

THE ACADEMY OF MELANCHOLY

by

Charlotte O'Leary

**ACT [1]****SCENE [1]**

*1824, The Operating Theatre and Herb Garrett, London Bridge.*

*The Operating Theatre and Garrett are high up in the rafters of St Thomas the Apostle's Church. The Garrett is used as an apothecary and every square inch is covered with herbs and flowers growing for medical purposes. Opium poppies grow freely on one side of the Garrett.*

*The audience enter the apothecary and wait. A violinist is playing. The occasional scream can be heard from the theatre.*

*Margaret, 31, a sister in the hospital, remarkably clever but held back by poor luck in life. A widow and mother of four, she has a strong and proud chin and always goes forth in her headstrong manner, no matter what. Flossie, 22, a nurse, amiable and innocent looking, her naivety about life ensures she is to be no more than a maid or simple nurse. She is certainly not stupid, but has little aptitude for medicine and always panics when faced with life's ills.*

*Dressed in their nursing finery, they walk around the apothecary, sorting out medical supplies and then putting out tea and biscuits. Flossie is very particular over the tea and biscuits, this is her area of expertise. Margaret keeps looking at the operating theatre and winces at the screaming. She is furious and barely able to contain it. She pushes audience members angrily out of the way if they are standing in the wrong place.*

*They sit and Flossie starts to serve tea and biscuits. The violinist continues to play throughout this scene, and the screaming gets louder and more frequent.*

MARGARET: Who is in charge, tell me? In charge of everything? Who is in charge of people, the world?

FLOSSIE: Would you like a cup of tea?

*Margaret signals to the violinist.*

MARGARET: Play louder madam! Play louder!

FLOSSIE: May I offer you a macaroon?

MARGARET: Drown out the sounds of the screams!

FLOSSIE: Surely a violinist can only lift the spirits of the patients, it can't cure all ills. Sister Margaret, I thought it rather fun.

MARGARET: I know Matron thinks this is a very fine idea indeed. To cover the sounds of horror and suffering with some light music. How wonderful, how very gracious of her.

FLOSSIE: Would you like an Abernethy?

MARGARET: The very first requirement in a hospital is that it should do the sick no harm. That's *my* patient in there!

FLOSSIE: Captain's biscuit?

MARGARET: Three days ago Elizabeth was walking round bright as you please, now listen to her. What miserable men commit such acts of utter barbarity?

FLOSSIE: Cracknells?

MARGARET: Flossie shush with your dratted biscuits.

FLOSSIE: I should thought most find the biscuit generally inoffensive. Like me, I think of myself as generally inoffensive. Oft I wonder if I should get through life and on my gravestone says is "she was generally inoffensive" I should be pleased.

*Margaret spies a row of doctors' coats and hats hanging on the wall. She takes a coat, tries it on, it's too big.*

FLOSSIE: How would you like to be remembered?

MARGARET: Pardon?

*Tries another, too small.*

FLOSSIE: How would you like to be remembered, what should you want people say about you after you've passed? It's a question I oft think about.

MARGARET: "Miseratione non mercede".

FLOSSIE: Pardon, dear, what?

*Tries a third, fits just right.*

MARGARET: "For compassion, not gain". Latin. It was in school, do you not recall? Tis a fine motto for both the nurse, and the surgeon. Sadly one I fear is to be want here. (*Beat*) I can't bear it, my mind is

racing at the horrors, I cannot endure to hear dear Elizabeth, my dear, dear Elizabeth in so much pain.

*Margaret adjusts her clothing. Stands erect. Opens the main door to the operating theatre and prepares to go in.*

MARGARET: I shan't take anymore. I shall *not* take anymore.

FLOSSIE: We know nothing compared to a surgeon. *I* know nothing compared to a surgeon.

MARGARET: I should learn everything then.

FLOSSIE: Margaret! This is foolhardy.

*Margaret disappears into the theatre. Flossie is at a loss of what to do with herself, she turns several times before coming to rest in her chair. She munches on a biscuit anxiously.*

FLOSSIE: Oh Margaret what will I do.

*Dr Haighton, 24, the human variant of a weasel. An air of distrust swirls around his short stature, he holds all mankind in disdain. He wears a smile as if to be continually plotting. His doctor's coat is a source of pride, but he wears the blood stains on it as badges of honour. He comes out of the back door of the theatre, claps his hands and shouts at the audience.*

DR HAIGHTON: Dr Edwards requests you take your seats. (Barks) Come on!  
Hurry! Come on will you!

*The audience are shepherded through the backdoors of the theatre. Dr Haighton takes his*

*place on the stage of the Operating Theatre.*

**ACT [1]**

**SCENE [2]**

*The Operating Theatre. Dr Edwards and Dr Haighton are preparing. Dr Edwards to glare at audience members if they are making a fuss about seating. Medical students would have stood on the stage and been berated if they were in the way.*

*Dr Edwards, 51, is an imposing man and causes profound silence to fall whenever he enters a room. His surgical procedures are rapid in execution, masterly in manner and there is no disorder. Despite his high rank he is an excellent teacher and likes to be challenged by the opinions of his charges, if only so he can declare them wrong.*

*Dr Haighton is putting surgical implements in order. Dr Edwards is reviewing a bottle of whiskey, and stands at the back eyeing up the audience, readying himself for his big performance.*

*In the middle of the theatre is the operating table, a simple wooden affair with a large wooden box underneath. On the table lies Elizabeth, shaking violently with a white cloth blindfold. She is in agony and screams occasionally. Dr Haighton seems utterly thrilled at her pain.*

*Margaret comes through the main door, unsure of where to put herself. Squeezes in on the end of a row.*

*Dr Edwards reviews his reflection in the mirror on the back wall. He puts on his top hat and addresses the audience.*

**DR EDWARDS:** Silence! Such insolence. The patient was admitted three days ago

with a compound fracture of the tibia and fibula, and an extensive wound of the integuments (pronounced: *in-teg-you-meant*). She was struck by a heavy carriage just outside here, it rolled onto her leg and she lost a considerable amount of blood. For the past three days she has been dosed with castor oil, and wine. Her wound now has an offensive smell, and we have opted to amputate. You will note that Dr Haighton has applied the tourniquet, and the artery in the groin region has been compressed well and long. Dr Haighton will support the limb while I proceed to amputate about three inches above the knee joint, here.

*He touches her leg, she sobs out loud.*

MARGARET:           No!

*Margaret clamps her hand over her mouth. Dr Edwards reviews the audience.*

DR EDWARDS:       This amputation will be rapid in its execution. Releasing the pressure on the femoral artery would only exacerbate the bleeding. There are three vessels that will have to be immediately secured to avoid blood being released at speed. Dr Haighton, amputation knife.

DR HAIGHTON:       Knife.

*Passes him an amputation knife.*

DR EDWARDS: I will make an incision here, then we will be able to pull the skin over the wound.

MARGARET: NO!

DR EDWARDS: Will that doctor please remove themselves from the theatre.

DR HAIGHTON: Pulse is thready. I think patient's about to faint.

DR EDWARDS: Whiskey!

*Dr Haighton gets the whiskey and tries to pour a tot into Elizabeth, she is too faint to swallow. Unsure what to do he tries to wrench open her jaw. Finally he gives in. Dr Edwards gestures to Dr Haighton for the whiskey, he passes it over, Dr Edwards takes the tot himself. Elizabeth has becomes more lucid as he makes his first incision.*

DR EDWARDS: Amputation saw

*Dr Haighton looks around, can't find it anywhere. Panics. Margaret can see the saw, it's been left on the side.*

DR EDWARDS: SAW!

*Margaret desperately tries to signal to where it is. In frustration she eventually walks down a few steps and points at it directly so Dr Haighton can see it. Dr Edwards is agog.*

DR EDWARDS: You will be joining us today?

MARGARET: No sir.

DR EDWARDS: Hold the leg



MARGARET: I beg your pardon Sir?

DR EDWARDS: No time for begs or pardons, hold the leg!

*Margaret goes to hold the leg. Dr Edwards takes the amputation saw and is about to remove the leg. Elizabeth is screaming in pain.*

DR EDWARDS: Physicians stick!

*Dr Haighton gets what looks like a walking stick, places it in Elizabeth's mouth.*

DR EDWARDS: For goodness' sake woman, bite down on it!

*Elizabeth bites down hard on it. Dr Edwards swiftly completes the initial cut above the knee. He takes the bloody knife and rams it in-between his teeth while he takes the amputation saw and swiftly finishes the job. He is panting, sweating, thrilled, blood now smeared around his mouth from the knife. Dr Haighton wraps the leg in a dressing, but is careful to keep his eyes to the ceiling. He finds the sight of blood abhorrent and wobbles as he performs his duties. Margaret, concerned for her patient, checks her pulse.*

MARGARET: Her pulse is weak and thready. Pallid, lips are blue.

DR EDWARDS: Can anyone tell me why?

DR HAIGHTON: Cyanosis? Blood poisoning? Menstruation?

MARGARET: She's gone into shock.

DR EDWARDS: And the treatment for that is?

MARGARET: Raise the legs

*She immediately realises what a bad idea that was as Dr Edwards takes Elizabeth's leg and dumps it on the table in front of Margaret. Dr Haighton stands holding the wrist of Elizabeth, taking her pulse, he is very matter-of-fact in his comments. Dr Edwards to make unwavering eye contact with Margaret.*

DR EDWARDS:           Diagnosis.

MARGARET:            There, there must be a fracture of, that bone and that bone.

DR EDWARDS:         Displaced oblique fracture. That is the tibia (*note: top shin bone*), and that is the fibula (*note: back calf bone*). You'll also note the extensive laceration of the skin extending from two inches below the head of the tibia to the medial malleolus (*pronounced muh-lee-oh-lus*) ankle bone. What else?

MARGARET:            Nothing, sir.

DR EDWARDS:         What else are you overlooking?

MARGARET:            I don't know, sir.

DR HAIGHTON:         Pulse is very weak, respiration appears to be shallow

DR EDWARDS:         Did you not hear what I said at the beginning? What has been overlooked?

MARGARET:            She, did she have another ill?

DR EDWARDS:         Did you not hear me say, she was brought in three days ago and what happened?

DR HAIGHTON: Pulse is...it's very, very weak now

MARGARET: I don't know.

DR EDWARDS: Nothing. Nothing happened. No one attempted fixation of the fracture. Three days ago it was very small. Had she received proper nursing, and not simply been offered castor oil and wine she would not have required an amputation.

DR HAIGHTON: Sir, the pulse is very weak. (Beat) No respiratory effort, no palpable pulse

MARGARET: Elizabeth!

*Dr Edwards eventually looks away from Margaret and turns to the audience.*

DR EDWARDS: Well I do hope that was instructive for you all. You will remember my private class is here, tomorrow evening.

*Dr Haighton takes the blindfold from Elizabeth's face, opens it out fully and lays it over her body. Dr Edwards checks his face in the mirror, takes another tot of whiskey. Margaret is left stood by the body of Elizabeth visibly traumatised. Dr Edwards slurs sarcastically into her ear.*

DR EDWARDS: Well done on your first operation. Do pass my compliments onto the nurses for an excellent job.

*Dr Edwards takes off his hat and leaves the theatre, followed by Dr Haighton who hot foots it out after him.*

MARGARET:               How very little can be done under the spirit of fear.

**ACT [1]                   SCENE [3]**

*Margaret stands by the body of Elizabeth, alone. She holds her hand, takes a cloth and gently strokes her arm with it. She tucks the cloth in neatly around the body as if it's a shroud.*

*She is startled as a porter comes in, pulling a sack. An East London man in his early thirties, he's spent years doing deals to scrape together a living, his tough life etched on his face. His movements are quick, his head is down, he's always doing a deal, trying not to get caught. He pulls apart the shroud. Proceeds to attempt to pull Elizabeth into the sack. He's sweating and struggling.*

PORTER:                   Take that end will ya

MARGARET:             Pardon?

PORTER:                   If you want your money, take that end.

*Margaret is confused, but does what she is told. They both pull Elizabeth into the sack (for ease the sack can simply be tied around her neck). He carries the body out of the theatre, then rushes back in to complete the transaction. Takes bag of coins out of his pocket and gives it to Margaret.*

PORTER:                   Almost forgot. Tell Mister Edwards that Mister W says pleasure doing business with him.

*He spies the bottle of whiskey. Starts to pour out a tot then instead just glugs straight from it. Hands the bottle to Margaret.*

PORTER: Right, off to Guy's.

*Drags the sack out of the door. Margaret is left holding a bag of coins and a bottle of whiskey.*

**ACT [1]                      SCENE [4]**

*Margaret and Flossie are busying themselves, cleaning up the theatre (they are only doing a 'surface' clean, make much of the fact it was not disinfected). Both women's minds are elsewhere. Flossie is desperate to talk to Margaret but takes a few attempts before she gets the confidence to launch into her monologue.*

FLOSSIE: Oh Margaret, what is the point of love without hope? I found Dr Haighton asleep, hidden, right at the back (*points to the back of the operating theatre*). He slept the best part of the day here, and I stood next to him, guarded him so that if any man should come in I could wake him. I was overcome with such joy. I truly believe that the greater the act, the greater the love they'll feel for you.

MARGARET: Dear Flossie, it's infatuation. Dr Haighton is nothing but an oaf. Why was he asleep at the back and not tending to his duties?

FLOSSIE: Wilberforce was terribly terribly tired from all his doctoring chores. I should be tired too if I had to operate the enormous brain that man does.

MARGARET: Flossie! It's Dr Haighton, please. (*Beat*) Who looks after the doctors' coats, this one is coming unstitched, look at it here.

FLOSSIE: If I were to marry Dr Haighton I'd ensure all of his attire were perfectly stitched. Leave it on the side, I'll sew it when there is a quiet moment in the ward and my fingers search for an activity. Do you think Dr Haighton might be courting?

MARGARET: Flossie, as long as a man is good, strong and true you don't take any notice of him, but as soon as he starts slithering around like a snake and portraying himself as King of his own court, you hang yourself round his neck as if you were his Fool. Is it really worse to be the wife of a good, courageous man than remain nurse to some dishonest self-centred creature?

FLOSSIE: Do you think I am a fool?

MARGARET: Not a fool Flossie, just sometimes: rather naive.

*Flossie starts polishing the mirror on the back wall of the theatre and looks into it as she talks.*

FLOSSIE: I'll not whine anymore. So that you know, if I could mock myself a hundred times more bitterly than you, I'd do that. Sometimes I catch sight of myself in this mirror, I laugh at myself, poor Flossie, and nearly go out of my mind with shame. I am feeling, as I have heard in love poems, the 'noble anguish of a unrequited lover'. I'd start to write my own poetry on the matter, save for the fact I n'ver learnt to write.

*Both continue to clean, in worlds of their own.*

FLOSSIE: I must say you made a very fine man. Almost the strong, courageous man you speak of.

MARGARET: Pardon?

FLOSSIE: As a man should be, erect.

MARGARET: Flossie!

FLOSSIE: Proud, confident, excellent cheekbones. Quite pompous too. I hear from Dr Haighton you were very pompous towards Dr Edwards, somewhat boorish he said. Grandiose. So it sounds as though you truly made a very fine man indeed.

*Flossie polishes the end of the banister at the front of the stage, slowly rubbing the cloth up and down, getting faster and faster as she talks. It's very suggestive although she's completely unaware of what she's doing.*

FLOSSIE: He has quite the face, a twinkle in his eye, a smile that invites me to be the centre of his world. Oh Margaret I do love him madly, he's all my joy. I promise that without him my life has no meaning, no happiness! I'll go anywhere with him, to the other end of the world if needs be, beyond the grave if he wanted, only for heaven's sake Wilberforce Haighton let's go soon for I shall suffocate under the weight of my passion!

*Margaret snatches the cloth away from Flossie.*

MARGARET: Flossie! Do stop. The man looks like an elf. Listen to me carefully,

do you joke or are you serious? Should it be possible that I could pass as a man?

*Flossie snatches the cloth back.*

FLOSSIE: Yes.

MARGARET: I shall take this coat home and fix it.