Scene III	15
Act II	25
Scene I	26
Scene II	31

Act III		thus relume
	36	My father's life: do you not think his ghost Might plead that argument with God?
Scene I		
	37	<i>Orsino.</i> Once gone
Scene II		You cannot now recall your sister's peace; Your own extinguished years of youth and hope; Nor your wife's bitter words; nor all the taunts Which, from the prosperous, weak misfortune takes; Nor your dead mother; nor...
	46	
Act IV		
	51	<i>Giacomo.</i> O, speak no more! I am resolved, although this very hand Must quench the life that animated it.
Scene I		
	52	
Scene II		<i>Orsino.</i> There is no need of that. Listen: you know Olimpio, the castellan of Petrella In old Colonna's time; him whom your father Degraded from his post? And Marzio, That desperate wretch, whom he deprived last year Of a reward of blood, well earned and due?
	60	
Scene III		
	64	
Scene IV		<i>Giacomo.</i> I knew Olimpio; and they say he hated Old Cenci so, that in his silent rage His lips grew white only to see him pass. Of Marzio I know nothing.
	68	
Act V		
	78	
Scene I		<i>Orsino.</i> Marzio's hate Matches Olimpio's. I have sent these men, But in your name and as at your request, To talk with Beatrice and Lucretia.
	79	
Scene II		<i>Giacomo.</i> Only to talk?
	81	
		<i>Orsino.</i> The moments which even now Pass onward to to-morrow's midnight hour May memorise their flight with death: ere then They must have talked, and may perhaps have done And made an end...

Speak!

Scene III

87

Orsino. I am come
To say he has escaped.

Scene IV

94

Giacomo. Escaped!

Orsino. And safe
Within Petrella. He past by the spot
Appointed for the deed an hour too soon.

Giacomo. Are we the fools of such contingencies?
And do we waste in blind misgivings thus
The hours when we should act? Then wind and thunder,
Which seemed to howl his knell, is the loud laughter
With which Heaven mocks our weakness! I henceforth
Will ne'er repent of aught designed or done
But my repentance.

Orsino. See, the lamp is out.

Giacomo. If no remorse is ours when the dim air
Has drank this innocent flame, why should we quail
When Cenci's life, that light by which ill spirits
See the worst deeds they prompt, shall sink for ever?
No, I am hardened.

Orsino. Why, what need of this?
Who feared the pale intrusion of remorse
In a just deed? Altho' our first plan failed,
Doubt not but he will soon be laid to rest.
But light the lamp; let us not talk i' the dark.

Giacomo (lighting the lamp). And yet once quenched I cannot

and the sound of a storm.

What! can the everlasting elements
Fell with a worm like man? If so the shaft
Of mercy-wingèd lightning would not fall
On stones and trees. My wife and children sleep:
They are now living in unmeaning dreams:
But I must wake, still doubting if that deed
Be just which was most necessary. O,
Thou unrefurnished lamp! whose narrow fire
Is shaken by the wind, and on whose edge
Devouring darkness hovers! Thou small flame,
Which, as a dying pulse rises and falls,
Still flickerest up and down, how very soon,
Did I not feed thee, wouldst thou fail and be
As thou hadst never been! So wastes and sinks
Even now, perhaps, the life that kindled mine:
But that no power can fill with vital oil
That broken lamp of flesh. Ha! 'tis the blood
Which fed these veins that ebbs till all is cold:
It is the form that moulded mine that sinks
Into the white and yellow spasms of death:
It is the soul by which mine was arrayed
In God's immortal likeness which now stands
Naked before Heaven's judgment seat! (*A bell strikes.*)
One! Two!
The hours crawl on; and when my hairs are white,
My son will then perhaps be waiting thus,
Tortured between just hate and vain remorse;
Chiding the tardy messenger of news
Like those which I expect; I almost wish
He be not dead, although my wrongs are great;
Yet ... 'tis Orsino's step...

Enter ORSINO

Scene II

A mean Apartment in GIACOMO'S House.

GIACOMO *alone*

Giacomo. 'Tis midnight, and Orsino comes not yet. [*Thunder,*

Dramatis Personæ

COUNT FRANCESCO CENCI.

GIACOMO & BERNARDO, *his Sons.*

CARDINAL CAMILLO.

ORSINO, *a Prelate.*

SAVELLA, *the Pope's Legate.*

OLIMPIO & MARZIO, *Assassins.*

ANDREA, *Servant to Cenci.*

Nobles—Judges—Guards—Servants.

LUCRETIA, *Wife of Cenci, and Step-mother of his children;*

BEATRICE, *his Daughter.*

The SCENE lies principally in Rome, but changes during the Fourth Act to Petrella, a castle among the Apulian Apennines.

Time. During the Pontificate of Clement VIII.

Act I

Enter BEATRICE

Beatrice. 'Tis my brother's voice! You know me not?

Giacomo. My sister, my lost sister!

Beatrice. Lost indeed!

I see Orsino has talked with you, and
That you conjecture things too horrible
To speak, yet far less than the truth.

Now, stay not,

He might return: yet kiss me; I shall know
That then thou hast consented to his death.

Farewell, farewell! Let piety to God,

Brotherly love, justice and clemency,

And all things that make tender hardest hearts

Make thine hard, brother. Answer not ... farewell. [*Exeunt severally.*]

How! Have you ventured hither? Know you then
That Cenci is from home?

Giacomo. I sought him here;
And now must wait till he returns.

Orsino. Great God!
Weigh you the danger of this rashness?

Giacomo. Ay!
Does my destroyer know his danger? We
Are now no more, as once, parent and child,
But man to man; the oppressor to the oppressed;
The slanderer to the slandered; foe to foe:
He has cast Nature off, which was his shield,
And Nature casts him off, who is her shame;
And I spurn both. Is it a father's throat
Which I will shake, and say, I ask not gold;
I ask not happy years; nor memories
Of tranquil childhood; nor home-sheltered love;
Though all these hast thou torn from me, and more;
But only my fair fame; only one hoard
Of peace, which I thought hidden from thy hate,
Under the penury heaped on me by thee,
Or I will ... God can understand and pardon,
Why should I speak with man?

Orsino. Be calm, dear friend.

Giacomo. Well, I will calmly tell you what he did.
This old Francesco Cenci, as you know,
Borrowed the dowry of my wife from me,
And then denied the loan; and left me so
In poverty, the which I sought to mend
By holding a poor office in the state.
It had been promised to me, and already
I bought new clothing for my ragged babes,
And my wife smiled; and my heart knew repose.
When Cenci's intercession, as I found,
Conferred this office on a wretch, whom thus
He paid for vilest service. I returned
With this ill...

Scene I

An Apartment In The Cenci Palace.

Enter COUNT CENCI, and CARDINAL CAMILLO

Camillo

THAT matter of the murder is hushed up
If you consent to yield his Holiness
Your fief that lies beyond the Pincian gate.—
It needed all my interest in the conclave
To bend him to this point: he said that you
Bought perilous impunity with your gold;
That crimes like yours if once or twice compounded
Enriched the Church, and respited from hell
An erring soul which might repent and live:—
But that the glory and the interest
Of the high throne he fills, little consist
With making it a daily mart of guilt
As manifold and hideous as the deeds
Which you scarce hide from men's revolted eyes.

Cenci. The third of my possessions—let it go!
Ay, I once heard the nephew of the Pope
Had sent his architect to view the ground,
Meaning to build a villa on my vines
The next time I compounded with his uncle:
I little thought he should outwit me so!
Henceforth no witness—not the lamp—shall see
That which the vassal threatened to divulge
Whose throat is choked with dust for his reward.
The deed he saw could not have rated higher
Than his most worthless life:—it angers me!
Respited me from Hell!—So may the Devil
Respite their souls from Heaven. No doubt Pope Clement,
And his most charitable nephews, pray
That the Apostle Peter and the saints
Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy
Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and length of days
Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards
Of their revenue.—But much yet remains
To which they show no title.

Camillo. Oh, Count Cenci!

So much that thou mightst honourably live

approach must never pass

The bridge of which we spoke. [*Exeunt LUCRETIA and BEATRICE.*]

Orsino. What shall I do?

Cenci must find me here, and I must bear
The imperious inquisition of his looks
As to what brought me hither: let me mask
Mine own in some inane and vacant smile.

Enter GIACOMO, in a hurried manner

speaks half to herself.)

Ay,
All must be suddenly resolved and done.
What is this undistinguishable mist
Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow,
Darkening each other?

Orsino. Should the offender live?
Triumph in his misdeed? and make, by use,
His crime, whate'er it is, dreadful no doubt,
Thine element; until thou mayest become
Utterly lost; subdued even to the hue
Of that which thou permittest?

Beatrice (to herself). Mighty death!
Thou double-visaged shadow? Only judge!
Rightfullest arbiter! *(She retires absorbed in thought.)*

Lucretia. If the lightning
Of God has e'er descended to avenge...

Orsino. Blaspheme not! His high Providence commits
Its glory on this earth, and their own wrongs
Into the hands of men; if they neglect
To punish crime...

Lucretia. But if one, like this wretch,
Should mock, with gold, opinion, law, and power?
If there be no appeal to that which makes
The guiltiest tremble? If because our wrongs,
For that they are unnatural, strange, and monstrous,
Exceed all measure of belief? O God!
If, for the very reasons which should make
Redress most swift and sure, our injurer triumphs?
And we, the victims, bear worse punishment
Than that appointed for their torturer?

42

Orsino. Think not
But that there is redress where there is wrong,
So we be bold enough to seize it.

Enter ANDREA

Andrea. My Lord, a gentleman from Salamanca
Would speak with you.

Cenci. Bid him attend me in the grand saloon. [*Exit ANDREA.*

Camillo. Farewell; and I will pray
Almighty God that thy false, impious words
Tempt not his spirit to abandon thee. [*Exit CAMILLO.*

Cenci. The third of my possessions! I must use
Close husbandry, or gold, the old man's sword,
Falls from my withered hand. But yesterday
There came an order from the Pope to make
Fourfold provision for my cursed sons;
Whom I had sent from Rome to Salamanca,
Hoping some accident might cut them off;
And meaning if I could to starve them there.
I pray thee, God, send some quick death upon them!
Bernardo and my wife could not be worse
If dead and damned:—then, as to Beatrice—
(Looking around him suspiciously.)
I think they cannot hear me at the door;
What if they should? And yet I need not speak
Though the heart triumphs with itself in words.
O, thou most silent air, that shalt not hear
What now I think! Thou, pavement, which I tread
Towards her chamber,—let your echoes talk
Of my imperious step scorning surprise,
But not of my intent!—Andrea!

Enter ANDREA

Andrea. My lord?

Cenci. Bid Beatrice attend me in her chamber
This evening:—no, at midnight and alone. [*Exeunt.*]

(*She approaches him solemnly.*) Welcome, Friend!
I have to tell you that, since last we met,
I have endured a wrong so great and strange,
That neither life nor death can give me rest.
Ask me not what it is, for there are deeds
Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue.

Orsino. And what is he who has thus injured you?

Beatrice. The man they call my father: a dread name.

Orsino. It cannot be...

Beatrice. What it can be, or not,
Forbear to think. It is, and it has been;
Advise me how it shall not be again.
I thought to die; but a religious awe
Restrains me, and the dread lest death itself
Might be no refuge from the consciousness
Of what is yet unexpiated. Oh, speak!

Orsino. Accuse him of the deed, and let the law avenge thee.

Beatrice. Oh, ice-hearted counsellor!
If I could find a word that might make known
The crime of my destroyer; and that done,
My tongue should like a knife tear out the secret
Which cankers my heart's core; ay, lay all bare
So that my unpolluted fame should be
With vilest gossips a stale mouthèd story;
A mock, a bye-word, an astonishment:—
If this were done, which never shall be done,
Think of the offender's gold, his dreaded hate
And the strange horror of the accuser's tale,
Baffling belief, and overpowering speech;
Scarce whispered, unimaginable, wrapt
In hideous hints ... Oh, most assured redress!

Orsino. You will endure it then?

Beatrice. Endure?—Orsino,

Enter ORSINO

Scene II

A Garden in the Cenci Palace.

Enter BEATRICE and ORSINO, as in conversation

Beatrice. Pervert not truth,
Orsino. You remember where we held
That conversation;—nay, we see the spot
Even from this cypress;—two long years are past
Since, on an April midnight, underneath
The moonlight ruins of mount Palatine,
I did confess to you my secret mind.

Orsino. You said you loved me then.

Beatrice. You are a Priest,
Speak to me not of love.

Orsino. I may obtain
The dispensation of the Pope to marry.
Because I am a Priest do you believe
Your image, as the hunter some struck deer,
Follows me not whether I wake or sleep?

Beatrice. As I have said, speak to me not of love:
Had you a dispensation I have not;
Nor will I leave this home of misery
Whilst my poor Bernard, and that gentle lady
To whom I owe life, and these virtuous thoughts,
Must suffer what I still have strength to share.
Alas, Orsino! All the love that once
I felt for you, is turned to bitter pain.
Ours was a youthful contract, which you first
Broke, by assuming vows no Pope will loose.
And thus I love you still, but holily,
Even as a sister or a spirit might;
And so I swear a cold fidelity.
And it is well perhaps we shall not marry.
You have a sly, equivocating vein
That suits me not.—Ah, wretched that I am!
Where shall I turn? Even now you look on me
As you were not my friend, and as if you
Discovered that I thought so, with false smiles
Making my true suspicion seem your wrong.
Ah no! forgive me; sorrow makes me seem
Stupid, that I should not see right from wrong.

father.
(*Aside.*) She is the madhouse nurse who tends on me,
It is a piteous office.
(*To Lucretia, in a slow, subdued voice.*) Do you know
I thought I was that wretched Beatrice
Men speak of, whom her father sometimes hales
From hall to hall by the entangled hair;
At others, pens up naked in damp cells
Where scaly reptiles crawl, and starves her there,
Till she will eat strange flesh. This woful story
So did I overact in my sick dreams,
That I imagined ... no, it cannot be!
Horrible things have been in this wild world,
Prodigious mixtures, and confusions strange
Of good and ill; and worse have been conceived
Than ever there was found a heart to do.
But never fancy imaged such a deed
As... (*Pauses, suddenly recollecting herself.*)
Who art thou? Swear to me, ere I die
With fearful expectation, that indeed
Thou art not what thou seemest ... Mother!

Lucretia. Oh!
My sweet child, know you...

Beatrice. Yet speak it not:
For then if this be truth, that other too
Must be a truth, a firm enduring truth,
Linked with each lasting circumstance of life,
Never to change, never to pass away.
Why so it is. This is the Cenci Palace;
Thou art Lucretia; I am Beatrice.
I have talked some wild words, but will no more.
Mother, come near me: from this point of time,
I am... (*Her voice dies away faintly.*)

Lucretia. Alas! What has befallen thee, child?
What has thy father done?

Beatrice. What have I done?
Am I not innocent? Is it my crime
That I am with this child in this prison?

that handkerchief!—My brain is hurt;
My eyes are full of blood; just wipe them for me...
I see but indistinctly...

Lucretia. My sweet child,
You have no wound; 'tis only a cold dew
That starts from your dear brow ... Alas! Alas!
What has befallen?

Beatrice. How comes this hair undone?
Its wandering strings must be what blind me so,
And yet I tied it fast.—O, horrible!
The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls
Spin round! I see a woman weeping there,
And standing calm and motionless, whilst I
Slide giddily as the world reels.... My God!
The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
The sunshine on the floor is black! The air
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps
A clinging, black contaminating mist
About me ... 'tis substantial, heavy, thick,
I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!
My God! I never knew what the mad felt
Before; for I am mad beyond all doubt!
(*More wildly.*) No, I am dead! These putrefying limbs
Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul
Which would burst forth into the wandering air! (*A pause.*)
What hideous thought was that I had even now?
'Tis gone; and yet its burthen remains here
O'er these dull eyes ... upon this weary heart!
O, world! O, life! O, day! O, misery!

38

Lucretia. What ails thee, my poor child? She answers not:
Her spirit apprehends the sense of pain,
But not its cause; suffering has dried away
The source from which it sprung...

Scene III

A Magnificent Hall in the Cenci Palace. A Banquet.

Enter CENCI, LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, ORSINO, CAMILLO,
NOBLES

Cenci. Welcome, my friends and kinsmen; welcome ye,
Princes and Cardinals, pillars of the church,
Whose presence honours our festivity.
I have too long lived like an anchorite,
And in my absence from your merry meetings
An evil word is gone abroad of me;
But I do hope that you, my noble friends,
When you have shared the entertainment here,
And heard the pious cause for which 'tis given,
And we have pledged a health or two together,
Will think me flesh and blood as well as you;
Sinful indeed, for Adam made all so,
But tender-hearted, meek and pitiful.

First Guest. In truth, My Lord, you seem too light of heart,
Too sprightly and companionable a man,
To act the deeds that rumour pins on you.
(*To his companion.*) I never saw such blithe and open cheer
In any eye!

Second Guest. Some most desired event,
In which we all demand a common joy,
Has brought us hither; let us hear it, Count.

Cenci. It is indeed a most desired event.
If, when a parent from a parent's heart
Lifts from this earth to the great father of all
A prayer, both when he lays him down to sleep,
And when he rises up from dreaming it;
One supplication, one desire, one hope,
That he would grant a wish for his two sons,
Even all that he demands in their regard—
And suddenly beyond his dearest hope,
It is accomplished, he should then rejoice,
And call his friends and kinsmen to a feast,
~~And~~ task their love to grace his merriment,
Then honour me thus far—for I am he.

Beatrice (to Lucretia). Great God! How horrible! Some dreadful

Scene I

An Apartment in the Cenci Palace.

LUCRETIA, *to her enter* BEATRICE

Beatrice. (She enters staggering, and speaks wildly.) Reach me

Act III

ill
Must have befallen my brothers.

Lucretia. Fear not, Child,
He speaks too frankly.

Beatrice. Ah! My blood runs cold.
I fear that wicked laughter round his eye,
Which wrinkles up the skin even to the hair.

Cenci. Here are the letters brought from Salamanca;
Beatrice, read them to your mother. God!
I thank thee! In one night didst thou perform,
By ways inscrutable, the thing I sought.
My disobedient and rebellious sons
Are dead!—Why, dead!—What means this change of cheer?
You hear me not, I tell you they are dead;
And they will need no food or raiment more:
The tapers that did light them the dark way
Are their last cost. The Pope, I think, will not
Expect I should maintain them in their coffins.
Rejoice with me—my heart is wondrous glad. [LUCRETIA

sinks, half-fainting; BEATRICE supports her.

Beatrice. It is not true!—Dear lady, pray look up.
Had it been true, there is a God in Heaven,
He would not live to boast of such a boon.
Unnatural man, thou knowest that it is false.

Cenci. Ay, as the word of God; whom here I call
To witness that I speak the sober truth;—
And whose most favouring Providence was shown
Even in the manner of their deaths. For Rocco
Was kneeling at the mass, with sixteen others,
When the church fell and crushed him to a mummy,
The rest escaped unhurt. Cristofano
Was stabbed in error by a jealous man,
Whilst she he loved was sleeping with his rival;
All in the self-same hour of the same night;
Which shows that Heaven has special care of me.
I beg those friends who love me, that they mark
The day a feast upon their calendars.
It was the twenty-seventh of December:
Ay, read the letters if you doubt my oath. [*The Assembly*

GIACOMO.

I had disposed the Cardinal Camillo
To feed his hope with cold encouragement:
It fortunately serves my close designs
That 'tis a trick of this same family
To analyse their own and other minds.
Such self-anatomy shall teach the will
Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,
Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,
Into the depth of darkest purposes:
So Cenci fell into the pit; even I,
Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself,
And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,
Show a poor figure to my own esteem,
To which I grow half reconciled. I'll do
As little mischief as I can; that thought
Shall fee the accuser conscience.

(*After a pause.*) Now what harm
If Cenci should be murdered?—Yet, if murdered,
Wherefore by me? And what if I could take
The profit, yet omit the sin and peril
In such an action? Of all earthly things
I fear a man whose blows outspeed his words;
And such is Cenci: and while Cenci lives
His daughter's dowry were a secret grave
If a priest wins her.—Oh, fair Beatrice!
Would that I loved thee not, or loving thee
Could but despise danger and gold and all
That frowns between my wish and its effect,
Or smiles beyond it! There is no escape...
Her bright form kneels beside me at the altar,
And follows me to the resort of men,
And fills my slumber with tumultuous dreams.
So when I wake my blood seems liquid fire;
And if I strike my damp and dizzy head
My hot palm scorches it: her very name,
But spoken by a stranger, makes my heart
Sicken and pant; and thus unprofitably
I clasp the phantom of unfelt delights
Till weak imagination half possesses
The self-created shadow. Yet much longer
Will I not stay; this life of sorrow and

You, my good Lord Orsino, heard those words.

Orsino. What words?

Giacomo. Alas, repeat them not again!
There then is no redress for me, at least
None but that which I may achieve myself,
Since I am driven to the brink.—But, say,
My innocent sister and my only brother
Are dying underneath my father's eye.
The memorable torturers of this land,
Galeaz Visconti, Borgia, Ezzelin,
Never inflicted on the meanest slave
What these endure; shall they have no protection?

Camillo. Why, if they would petition to the Pope
I see not how he could refuse it—yet
He holds it of most dangerous example
In aught to weaken the paternal power,
Being, as 'twere, the shadow of his own.
I pray you now excuse me. I have business
That will not bear delay. [*Exit CAMILLO.*]

Giacomo. But you, Orsino,
Have the petition: wherefore not present it?

Orsino. I have presented it, and backed it with
My earnest prayers, and urgent interest;
It was returned unanswered. I doubt not
But that the strange and execrable deeds
Alleged in it—in truth they might well baffle
Any belief—have turned the Pope's displeasure
Upon the accusers from the criminal:
So I should guess from what Camillo said.

Giacomo. My friend, that palace-walking devil Gold
~~Has~~ whispered silence to his Holiness:
And we are left, as scorpions ringed with fire.
What should we do but strike ourselves to death?
For he who is our murderous persecutor
Is shielded by a father's holy name,
O, I should guess from what Camillo said.

appears confused; several of the guests rise.

First Guest. Oh, horrible! I will depart—

Second Guest. And I.—

Third Guest. No, stay!
I do believe it is some jest; tho' faith!
'Tis mocking us somewhat too solemnly.
I think his son has married the Infanta,
Or found a mine of gold in El Dorado;
'Tis but to season some such news; stay, stay!
I see 'tis only raillery by his smile.

Cenci (filling a bowl of wine, and lifting it up). Oh, thou
bright wine whose purple splendour leaps
And bubbles gaily in this golden bowl
Under the lamp-light, as my spirits do,
To hear the death of my accursèd sons!
Could I believe thou wert their mingled blood,
Then would I taste thee like a sacrament,
And pledge with thee the mighty Devil in Hell,
Who, if a father's curses, as men say,
Climb with swift wings after their children's souls,
And drag them from the very throne of Heaven,
Now triumphs in my triumph!—But thou art
Superfluous; I have drunken deep of joy,
And I will taste no other wine to-night.
Here, Andrea! Bear the bowl around.

A Guest (rising). Thou wretch!
Will none among this noble company
Check the abandoned villain?

Camillo. For God's sake
Let me dismiss the guests! You are insane,
Some ill will come of this.

Second Guest. Seize, silence him!

First Guest. I will!

Who moves? Who speaks? (*turning to the Company*)

'tis nothing,

Enjoy yourselves.—Beware! For my revenge

Is as the sealed commission of a king

That kills, and none dare name the murderer. [*The Banquet is*

Enter ORSINO

Camillo. There is an obsolete and doubtful law
By which you might obtain a bare provision
Of food and clothing—

Giacomo. Nothing more? Alas!
Bare must be the provision which strict law
Awards, and aged, sullen avarice pays.
Why did my father not apprentice me
To some mechanic trade? I should have then
Been trained in no highborn necessities
Which I could meet not by my daily toil.
The eldest son of a rich nobleman
Is heir to all his incapacities;
He has wide wants, and narrow powers. If you,
Cardinal Camillo, were reduced at once
From thrice-driven beds of down, and delicate food,
An hundred servants, and six palaces,
To that which nature doth indeed require?—

Camillo. Nay, there is reason in your plea; 'twere hard.

Giacomo. 'Tis hard for a firm man to bear: but I
Have a dear wife, a lady of high birth,
Whose dowry in ill hour I lent my father
Without a bond or witness to the deed:
And children, who inherit her fine senses,
The fairest creatures in this breathing world;
And she and they reproach me not. Cardinal,
Do you not think the Pope would interpose
And stretch authority beyond the law?

Camillo. Though your peculiar case is hard, I know
The Pope will not divert the course of law.
After that impious feast the other night
I spoke with him, and urged him then to check
Your father's cruel hand; he frowned and said,
"Children are disobedient, and they sting
Their father's hearts to madness and despair,
Requiting years of care with contumely.
I pity the Count Cenci from my heart;
His father should have been more patient,

broken up; several of the Guests are departing.

Beatrice. I do entreat you, go not, noble guests;
What, although tyranny and impious hate
Stand sheltered by a father's hoary hair,
What, if 'tis he who clothed us in these limbs
Who tortures them, and triumphs? What, if we,
The desolate and the dead, were his own flesh,
His children and his wife, whom he is bound
To love and shelter? Shall we therefore find
No refuge in this merciless wide world?
O think what deep wrongs must have blotted out
First love, then reverence in a child's prone mind,
Till it thus vanquish shame and fear! O think!
I have borne much, and kissed the sacred hand
Which crushed us to the earth, and thought its stroke
Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!
Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt
Remained, have sought by patience, love, and tears
To soften him, and when this could not be
I have knelt down through the long sleepless nights
And lifted up to God, the father of all,
Passionate prayers: and when these were not heard
I have still borne,—until I meet you here,
Princes and kinsmen, at this hideous feast
Given at my brothers' deaths. Two yet remain,
His wife remains and I, whom if ye save not,
Ye may soon share such merriment again
As fathers make over their children's graves.
O Prince Colonna, thou art our near kinsman,
Cardinal, thou art the Pope's chamberlain,
Camillo, thou art chief justiciary,
Take us away!

Cenci. (He has been conversing with CAMILLO during the first

part of BEATRICE'S speech; he hears the conclusion, and now advances.) I hope my good friends here
Will think of their own daughters—or perhaps
Of their own throats—before they lend an ear
To this wild girl.

Beatrice (not noticing the words of Cenci). Dare no one look on

Scene II

A Chamber in the Vatican.

Enter CAMILLO and GIACOMO, in conversation

give poor Beatrice.
She meant not any ill.

Cenci. Nor you perhaps?
Nor that young imp, whom you have taught by rote
Parricide with his alphabet? Nor Giacomo?
Nor those two must unnatural sons, who stirred
Enmity up against me with the Pope?
Whom in one night merciful God cut off:
Innocent lambs! They thought not any ill.
You were not here conspiring? You said nothing
Of how I might be dungeoned as a madman;
Or be condemned to death for some offence,
And you would be the witness?—This failing,
How just it were to hire assassins, or
Put sudden poison in my evening drink?
Or smother me when overcome by wine?
Seeing we had no other judge but God,
And he had sentenced me, and there were none
But you to be the executioners
Of this decree enregistered in heaven?
Oh, no! You said not this?

Lucretia. So help me God,
I never thought the things you charge me with!

Cenci. If you dare speak that wicked lie again
I'll kill you. What! It was not by your counsel
That Beatrice disturbed the feast last night?
You did not hope to stir some enemies
Against me, and escape, and laugh to scorn
What every nerve of you now trembles at?
You judged that men were bolder than they are;
Few dare to stand between their grave and me.

Lucretia. Look not so dreadfully! By my salvation
I knew not aught that Beatrice designed;
Nor do I think she designed any thing
Until she heard you talk of her dead brothers.

Cenci. Blaspheming liar! You are damned for his!

me?
None answer? Can one tyrant overbear
The sense of many best and wisest men?
Or is it that I sue not in some form
Of scrupulous law, that ye deny my suit?
O God! That I were buried with my brothers!
And that the flowers of this departed spring
Were fading on my grave! And that my father
Were celebrating now one feast for all!

Camillo. A bitter wish for one so young and gentle;
Can we do nothing?

Colonna. Nothing that I see.
Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy:
Yet I would second any one.

A Cardinal. And I.

Cenci. Retire to your chamber, insolent girl!

Beatrice. Retire thou impious man! Ay, hide thyself
Where never eye can look upon thee more!
Wouldst thou have honour and obedience
Who art a torturer? Father, never dream
Though thou must overbear this company,
But ill must come of ill.—Frown not on me!
Haste, hide thyself, lest with avenging looks
My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat!
Cover thy face from every living eye,
And start if thou but hear a human step.
Seek out some dark and silent corner, there
Bow thy white head before offended God,
And we will kneel around, and fervently
Pray that he pity both ourselves, and thee.

Cenci. My friends, I do lament this insane girl
Has spoiled the mirth of our festivity.
Good night, farewell; I will not make you longer
Spectators of our dull domestic quarrels.
Another time.— [*Exeunt all but CENCI and BEATRICE.*
My brain is swimming round;
Give me a bowl of wine! [*To BEATRICE.*

Be thou the resolution of quick youth
Within my veins, and manhood's purpose stern,
And age's firm, cold, subtle villainy;
As if thou wert indeed my children's blood
Which I did thirst to drink! The charm works well;
It must be done; it shall be done, I swear! [*Exit.*]

Enter CENCI suddenly

Cenci. What, Beatrice here!
Come hither! [*She shrinks back, and covers her face.*]
Nay, hide not your face, 'tis fair;
Look up! Why, yesternight you dared to look
With disobedient insolence upon me,
Bending a stern and an inquiring brow
On what I meant; whilst I then sought to hide
That which I came to tell you—but in vain.

Beatrice (wildly, staggering towards the door). O that the earth
would gape! Hide me, O God!

Cenci. Then it was I whose inarticulate words
Fell from my lips, and who with tottering steps
Fled from your presence, as you now from mine.
Stay, I command you—from this day and hour
Never again, I think, with fearless eye,
And brow superior, and unaltered cheek,
And that lip made for tenderness or scorn,
Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of mankind;
Me least of all. Now get thee to thy chamber!
Thou too, loathed image of thy cursed mother, [*To BERNARDO.*]

Thy milky, meek face makes me sick with hate! [*Exeunt BEAT-
RICE and BERNARDO.*]

(Aside.) So much has past between us as must make
Me bold, her fearful.—'Tis an awful thing
To touch such mischief as I now conceive:
So men sit shivering on the dewy bank,
And try the chill stream with their feet; once in...
How the delighted spirit pants for joy!

Lucretia (advancing timidly towards him). O husband! Pray for-

one word, Mother, one little word;
One look, one smile. (*Wildly*) Oh! He has trampled me
Under his feet, and made the blood stream down
My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all
Ditch water, and the fever-stricken flesh
Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,
And we have eaten.—He has made me look
On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust
Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,
And I have never yet despaired—but now!
What could I say? [*Recovering herself*.
Ah! No, 'tis nothing new.
The sufferings we all share have made me wild:
He only struck and cursed me as he passed;
He said, he looked, he did;—nothing at all
Beyond his wont, yet it disordered me.
Alas! I am forgetful of my duty,
I should preserve my senses for your sake.

Lucretia. Nay, Beatrice! have courage, my sweet girl,
If any one despairs it should be I
Who loved him once, and now must live with him
Till God in pity call for him or me.
For you may, like your sister, find some husband,
And smile, years hence, with children round your knees;
Whilst I, then dead, and all this hideous coil
Shall be remembered only as a dream.

Beatrice. Talk not to me, dear lady, of a husband.
Did you not nurse me when my mother died?
Did you not shield me and that dearest boy?
And had we any other friend but you
In infancy, with gentle words and looks,
To win our father not to murder us?
And shall I now desert you? May the ghost
Of my dead Mother plead against my soul
I abandon her who filled the place
She left, with more, even, than a mother's love!

Bernardo. And I am of my sister's mind. Indeed
I would not leave you in this wretchedness,
For though the Emperor should have us both

Act II

Scene I

An Apartment in the Cenci Palace.

Enter LUCRETIA and BERNARDO

Lucretia. Weep not, my gentle boy; he struck but me
Who have borne deeper wrongs. In truth, if he
Had killed me, he had done a kinder deed.
O, God Almighty, do thou look upon us,
We have no other friend but only thee!
Yet weep not; though I love you as my own,
I am not your true mother.

Bernardo. O more, more,
Than ever mother was to any child,
That have you been to me! Had he not been
My father, do you think that I should weep!

Lucretia. Alas! Poor boy, what else couldst thou have done?

Enter BEATRICE

Beatrice (in a hurried voice). Did he pass this way? Have you

seen him, brother?

Ah! No, that is his step upon the stairs;
'Tis nearer now; his hand in on the door;
Mother, if I to thee have ever been
A duteous child, now save me! Thou, great God,
Whose image upon earth a father is,
Dost thou indeed abandon me? He comes:
The door is opening now; I see his face;
He frowns on others, but he smiles on me,
Even as he did after the feast last night.

Enter a Servant

Almighty God, how merciful thou art!
'Tis but Orsino's servant.—Well, what news?
Servant. My master bids me say, the Holy Father
Has sent back your petition thus unopened. [*Giving a paper.*
And he demands at what hour 'twere secure
To visit you again?

Lucretia. At the Ave Mary. [*Exit Servant.*
So daughter, our last hope has failed; Ah me!
How pale you look; you tremble, and you stand
Wrapped in some fixed and fearful meditation,
As if one thought were over strong for you:
Your eyes have a chill glare; O, dearest child!
Are you gone mad? If not, pray speak to me.

Beatrice. You see I am not mad: I speak to you.

Lucretia. You talked of something that your father did
After that dreadful feast? Could it be worse
Than when he smiled, and cried, My sons are dead!
And every one looked in his neighbour's face
To see if others were as white as he?
At the first word he spoke I felt the blood
Rush to my heart, and fell into a trance;
And when it passed I sat all weak and wild;
Whilst you alone stood up, and with strong words
Checked his unnatural pride; and I could see
The devil was rebuked that lives in him.
Until this hour thus have you ever stood
Between us and your father's moody wrath

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Percy Bysshe Shelley
The Cenci
1819

<https://www.bartleby.com/18/4/>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Thou loathèd wretch!
Hide thee from my abhorrence; fly, begone!
Yet stay! Bid Beatrice come hither.

Lucretia. Oh,
Husband! I pray for thine own wretched sake
Heed what thou dost. A man who walks like thee
Thro' crimes, and thro' the danger of his crimes,
Each hour may stumble o'er a sudden grave.
And thou art old; thy hairs are hoary gray;
As thou wouldst save thyself from death and hell,
Pity thy daughter; give her to some friend
In marriage: so that she may tempt thee not
To hatred, or worse thoughts, if worse there be.

Cenci. What! like her sister who has found a home
To mock my hate from with prosperity?
Strange ruin shall destroy both her and thee
And all that yet remain. My death may be
Rapid, her destiny outspeeds it. Go,
Bid her come hither, and before my mood
Be changed, lest I should drag her by the hair.

Lucretia. She sent me to thee, husband. At thy presence
She fell, as thou dost know, into a trance;
And in that trance she heard a voice which said,
“Cenci must die! Let him confess himself!
Even now the accusing Angel waits to hear
If God, to punish his enormous crimes,
Harden his dying heart!”

Cenci. Why—such thing are...
No doubt divine revealings may be made.
'Tis plain I have been favoured from above,
For when I cursed my sons they died.—Ay ... so...
As to the right of wrong that's talk ... repentance...
Repentance is an easy moment's work
And more depends on God than me. Well ... well...
I must give up the greater point, which was
To poison and corrupt her soul. [*A pause*; LUCRETIA *ap-*

proaches anxiously, and then shrinks back as he speaks. One,

two;
Ay ... Rocco and Cristofano my curse
Strangled: and Giacomo, I think, will find
Life a worse Hell than that beyond the grave:
Beatrice shall, if there be skill in hate,
Die in despair, blaspheming: to Bernardo,
He is so innocent, I will bequeath
The memory of these deeds, and make his youth
The sepulchre of hope, where evil thoughts
Shall grow like weeds on a neglected tomb.
When all is done, out in the wide Campagna,
I will pile up my silver and my gold;
My costly robes, paintings and tapestries;
My parchments and all records of my wealth,
And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave
Of my possessions nothing but my name;
Which shall be an inheritance to strip
Its wearer bare as infamy. That done,
My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign
Into the hands of him who wielded it;
Be it for its own punishment or theirs,
He will not ask it of me till the lash
Be broken in its last and deepest wound;
Until its hate be all inflicted. Yet,
Lest death outspeed my purpose, let me make
Short work and sure ... [*Going.*

Lucretia. (*Stops him.*) Oh, stay! It was a feint:
She had no vision, and she heard no voice.
I said it but to awe thee.

Cenci. That is well.
Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God,
Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie!
For Beatrice worse terrors are in store
To bend her to my will.

Lucretia. Oh! to what will?
What cruel sufferings more than she has known
Canst thou inflict?

Enter ANDREA

Andrea. The Lady Beatrice...

Cenci. Speak, pale slave! What
Said she?

Andrea. My lord, 'twas what she looked; she said:
"Go tell my father that I see the gulf
Of Hell between us two, which he may pass,
I will not." [*Exit ANDREA.*

Cenci. Go thou quick, Lucretia,
Tell her to come; yet let her understand
Her coming is consent: and say, moreover
That if she come not I will curse her. [*Exit LUCRETIA.*
Ha!

With what but with a father's curse doth God
Panic-strike armèd victory, and make pale
Cities in their prosperity? The world's Father
Must grant a parent's prayer against his child,
Be he who asks even what men call me.
Will not the deaths of her rebellious brothers
Awe her before I speak? For I on them
Did imprecate quick ruin, and it came.

Enter LUCRETIA

Well; what? Speak, wretch!

Lucretia. She said, "I cannot come;
Go tell my father that I see a torrent
Of his own blood raging between us."

Cenci (kneeling). God!
Hear me! If this most specious mass of flesh,
Which thou hast made my daughter; this my blood,
This particle of my divided being;
Or rather, this my bane and my disease,
Whose sight infects and poisons, me; this devil
Which sprung from me as from a hell, was meant
To aught good use; if her bright loveliness
Was kindled to illumine this dark world;
If nursed by thy selectest dew of love
Such virtues blossom in her as should make
The peace of life, I pray thee for my sake,
As thou the common God and Father art
Of her, and me, and all; reverse that doom!
Earth, in the name of God, let her food be
Poison, until she be encrusted round
With leprous stains! Heaven, rain upon her head
The blistering drops of the Maremma's dew,
Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up
Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs
To loathed lameness! All-beholding sun,
Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes
With thine own blinding beams!

Lucretia. Peace! Peace!
For thine own sake unsay those dreadful words.
When high God grants he punishes such prayers.

Cenci (leaping up, and throwing his right hand towards Heaven).

He does his will, I mine! This in addition,
That if she have a child...

Lucretia. Horrible thought!

Cenci. That if she ever have a child; and thou,
Quick Nature! I adjure thee by thy God,
That thou be fruitful in her, and increase
And multiply, fulfilling his command,
And my deep imprecation! May it be
A hideous likeness of herself, that as
From a distorting mirror, she may see
Her image mixed with what she most abhors,
Smiling upon her from her nursing breast.
And that the child may from its infancy
Grow, day by day, more wicked and deformed,
Turning her mother's love to misery:
And that both she and it may live until
It shall repay her care and pain with hate,
Or what may else be more unnatural.
So he may hunt her through he clamorous scoffs
Of the loud world to a dishonoured grave.
Shall I revoke this curse? Go, bid her come,
Before my words are chronicled in Heaven. [*Exit LUCRETIA.*]
I do not feel as if I were a man,
But like a fiend appointed to chastise
The offences of some unremembered world.
My blood is running up and down my veins;
A fearful pleasure makes it prick and tingle:
I feel a giddy sickness of strange awe;
My heart is beating with an expectation
Of horrid joy.

Enter LUCRETIA

They come! Let me
Kiss those warm lips before their crimson leaves
Are blighted ... white ... cold. Say farewell, before
Death chokes that gentle voice! Oh, let me hear
You speak!

Beatrice. Farewell, my tender brother. Think
Of our sad fate with gentleness, as now;
And let mild, pitying thoughts lighten for thee
Thy sorrow's load. Err not in harsh despair,
But tears and patience. One thing more, my child,
For thine own sake be constant to the love
Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
Tho' wrapt in a strange cloud of crime and shame,
Lived ever holy and unstained. And tho'
Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name
Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow
For men to point at as they pass, do thou
Forbear, and never think a thought unkind
Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves.
So mayest thou die as I do; fear and pain
Being subdued. Farewell! Farewell! Farewell!

Bernardo. I cannot say, farewell!

Camillo. O Lady Beatrice!

Beatrice. Give yourself no unnecessary pain,
My dear Lord Cardinal. Here, Mother, tie
My girdle for me, and bind up this hair
In any simple knot; ay, that does well.
And yours I see is coming down. How often
Have we done this for one another, now
We shall not do it any more. My Lord,
We are quite ready. Well, 'tis very well.

Enter CAMILLO and Guards

What? Speak!

Lucretia. She bids thee curse;
And if thy curses, as they cannot do,
Could kill her soul...

Cenci. She would not come. 'Tis well,
I can do both: first take what I demand,
And then extort concession. To thy chamber!
Fly ere I spurn thee: and beware this night
That thou cross not my footsteps. It were safer
To come between the tiger and his prey. [*Exit* LUCRETIA.
It must be late; mine eyes grow weary dim
With unaccustomed heaviness of sleep.
Conscience! Oh, thou most insolent of lies!
They say that sleep, that healing dew of Heaven,
Steeps not in balm the foldings of the brain
Which thinks thee an impostor. I will go
First belie thee with an hour of rest,
Which will be deep and calm, I feel: and then...
O, multitudinous Hell, the fiends will shake
Thine arches with the laughter of their joy!
There shall be lamentation heard in Heaven
As o'er an angel fallen and upon Earth
All good shall droop and sicken, and ill things
Shall with a spirit of unnatural life
Stir and be quickened ... even as I am now. [*Exit.*

Scene II

Before the Castle of Petrella.

Enter BEATRICE and LUCRETIA above on the Ramparts

who now goes out; GIACOMO advances.

Giacomo. Know you not, Mother ... Sister, know you not?
Bernardo even now is gone to implore
The Pope to grant our pardon.

Lucretia. Child, perhaps
It will be granted. We may all then live
To make these woes a tale for distant years:
Oh, what a thought! It gushes to my heart
Like the warm blood.

Beatrice. Yet both will soon be cold.
Oh, trample out that thought! Worse than despair,
Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope:
It is the only ill which can find place
Upon the giddy, sharp and narrow hour
Tottering beneath us. Plead with the swift frost
That it should spare the eldest flower of spring:
Plead with awakening earthquake, o'er whose couch
Even now a city stands, strong, fair, and free:
Now stench and blackness yawn, like death. Oh, plead
With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,
Blind lightning, or the deaf sea, not with man!
Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,
In deeds a Cain. No, Mother, we must die:
Since such is the reward of innocent lives;
Such the alleviation of worst wrongs.
And whilst our murderers live, and hard, cold men,
Smiling and slow, walk thro' a world of tears
To death as to life's sleep; 'twere just the grave
Were some strange joy for us. Come, obscure Death,
And wind me in thine all-embracing arms!
Like a fond mother hide me in thy bosom,
And rock me to the sleep from which none wake.
Live ye, who live, subject to one another
As we were once, who now... [*BERNARDO rushes in.*

Bernardo. Oh, horrible,
That tears, that looks, that hope poured forth in prayer,
Even till the heart is vacant and despairs,
Should hold me in! The justice of the world

speeches GIACOMO *has retired conversing with* CAMILLO,

Beatrice. They come not yet.

Lucretia. 'Tis scarce midnight.

Beatrice. How slow
Behind the course of thought, even sick with speed,
Lags leaden footed time!

Lucretia. The minutes pass...
If he should wake before the deed is done?

Beatrice. O, mother! He must never wake again.
What thou hast said persuades me that our act
Will but dislodge a spirit of deep hell
Out of a human form.

Lucretia. 'Tis true he spoke
Of death and judgment with strange confidence
For one so wicked; as a man believing
In God, yet recking not of good or ill.
And yet to die without confession!...

Beatrice. Oh!
Believe that Heaven is merciful and just,
And will not add our dread necessity
To the amount of his offences.

Enter OLIMPIO and MARZIO, below

Lucretia. See,
They come.

Beatrice. All mortal things must hasten thus
To their dark end. Let us go down. [*Exeunt LUCRETIA and*

BEATRICE *from above.*

Olimpio. How feel you to this work?

Marzio. As one who thinks

A thousand crowns excellent market price
For an old murderer's life. Your cheeks are pale.

Olimpio. It is the white reflection of your own,
Which you call pale.

Marzio. Is that their natural hue?

Olimpio. Or 'tis my hate and the deferred desire
To wreak it, which extinguishes their blood.

Marzio. You are inclined then to this business?

Olimpio. Ay.

If one should bribe me with a thousand crowns
To kill a serpent which had stung my child,
I could not be more willing.

Enter BEATRICE and LUCRETIA, below

Camillo. The Pope is stern; not to be moved or bent.

He looked as calm and keen as is the engine
Which tortures and which kills, exempt itself
From aught that it inflicts; a marble form,
A rite, a law, a custom: not a man.

He frowned, as if to frown had been the trick
Of his machinery, on the advocates

Presenting the defences, which he tore
And threw behind, muttering with hoarse, harsh voice:

"Which among ye defended their old father
Killed in his sleep?" Then to another: "Thou
Dost this in virtue of thy place; 'tis well."

He turned to me then, looking deprecation,
And said these three words, coldly: "They must die."

Bernardo. And yet you left him not?

Camillo. I urged him still;

Pleading, as I could guess, the devilish wrong
Which prompted your unnatural parent's death.

And he replied: "Paolo Santa Croce

Murdered his mother yester evening,

And he is fled. Parricide grows so rife

That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young

Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs.

Authority, and power, and hoary hair

Are grown crimes capital. You are my nephew,

You come to ask their pardon; stay a moment;

Here is their sentence; never see me more

Till, to the letter, it be all fulfilled."

Bernardo. O God, not so! I did believe indeed

That all you said was but sad preparation

For happy news. Oh, there are words and looks

To bend the sternest purpose! Once I knew them,

Now I forget them at my dearest need.

What think you if I seek him out, and bathe

His feet and robe with hot and bitter tears?

Importune him with prayers, vexing his brain

With my perpetual cries, until in rage

He stills me with his tears, and then I

Scene IV

A Hall of the Prison.

Enter CAMILLO and BERNARDO

Noble ladies!

Beatrice. Are ye resolved?

Olimpio. Is he asleep?

Marzio. Is all

Quiet?

Lucretia. I mixed an opiate with his drink:
He sleeps so soundly...

Beatrice. That his death will be
But as a change of sin-chastising dreams,
A dark continuance of the Hell within him,
Which God extinguish! But ye are resolved?
Ye know it is a high and holy deed?

Olimpio. We are resolved.

Marzio. As to the how this act
Be warranted, it rests with you.

Beatrice. Well, follow!

Olimpio. Hush! Hark! What noise is that?

Marzio. Ha! some one comes!

Beatrice. Ye conscience-stricken cravens, rock to rest
Your baby hearts. It is the iron gate,
Which ye left open, swinging to the wind,
That enters whistling as in scorn. Come, follow!
And be your steps like mine, light, quick and bold. [*Exeunt.*]

Scene III

An Apartment in the Castle.

Enter BEATRICE and LUCRETIA

Lucretia. They are about it now.

Beatrice. Nay, it is done.

Lucretia. I have not heard him groan.

Beatrice. He will not groan.

Lucretia. What sound is that?

Beatrice. List 'tis the tread of feet
About his bed.

Lucretia. My God!
If he be now a cold stiff corpse...

Beatrice. O, fear not
What may be done, but what is left undone:
The act seals all.

Enter OLIMPIO and MARZIO

False friend, wilt thou smile or weep
When my life is laid asleep?
Little cares for a smile or a tear,
The clay-cold corpse upon the bier!
Farewell! Heigho!
What is this whispers low?
There is a snake in thy smile, my dear;
And bitter poison within thy tear.

Sweet sleep, were death like to thee,
Or if thou couldst mortal be,
I would close these eyes of pain;
When to wake? Never again.
O World! Farewell!
Listen to the passing bell!
It says, thou and I must part,
With a light and a heavy heart. [*The scene closes.*]

weeps.

Lucretia. O my child!

To what a dreadful end are we all come!
Why did I yield? Why did I not sustain
Those torments? Oh, that I were all dissolved
Into these fast and unavailing tears,
Which flow and feel not!

Beatrice. What 'twas weak to do,

'Tis weaker to lament, once being done;
Take cheer! The God who knew my wrong, and made
Our speedy act the angel of his wrath,
Seems, and but seems, to have abandoned us.
Let us not think that we shall die for this.
Brother, sit near me; give me your firm hand,
You had a manly heart. Bear up! Bear up!
O dearest Lady, put your gentle head
Upon my lap, and try to sleep awhile:
Your eyes look pale, hollow and overworn,
With heaviness of watching and slow grief.
Come, I will sing you some low, sleepy tune,
Not cheerful, nor yet sad; some dull old thing,
Some outworn and unused monotony,
Such as our country gossips sing and spin,
Till they almost forget they live: lie down!
So, that will do. Have I forgot the words?
Faith! They are sadder than I thought they were.

SONG

Is it accomplished?

Marzio. What?

Olimpio. Did you not call?

Beatrice. When?

Olimpio. Now.

Beatrice. I ask if all is over?

Olimpio. We dare not kill an old and sleeping man;
His thin gray hair, his stern and reverent brow,
His veined hands crossed on his heaving breast,
And the calm innocent sleep in which he lay,
Quelled me. Indeed, indeed, I cannot do it.

Marzio. But I was bolder; for I chid Olimpio,
And bade him bear his wrongs to his own grave
And leave me the reward. And now my knife
Touched the loose wrinkled throat, when the old man
Stirred in his sleep, and said, "God! hear, O, hear,
A father's curse! What, art thou not our father?"
And then he laughed. I knew it was the ghost
Of my dead father speaking through his lips,
And could not kill him.

Beatrice. Miserable slaves!

Where, if ye dare not kill a sleeping man,
Found ye the boldness to return to me
With such a deed undone? Base palterers!
Cowards and traitors! Why, the very conscience
Which ye would sell for gold and for revenge
Is an equivocation: it sleeps over
A thousand daily acts disgracing men;
And when a deed where mercy insults Heaven...
Why do I talk? [*Snatching a dagger from one of them and*

raising it.

Hadst thou a tongue to say,
She murdered her own father, I must do it!
But never dream ye shall outlive him long!

Olimpio. Stop, for God's sake!

Marzio. I will go back and kill him.

Olimpio. Give me the weapon, we must do thy will.

Beatrice. Take it. Depart! Return! [*Exeunt OLIMPIO and MARZIO.*]

How pale thou art!

We do but that which 'twere a deadly crime
To leave undone.

Lucretia. Would it were done!

Beatrice. Even whilst

That doubt is passing through your mind, the world
Is conscious of a change. Darkness and Hell
Have swallowed up the vapour they sent forth
To blacken the sweet light of life, My breath
Comes, methinks, lighter, and the jellied blood
Runs freely thro' my veins. Hark!

Enter OLIMPIO and MARZIO.

He is...

Olimpio. Dead!

Marzio. We strangled him that there might be no blood;
And then we threw his heavy corpse i' the garden
Under the balcony; 'twill seem it fell.

Beatrice (giving them a bag of coin). Here, take this gold and
hasten to your homes.

And, Marzio, because thou wast only awed

By that which made me tremble, wear thou this! [*Clothes him*]

TIA, BEATRICE, and GIACOMO.

Giacomo. Have I confessed? It is all over now?

No hope! No refuge! O weak, wicked tongue
Which hast destroyed me, would that thou hadst been
Cut out and thrown to dogs first! To have killed
My father first, and then betrayed my sister;

Ay, thee! the one thing innocent and pure

In this black guilty world, to that which I

So well deserve! My wife! my little ones!

Destitute, helpless, and I ... Father! God!

Canst thou forgive even the unforgiving,

When their full hearts break thus, thus!... [*Covers his face and*]

Ignoble hearts!

For some brief spasms of pain, which are at least
As mortal as the limbs through which they pass,
Are centuries of high splendour laid in dust?
And that eternal honour which should live
Sunlike, above the reek of mortal fame,
Changed to a mockery and a bye-word? What!
Will you give up these bodies to be dragged
At horses' heels, so that our hair should sweep
The footsteps of the vain and senseless crowd,
Who, that they may make our calamity
Their worship and their spectacle, will leave
The churches and the theatres as void
As their own hearts? Shall the light multitude
Fling at their choice, curses or faded pity,
Sad funeral flowers to deck a living corpse,
Upon us as we pass to pass away,
And leave ... what memory of our having been?
Infamy, blood, terror, despair? O thou,
Who wert a mother to the parentless,
Kill not thy child! Let not her wrongs kill thee!
Brother, lie down with me upon the rack,
And let us each be silent as a corpse;
It soon will be as soft as any grave.
'Tis but the falsehood it can wring from fear
Makes the rack cruel.

Giacomo. They will tear the truth
Even from thee at last, those cruel pains:
For pity's sake say thou art guilty now.

Lucretia. Oh, speak the truth! Let us all quickly die;
And after death, God is our judge, not they;
He will have mercy on us.

Bernardo. If indeed
It can be true, say so, dear sister mine;
And then the Pope will surely pardon you,
And all be well.

Judge. Confess, or I will warp.
Your limbs with such keen tortures...

in a rich mantle.

It was the mantle which my grandfather
Wore in his high prosperity, and men
Envied his state: so may they envy thine.
Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God
To a just use. Live long and thrive! And, mark,
If thou hast crimes, repent: this deed is none. [*A horn is sounded.*]

Lucretia. Hark, 'tis the castle horn; my God! it sounds
Like the last trump.

Beatrice. Some tedious guest is coming.

Lucretia. The drawbridge is let down; there is a tramp
Of horses in the court; fly, hide yourselves! [*Exeunt OLIMPIO
and MARZIO.*]

Beatrice. Let us retire to counterfeit deep rest;
I scarcely need to counterfeit it now:
The spirit which doth reign within these limbs
Seems strangely undisturbed. I could even sleep
Fearless and calm: all ill is surely past. [*Exeunt.*]

Enter JUDGE with LUCRETIA and GIACOMO, guarded

Scene IV

Another Apartment in the Castle.

Enter on one side the Legate SAVELLA, introduced by a Servant, and on the other LUCRETIA and BERNARDO

Bernardo. How gently slumber rests upon her face,
Like the last thoughts of some day sweetly spent
Closing in night and dreams, and so prolonged.
After such torments as she bore last night,
How light and soft her breathing comes. Ay, me!
Methinks that I shall never sleep again.
But I must shake the heavenly dew of rest
From this sweet folded flower, thus ... wake! awake!
What, sister, canst thou sleep?

Beatrice (awaking). I was just dreaming
That we were all in Paradise. Thou knowest
This cell seems like a kind of Paradise
After our father's presence.

Bernardo. Dear, dear sister,
Would that thy dream were not a dream! O God!
How shall I tell?

Beatrice. What wouldst thou tell, sweet brother?

Bernardo. Look not so calm and happy, or even whilst
I stand considering what I have to say
My heart will break.

Beatrice. See now, thou mak'st me weep:
How very friendless thou wouldst be, dear child,
If I were dead. Say what thou hast to say.

Bernardo. They have confessed; they could endure no more
The tortures...

Beatrice. Ha! What was there to confess?
They must have told some weak and wicked lie
To flatter their tormentors. Have they said
~~What~~ that they were guilty? O white innocence,
That thou shouldst wear the mask of guilt to hide
Thine awful and serenest countenance
From those who know thee not!

Savella. Lady, my duty to his Holiness
Be my excuse that thus unseasonably
I break upon your rest. I must speak with
Count Cenci; doth he sleep?

Lucretia (in a hurried and confused manner). I think he sleeps;
Yet wake him not, I pray, spare me awhile,
He is a wicked and a wrathful man;
Should he be roused out of his sleep to-night,
Which is, I know, a hell of angry dreams,
It were not well; indeed it were not well.
Wait till day break ... *(aside)* O, I am deadly sick!
Savella. I grieve thus to distress you, but the Count
Must answer charges of the gravest import,
And suddenly; such my commission is.

Lucretia (with increased agitation). I dare not rouse him:
I know none who dare...
'Twere perilous;... you might as safely waken
A serpent; or a corpse in which some fiend
Were laid to sleep.
Savella. Lady, moments here
Are counted. I must rouse him from his sleep,
Since none else dare.

Lucretia (aside). O, terror! O, despair!
(To BERNARDO.) Bernardo, conduct you the Lord Legate to
Your father's chamber. [*Exeunt SAVELLA and BERNARDO.*]

Enter BEATRICE

Beatrice. 'Tis a messenger
Come to arrest the culprit who now stands
Before the throne of unappealable God.
Both Earth and Heaven, consenting arbiters,
Acquit our deed.

Lucretia. Oh, agony of fear!
Would that he yet might live! Even now I heard
The Legate's followers whisper as they passed
They had a warrant for his instant death.
All was prepared by unforbidden means
Which we must pay so dearly, having done.
Even now they search the tower, and find the body;
Now they suspect the truth; now they consult
Before they come to tax us with the fact;
O, horrible, 'tis all discovered!

Beatrice. Mother,
What is done wisely, is done well. Be bold
As thou art just. 'Tis like a truant child
To fear that others know what thou hast done,
Even from thine own strong consciousness, and thus
Write on unsteady eyes and altered cheeks
All thou wouldst hide. Be faithful to thyself,
And fear no other witness but thy fear.
For if, as cannot be, some circumstance
Should rise in accusation, we can blind
Suspicion with such cheap astonishment,
Or overbear it with such guiltless pride,
As murderers cannot feign. The deed is done,
And what may follow now regards not me.
I am as universal as the light;
Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
As the world's centre. Consequence, to me,
Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock
But shakes it not. [*A cry within and tumult.*
Voices. Murder! Murder! Murder!

Scene III

The Cell of a Prison.

BEATRICE is discovered asleep on a couch. Enter BERNARDO

Enter an Officer

Officer. Marzio's dead.

Judge. What did he say?

Officer. Nothing. As soon as we
Had bound him on the wheel, he smiled on us,
As one who baffles a deep adversary;
And holding his breath, died.

Judge. There remains nothing
But to apply the question to those prisoners,
Who yet remain stubborn.

Camillo. I overrule
Further proceedings, and in the behalf
Of these most innocent and noble persons
Will use my interest with the Holy Father.

Judge. Let the Pope's pleasure then be done. Meanwhile
Conduct these culprits each to separate cells;
And be the engines ready: for this night
If the Pope's resolution be as grave,
Pious, and just as once, I'll wring the truth
Out of those nerves and sinews, groan by groan. [*Exeunt.*]

Enter BERNARDO and SAVELLA

Savella (to his followers). Go search the castle round; sound the
alarm;
Look to the gates that none escape!

Beatrice. What now?

Bernardo. I know not what to say ... my father's dead.

Beatrice. How; dead! he only sleeps; you mistake, brother.
His sleep is very calm, very like death;
'Tis wonderful how well a tyrant sleeps.
He is not dead?

Bernardo. Dead; murdered.

Lucretia (with extreme agitation). Oh no, no,
He is not murdered though he may be dead;
I have alone the keys of those apartments.
Savella. Ha! Is it so?

Beatrice. My Lord, I pray excuse us;
We will retire; my mother is not well:
She seems quite overcome with this strange horror. [*Exeunt*]

LUCRETIA and BEATRICE.

Savella. Can you suspect who may have murdered him?

Bernardo. I know not what to think.

Savella. Can you name any
Who had an interest in his death?

Bernardo. Alas!

I can name none who had not, and those most
Who most lament that such a deed is done;
My mother, and my sister, and myself.

Savella. 'Tis strange! There were clear marks of violence.
I found the old man's body in the moonlight
Hanging beneath the window of his chamber,
Among the branches of a pine; he could not
Have fallen there, for all his limbs lay heaped
And effortless; 'tis true there was no blood...
Favour me, Sir; it much imports your house
That all should be made clear; to tell the ladies
That I request their presence. [*Exit* BERNARDO.]

Enter GUARDS bringing in MARZIO

chosen forth
Out of the multitude of living men
To kill the innocent?

Marzio. I am Marzio,
Thy father's vassal.

Beatrice. Fix thine eyes on mine;
Answer to what I ask.
(*Turning to the Judges.*) I prithee mark
His countenance: unlike bold calumny
Which sometimes dares not speak the thing it looks,
He dares not look the thing he speaks, but bends
His gaze on the blind earth.

(*To* MARZIO.) What! wilt thou say
That I did murder my own father?

Marzio. Oh!
Spare me! My brain swims round ... I cannot speak...
It was that horrid torture forced the truth.
Take me away! Let her not look on me!
I am a guilty miserable wretch,
I have said all I know; now, let me die!

Beatrice. My Lords, if by my nature I had been
So stern, as to have planned the crime alleged,
Which your suspicions dictate to this slave,
And the rack makes him utter, do you think
I should have left this two-edged instrument
Of my misdeed; this man, this bloody knife
With my own name engraven on the heft,
Lying unsheathed amid a world of foes,
For my own death? That with such horrible need
For deepest silence, I should have neglected
So trivial a precaution, as the making
His tomb the keeper of a secret written
On a thief's memory? What is his poor life?
What are a thousand lives? A parricide
Had trampled them like dust; and, see, he lives!
(*Turning to* MARZIO.) And thou...

Marzio. Oh, spare me!
Speak to me no more!
That stern yet piteous look, those solemn tones,
Which have so often...

towards him; he covers his face, and shrinks back. O, dart
The terrible resentment of those eyes
On the dead earth! Turn them away from me!
They wound: 'twas torture forced the truth. My Lords,
Having said this let me be led to death.

Beatrice. Poor wretch, I pity thee: yet stay awhile.

Camillo. Guards, lead him not away.

Beatrice. Cardinal Camillo,
You have a good repute for gentleness
And wisdom: can it be that you sit here
To countenance a wicked farce like this?
When some obscure and trembling slave is dragged
From sufferings which might shake the sternest heart
And bade to answer, not as he believes,
But as those may suspect or do desire
Whose questions thence suggest their own reply:
And that in peril of such hideous torments
As merciful God spares even the damned. Speak now
The thing you surely know, which is that you,
If your fine frame were stretched upon that wheel,
And you were told: "Confess that you did poison
Your little nephew; that fair blue-eyed child
Who was the loadstar of your life:"—and though
All see, since his most swift and piteous death,
That day and night, and heaven and earth, and time,
And all the things hoped for or done therein
Are changed to you, through your exceeding grief,
Yet you would say, "I confess anything:"
And beg from your tormentors, like that slave,
The refuge of dishonourable death.
I pray thee, Cardinal, that thou assert
My innocence.

Camillo (much moved). What shall we think, my Lords?
Shame on these tears! I thought the heart was frozen
Which is their fountain. I would pledge my soul
That she is guiltless.

Judge. Yet she must be tortured.

Guard. We have one.

Officer. My Lord, we found this ruffian and another
Lurking among the rocks; there is no doubt
But that they are the murderers of Count Cenci;
Each had a bag of coin; this fellow wore
A gold-inwoven robe, which shining bright
Under the dark rocks to the glimmering moon
Betrayed them to our notice: the other fell
Desperately fighting.

Savella. What does he confess?

Officer. He keeps firm silence; but these lines found on him
May speak.

Savella. Their language is at least sincere. [*Reads.*

"TO THE LADY BEATRICE.—That the atonement of what my
nature sickens to conjecture may soon arrive, I send thee, at
thy brother's desire, those who will speak and do more than I
dare write.... Thy devoted servant,
ORSINO."

Enter LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, *and* BERNARDO
Knowest thou this writing, Lady?

Beatrice. No.

Savella. Nor thou?

Lucretia. (*Her conduct throughout the scene is marked by extreme*

agitation). Where was it found? What is it?
It should be
Orsino's hand! It speaks of that strange horror
Which never yet found utterance, but which made
Between that hapless child and her dead father
A gulf of obscure hatred.

Savella. Is it so?
Is it true, Lady, that thy father did
Such outrages as to awaken in thee
Unfilial hate?

Beatrice. Not hate, 'twas more than hate:
This is most true, yet wherefore question me?

Savella. There is a deed demanding question done;
Thou hast a secret which will answer not.

Beatrice. What sayest? My Lord, your words are bold and rash.

Look upon this man;
When did you see him last?

Beatrice. We never saw him.

Marzio. You know me too well, Lady Beatrice.

Beatrice. I know thee! How? where? when?

Marzio. You know 'twas I

Whom you did urge with menaces and bribes
To kill your father. When the thing was done
You clothed me in a robe of woven gold
And bade me thrive: how I have thriven, you see.

You, my Lord Giacomo, Lady Lucretia,

You know that what I speak is true. [BEATRICE *advances*

First Judge. Accused, do you persist in your denial?

I ask you, are you innocent, or guilty?

I demand who were the participators

In your offence? Speak truth and the whole truth.

Marzio. My God! I did not kill him; I know nothing;

Olimpio sold the robe to me from which

You would infer my guilt.

Second Judge. Away with him!

First Judge. Dare you, with lips yet white from the rack's kiss

Speak false? Is it so soft a questioner,

That you would bandy lover's talk with it

Till it wind out your life and soul? Away!

Marzio. Spare me! O, spare! I will confess.

First Judge. Then speak.

Marzio. I strangled him in his sleep.

First Judge. Who urged you to it?

Marzio. His own son Giacomo, and the young prelate

Orsino sent me to Petrella; there

The ladies Beatrice and Lucretia

Tempted me with a thousand crowns, and I

And my companion forthwith murdered him.

Now let me die.

First Judge. This sounds as bad as truth. Guards, there,

Lead forth the prisoner!

Enter LUCRETIA, BEATRICE, and GIACOMO, guarded

Savella. I do arrest all present in the name

Of the Pope's Holiness. You must to Rome.

Lucretia. O, not to Rome, Indeed we are not guilty.

Beatrice. Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord,
I am more innocent of parricide

Than is a child born fatherless. ... Dear mother,

Your gentleness and patience are no shield

For this keen-judging world, this two-edged lie,

Which seems, but is not. What! will human laws,

Rather will ye who are their ministers,

Bar all access to retribution first,

And then, when Heaven doth interpose to do

What ye neglect, arming familiar things

To the redress of an unwonted crime,

Make ye the victims who demanded it

Culprits? 'Tis ye are culprits! That poor wretch

Who stands so pale, and trembling, and amazed,

If it be true he murdered Cenci, was

A sword in the right hand of justest God.

Wherefore should I have wielded it? Unless

The crimes which mortal tongue dare never name

God therefore scruples to avenge.

Savella. You own

That you desired his death?

Beatrice. It would have been

A crime no less than his, if for one moment

That fierce desire had faded in my heart.

'Tis true I did believe, and hope, and pray,

Ay, I even knew ... for God is wise and just,

That some strange sudden death hung over him.

'Tis true that this did happen, and most true

There was no other rest for me on earth,

No other hope in Heaven ... now what of this?

Savella. Strange thoughts beget strange deeds; and here are

both:
I judge thee not.

Beatrice. And yet, if you arrest me,
You are the judge and executioner
Of that which is the life of life: the breath
Of accusation kills an innocent name,
And leaves for lame acquittal the poor life
Which is a mask without it. 'Tis most false
That I am guilty of foul parricide;
Although I must rejoice, for justest cause,
That other hands have sent my father's soul
To ask the mercy he denied to me.
Now leave us free; stain not a noble house
With vague surmises of rejected crime;
Add to our sufferings and your own neglect
No heavier sum: let them have been enough:
Leave us the wreck we have.

Savella. I dare not, Lady.
I pray that you prepare yourselves for Rome:
There the Pope's further pleasure will be known.

Lucretia. O, not to Rome! O, take us not to Rome!

Beatrice. Why not to Rome, dear mother? There as here
Our innocence is as an armed heel
To trample accusation. God is there
As here, and with his shadow ever clothes
The innocent, the injured and the weak;
And such are we. Cheer up, dear Lady, lean
On me; collect your wandering thoughts. My Lord,
As soon as you have taken some refreshment,
And had all such examinations made
Upon the spot, as may be necessary
To the full understanding of this matter,
We shall be ready. Mother; will you come?

76

Lucretia. Ha! they will bind us to the rack, and wrest
Self-accusation from our agony!
Will Giacomo be there? Orsino? Marzio?
All present; all confronted; all demanding
Each for the other's name; and each for the other's

Scene II

A Hall of Justice.

CAMILLO, JUDGES, etc., *are discovered seated*; MARZIO *is led in*

Giacomo. Do evil deeds thus quickly come to end?
O, that the vain remorse which must chastise
Crimes done, had but as loud a voice to warn
As its keen sting is mortal to avenge!
O, that the hour when present had cast off
The mantle of its mystery, and shown
The ghastly form with which it now returns
When its scared game is roused, cheering the hounds
Of conscience to their prey! Alas! Alas!
It was a wicked thought, a piteous deed,
To kill an old and hoary-headed father.

Orsino. It has turned out unluckily, in truth.

Giacomo. To violate the sacred doors of sleep;
To cheat kind nature of the placid death
Which she prepares for overworn age;
To drag from Heaven an unrepentant soul
Which might have quenched in reconciling prayers
A life of burning crimes...

Orsino. You cannot say
I urged you to the deed.

Giacomo. O, had I never
Found in thy smooth and ready countenance
The mirror of my darkest thoughts; hadst thou
Never with hints and questions made me look
Upon the monster of my thought, until
It grew familiar to desire...

Orsino. 'Tis thus
Men cast the blame of their unprosperous acts
Upon the abettors of their own resolve;
Or anything but their weak, guilty selves.
~~And~~ yet, confess the truth, it is the peril
In which you stand that gives you this pale sickness
Of penitence; confess 'tis fear disguised
From its own shame that takes the mantle now
Of thin remorse. What if we yet were safe?

Savella. She faints: an ill appearance, this.

Beatrice. My Lord,
She knows not yet the uses of the world.
She fears that power is as a beast which grasps
And loosens not: a snake whose look transmutes
All things to guilt which is its nutriment.
She cannot know how well the supine slaves
Of blind authority read the truth of things
When written on a brow of guilelessness:
She sees not yet triumphant Innocence
Stand at the judgment-seat of mortal man,
A judge and an accuser of the wrong
Which drags it there. Prepare yourself, my Lord;
Our suite will join yours in the court below. [*Exeunt.*]

Act V

Scene I

An Apartment in ORSINO'S Palace.

Enter ORSINO and GIACOMO