
Act One

The protagonist, Paul, has moved there following the sudden death of his wife, Marie. He is looked after by a servant, Brigitta. He has turned one of the rooms in his apartment into a shrine, which he calls "the Temple of Memories" and is dedicated solely to the cult of his dead wife and her relics, which include a picture, a lute and a long plait of her hair, conserved in a crystal cask.

Brigitta admits Frank, a friend of Paul's, to the "Temple". Frank has not seen Paul for some time and Brigitta tells him that a marked change has come over her master, who is now excited and talks of the dead returning to life. Paul comes home and he joyfully embraces Frank and tells him that he has met a woman who is like Marie in every way. He has bought her roses and invited her to the house. Frank vainly begs his friend not to indulge in groundless fancies. Finally arrived the mysterious woman, elegant and non-chalant. Paul asks her to put on his wife's shawl and he calls her "Marie!" She tells him that her name is Marietta. He gives her the lute and Marietta sings a song. Happy singing can also be heard from the street: they are friends and colleagues, whom she must join because they have rehearsals at the theatre. She is a dancer and dances. Discovering accidentally a woman portrait, her reaction is one of surprise: "But this is me! With the shawl and the lute?". She has to go to her rehearsal, however, and leaves. Once alone, Paul hear the wife's voice, begs her forgiveness. He urges him to see that "Life is calling you; look and understand".

Act Two

The vision continues. Perturbed by a sense of anguish and remorse, Paul waits in front of Marietta's house. A group of beguines walks past; the last of them is Brigitta dressed in a novice's habit. She has left Paul's service because he has not remained faithful to Marie. Then Frank suddenly appears. He too has been seduced by the dancer and is about to enter her apartment; he shows Paul the key that she has given him. Paul is furious and he sets upon his friend, grabbing the key from his hand. Frank shouts "I am no longer your friend" and, staggering, he leaves. In the next scene, a boat carrying the entire company passes along the canal. Everyone sings a serenade to Marietta, who enters with Gaston. Fritz, dressed as Pierrot, sings "Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen"; Marietta suggests rehearsing in the open air the scene from *Robert the Devil* in which she plays the part of Hélène, the nun who rises from the tomb, and then she starts a seductive dance with Gaston. Paul is disgusted and comes forward to stop the spectacle. The friends leave and, once alone with Marietta, Paul in a fury reveals the reason for his attraction towards her. He says he never loved her: he has loved in her only the image of his deceased wife. Marietta is hurt, but determined to challenge her rival and chase out her ghost forever. She gradually seduces Paul

who, incapable of controlling himself, gives in and attempts to enter her house. However, she stops him: "I want to come to your home! For the first time at your home!".

Act Three

After a night of love with Paul, Marietta wakes up early to find herself alone. She goes into the "Temple of Memories" to look in triumph on the portrait of Marie. Paul returns. Full of remorse, he has been out walking and praying. He tries to make Marietta leave the room, but she refuses. As bells and chants can already be heard, she insists that she wishes to watch from the window the religious procession that is held every year on that day. Paul feels increasingly drawn by the ceremony and, as the bishop passes, he falls to his knees. Marietta, following a devilish impulse to profane his feelings, tries to seduce him again. Tormented by guilt feelings, Paul spurns her, but in his delirium, he thinks that he can see the procession menacingly entering the room, which makes Marietta laugh. Paul tries to control himself, as he defends his faith in love and loyalty; but she accuses him of weakness and hypocrisy. She runs to the cask and seizes the plait, which she winds around her neck, and begins to perform a provocative dance. Furious, Paul throws Marietta to the floor and he strangles her with the plait. The scene dims and the vision is over.

The light slowly returns. Paul shakes himself and, surprised, he sees that the dead body has disappeared and the plait is in its rightful place. Brigitta comes to announce the lady who had just left: she has come back after taking just a few steps. Marietta enters: she has forgotten her umbrella and the roses. Is this perhaps a sign that she ought to stay? Paul is astonished and says nothing, while she shrugs her shoulders, smiles and leaves. At the door, she meets Frank, who bows as she passes by and then asks his friend: "So, was this the miracle?". It has indeed been a miracle: Paul will never see her again. The nightmare has had a liberating effect on him, destroying his dream, but at the same time curing him of his obsession. Frank is about to leave and he suggests that Paul go with him. Paul replies: "I want to try". He will leave the dead city, because life imposes the "terrible commandment": there is no resurrection on this earth.

(Traduzione di Chris Owen)