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# Pleasures and Days



## To My Friend Willie Heath

*Died in Paris 3rd October 1893\**

*From the lap of God in which you  
rest... reveal to me those truths which  
conquer death, prevent us from fear-  
ing it and almost make us love it.\**

The ancient Greeks brought cakes, milk and wine for their dead. Seduced by a more refined illusion, if not by one that is any wiser, we offer them flowers and books. If I am giving you this one, it is first and foremost because it is a book of images. Despite the “legends”, it will be, if not read, at least looked at by all the admirers of that great artist who has given me, without any affectation, this magnificent present, the woman of whom we might well say, adapting Dumas’s words, “that she is the one who has created the most roses after God”.\* M. Robert de Montesquiou\* has also celebrated her, in poems as yet unpublished, with that ingenious gravity, that sententious and subtle eloquence, that rigorous form which at times in his work recalls the seventeenth century. He tells her, speaking of flowers:

Posing for your paintbrush encourages them to bloom [...]  
You are their Vigée\* and you are Flora too,  
Who brings them immortality, where she brings only doom!

Her admirers are an elite, and there is a host of them. It was my wish that on the first page they should see the name of the man they had no time to become acquainted with and whom they would have admired. I myself, dear friend, knew you for only a very short time. It was in the Bois de Boulogne that I would often meet you in the mornings: you had spotted me coming and were waiting for me beneath the trees, erect but relaxed, like one of those great lords painted by Van Dyck,\* whose pensive elegance you shared. And indeed their elegance, like yours, resides less in clothes than in the body, and their bodies seem to have received it and to continue ceaselessly to receive it from their souls: it is a moral elegance. And everything, moreover, helped to bring out that melancholy resemblance, even the background of foliage in whose shadow Van Dyck often caught and fixed a king taking a stroll; like so many of those who were his models, you were soon to die, and in your eyes as in their eyes one could see alternately the shades of presentiment and the gentle light of resignation. But if the grace of your pride belonged by right to the art of a Van Dyck, you were much closer to Leonardo da Vinci by the mysterious intensity of your spiritual life. Often, your finger raised, your eyes impenetrable and smiling at the sight of the enigma you kept to yourself, you struck me as Leonardo's John the Baptist. Then we came up with the dream, almost the plan, of living more and more with each other, in a circle of magnanimous and well-chosen men and women, far enough from stupidity, vice and malice to feel safe from their vulgar arrows.

Your life, as you wished it to be, would comprise one of those works of art which require a lofty inspiration. Like faith and genius, we can receive this inspiration from the hands of love. But it was death that would give it to you. In it too and even in its approach reside hidden strength, secret aid, a "grace" which

is not found in life. Just like lovers when they start to love, like poets at the time when they sing, those who are ill feel closer to their souls. Life is hard when it wraps us in too tight an embrace, and perpetually hurts our souls. When we sense its bonds relaxing for a moment, we can experience gentle moments of lucidity and foresight. When I was still a child, no other character in sacred history seemed to me to have such a wretched fate as Noah, because of the flood which kept him trapped in the ark for forty days. Later on, I was often ill, and for days on end I too was forced to stay in the “ark”. Then I realized that Noah was never able to see the world so clearly as from the ark, despite its being closed and the fact that it was night on earth. When my convalescence began, my mother, who had not left me, and would even, at night-time, remain by my side, “opened the window of the ark”, and went out. But, like the dove, “she came back in the evening”. Then I was altogether cured, and like the dove “she returned not again”.\* I had to start to live once more, to turn away from myself, to listen to words harder than those my mother spoke; what was more, even her words, perpetually gentle until then, were no longer the same, but were imbued with the severity of life and of the duties she was obliged to teach me. Gentle dove of the flood, seeing you depart, how can one imagine that the patriarch did not feel a certain sadness mingling with his joy at the rebirth of the world? How gentle is that suspended animation, that veritable “Truce of God” which brings to a halt our labours and evil desires! What “grace” there is in illness, which brings us closer to the realities beyond death – and its graces too, the graces of its “vain adornments and oppressive veils”, the hair that an importunate hand “has carefully gathered”,\* the soft mild acts of a mother’s or friend’s faithfulness that so often appeared to us wearing the very face of our sadness, or as the protective gesture that our weakness had



implored, and which will stop on the threshold of convalescence; often I have suffered at feeling that you were so far away from me, all of you, the exiled descendants of the dove from the ark. And who indeed has not experienced those moments, my dear Willie, in which he would like to be where you are? We assume so many responsibilities towards life that there comes a time when, discouraged at the impossibility of ever being able to fulfil them all, we turn towards the tombs, we call on death, "death who comes to the aid of destinies that are difficult to accomplish".\* But if she unbinds us from the responsibilities we have assumed towards life, she cannot unbind us from those we have assumed towards ourselves, the first and foremost in particular – that of living so as to be worth something, and to gain merit.

More serious than any of us, you were also more childlike than anyone, not only in purity of heart, but in your innocent and delightful gaiety. Charles de Grancey had a gift which I envied him, that of being able, with memories of your schooldays, to arouse all of a sudden that laughter that never slumbered for long within you, and that we will hear no more.

If some of these pages were written at the age of twenty-three, many others ('Violante', almost all the 'Fragments from Italian Comedy', etc.) date from my twentieth year. All of them are merely the vain foam of a life that was agitated but is now calming down. May that life one day be limpid enough for the Muses to deign to gaze at themselves in it and for the reflection of their smiles and their dances to dart across its surface!

I am giving you this book. You are – alas! – the only one of my friends whose criticism it had nothing to fear from. I am at least confident that nowhere would its freedom of tone have shocked you. I have depicted immorality only in persons of a delicate conscience. Thus, as they are too weak to will the good, too noble to

TO MY FRIEND WILLIE HEATH

indulge with real enjoyment in evil, knowing nothing but suffering, I have managed to speak of them only with a pity too sincere for it not to purify these short essays. May that true friend, and that illustrious and beloved Master,\* who have added the poetry of his music and the music of his incomparable poetry respectively, and may M. Darlu\* too, that great philosopher whose inspired spoken words, more assured of lasting life than anything written, have in me as in so many others engendered thought, forgive me for having reserved for you this last token of my affection, bearing in mind that no one living, however great he may be or however dear, must be honoured before one who is dead.

# The Death of Baldassare Silvande Viscount of Sylvania

## 1

*The poets say that Apollo  
tended the flocks of Admetus;  
so too, each man is a God in  
disguise who plays the fool.*

– Emerson\*

“Monsieur Alexis, don’t cry like that; maybe the Viscount of Sylvania will give you a horse.”

“A big horse, Beppo, or a pony?”

“A big horse, perhaps, like Monsieur Cardenio’s. But please don’t cry like that... on your thirteenth birthday!”

The hope that he might be getting a horse, and the reminder that he was thirteen years old today, made Alexis’s eyes shine through their tears. But he was not entirely consoled, since it would mean having to go and see his uncle, Baldassare Silvande, Viscount of Sylvania. Admittedly, since the day he had heard that his uncle’s illness was incurable, Alexis had seen him several times. But since then, everything had completely changed. Baldassare had realized how ill he was and now knew that he had at most three years to live. Alexis could not understand how this certainty had not already killed his uncle with grief, or driven him mad, and for his own part felt quite unable to bear the pain of seeing him.

Convinced as he was that his uncle would start talking to him about his imminent demise, he did not think he had the strength to hold back his own sobs, let alone console him. He had always adored his uncle, the tallest, most handsome, youngest, liveliest, most gentle of all his relatives. He loved his grey eyes, his blond moustache and his knees – a deep and welcoming place of pleasure and refuge when he had been smaller, seemingly as inaccessible as a citadel, affording him as much enjoyment as any wooden horse, and more inviolable than a temple. Alexis, who openly disapproved of his father's sombre and severe way of dressing, and dreamt of a future in which, always on horseback, he would be as elegant as a fine lady and as splendid as a king, recognized in Baldassare the most ideal man imaginable; he knew that his uncle was handsome, and that he himself resembled him, and he knew too that his uncle was intelligent and noble-hearted, and wielded as much power as a bishop or a general. It was true that his parents' criticisms had taught him that the Viscount had his failings. He could even remember the violence of his anger on the day when his cousin Jean Galéas had made fun of him, how much the gleam in his eyes had betrayed the extreme pleasure of his vanity when the Duke of Parma had offered his sister's hand in marriage to him (on that occasion he had clenched his jaws in an attempt to disguise his pleasure and pulled a face, an expression habitual to him – one that Alexis disliked), and he remembered too the tone of contempt with which his uncle spoke to Lucretia, who professed not to like his music.

Often his parents would allude to other things his uncle had done, things which Alexis did not know about, but which he heard being severely censured.

But all of Baldassare's failings, including the vulgar face he pulled, had certainly disappeared. When his uncle had learnt that

in two years, perhaps, he would be dead, how much the mockeries of Jean Galéas, the friendship of the Duke of Parma and his own music must have become a matter of indifference to him!... Alexis imagined him to be just as handsome, but solemn and even more perfect than he had been before. Yes, solemn, and already no longer altogether of this world. Thus his despair was mingled with a certain disquiet and alarm.

The horses had long been harnessed, and it was time to go; he climbed into the carriage, then stepped back out, as he wanted to go over and ask his tutor for one last piece of advice. At the moment he spoke, he turned very red.

“Monsieur Legrand, is it better if my uncle thinks or does not think that I know that he is going to die?”

“Better that he does not think so, Alexis!”

“But what if he starts talking about it?”

“He won’t talk about it.”

“He won’t talk about it?” said Alexis in surprise, for this was the only possibility he had not foreseen: each time he had started imagining his visit to his uncle, he had heard him speaking of death to him with the gentleness of a priest.

“Yes but, what if he *does* talk about it?”

“You’ll tell him he’s wrong.”

“And what if I start crying?”

“You’ve cried enough this morning, you won’t cry when you’re at his place.”

“I won’t cry!” exclaimed Alexis in despair. “But he’ll think I’m not sorry about it, that I don’t love him... my dear old uncle!”

And he burst into tears. His mother, tired of waiting, came to fetch him; they set off.

When Alexis had given his little overcoat to a valet in white-and-green livery, with the Sylvanian coat of arms, who was standing in

the entrance hall, he paused for a moment with his mother to listen to a violin melody coming from a nearby room. Then they were led into a huge round room, with windows extending all around it, where the Viscount was often to be found. As you went in, you saw the sea facing you and, as you looked round, lawns, pastures and woods were visible; at the far end of the room, there were two cats, roses, poppies and a great number of musical instruments. They waited for a while.

Alexis suddenly rushed over to his mother. She thought he wanted to kiss her, but he asked her in a low voice, his mouth glued to her ear, "How old is my uncle?"

"He'll be thirty-six in June."

He wanted to ask, "Do you think he'll ever actually make thirty-six?" but he did not dare.

A door opened, Alexis trembled, and a servant said, "The Viscount will be here presently."

Soon the servant returned, ushering in two peacocks and a kid goat that the Viscount took everywhere with him. Then they heard some more footsteps and the door opened again.

"It's nothing," Alexis told himself; his heart thumped every time he heard a noise. "It's probably a servant, yes, most probably a servant." But at the same time he heard a gentle voice saying, "Hello, young Alexis, many happy returns of the day!"

And his uncle came to kiss him, and made him feel afraid – and no doubt realized as much, since he turned away to give him time to pull himself together, and started to chat cheerfully to Alexis's mother, his sister-in-law, who, ever since the death of his mother, had been the person he loved most in the world.

Alexis, now feeling reassured, felt only immense affection for this young man, still so charming, scarcely any paler and so heroic as to be able to adopt a tone of cheerfulness during these tragic

minutes. He would like to have flung his arms around him, but did not dare, fearing that he might break his uncle's composure and cause him to lose his self-possession. It was the Viscount's sad and gentle eyes that especially made him want to cry. Alexis knew that his eyes had *always* been sad and that, even at the happiest times, he seemed to be imploring you to console him for sorrows that apparently did not affect him. But just now, he felt that his uncle's sadness, bravely banished from his conversation, had taken refuge in his eyes, the only sincere thing about his whole appearance, together with his hollowed cheeks.

"I know you'd like to drive a two-horse carriage, young Alexis," said Baldassare. "Tomorrow they'll bring you a horse. Next year I'll make up the complete pair, and in two years I'll give you the carriage. But perhaps this year you'll already be able to ride the horse – we'll try it out when I get back. I'm leaving tomorrow, you see," he added, "but not for long. I'll be back within a month and we can go off together and, you know, see a matinee of that comedy I promised to take you to."

Alexis knew that his uncle was going to spend a few weeks at one of his friends' houses. He also knew that his uncle was still allowed to go to the theatre; but as he was even now transfixed by the idea of death that had so deeply shaken him before coming to his uncle's, the latter's words gave him a painful and profound surprise.

"I won't go," he said to himself. "How much pain it would cause him to hear the actors' buffoonery and the audience's laughter!"

"What was that lovely violin tune we heard when we came in?" asked Alexis's mother.

"Ah! So you thought it was lovely?" said Baldassare quickly, looking extremely pleased. "It was the romance I mentioned to you."

"Is he putting it on?" Alexis wondered. "How can the success of his music still give him any pleasure?"

Just then, the Viscount's face assumed an expression of deep pain; his cheeks had grown pale, he pursed his lips and knit his brows, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Good Lord!" thought Alexis in alarm. "He's not up to playing this part! Poor uncle! Anyway, why is he so concerned to spare us any suffering? Why take such a burden on himself?"

But the painful effects of his general paralysis, which sometimes gripped Baldassare as if in an iron corset, even imprinting marks and bruises on his body, and whose intensity had just forced him to contort his face despite his best efforts, had vanished.

He resumed his good-humoured conversation, after wiping his eyes.

"I have the impression the Duke of Parma has been rather neglecting you of late?" Alexis's mother asked, unthinkingly.

"The Duke of Parma?" exclaimed Baldassare in tones of rage. "The Duke of Parma, neglecting me? But what can you be thinking of, my dear? This very morning he wrote to me to put his castle in Illyria at my disposal, if I think the mountain air will do me any good."

He suddenly stood up, but this brought on another attack of his dreadful pain, and he had to keep still for a while; his suffering had hardly been assuaged before he summoned a servant.

"Bring me the letter next to my bed."

And he made haste to read:

*My dear Baldassare,*

*How sorry I am not to be able to see you, etc.*

As the Prince came out with more and more kindly words, Baldassare's face softened and shone with happiness and confidence. Suddenly, no doubt because he wished to disguise a joy



that he felt was not very dignified, he clamped his teeth together and made the attractive and rather vulgar little grimace that Alexis had imagined for ever banished from his face, pacified as it was by death.

This little grimace, now twisting Baldassare's lips as it had before, opened the eyes of Alexis who, ever since he had been in his uncle's presence, had thought and hoped that he would be able to contemplate the face of a dying man forever detached from vulgar realities – a face on which the only expression would be the gentle hint of a heroically forced smile, tender and melancholy, heavenly and disenchanting. Now his doubts had been removed, and he knew that Jean Galéas, by teasing his uncle, had yet again made him angry, and that in the sick man's gaiety, in his desire to go to the theatre, there was no trace of either pretence or courage, and that now that he was on the threshold of death, Baldassare still continued to think only of life.

On his return home, Alexis was overwhelmed by the thought that he too would one day die, and that even if he himself still had much more time ahead of him than his uncle, the latter's old gardener and his cousin, the Duchess of Alériouvres, would certainly not survive Baldassare for long. And yet, even though he was wealthy enough to retire, Rocco continued to work ceaselessly so as to earn even more money, and was trying to win a prize for his roses. The Duchess, in spite being seventy years old, took great care to dye her hair and paid for newspaper articles in which the youthfulness of her bearing, the elegance of her receptions and the refinements of her table and her wit were all celebrated.

These examples did nothing to diminish the sudden amazement that his uncle's attitude had aroused in Alexis, but rather gave him a kindred feeling that, gradually spreading, turned into an immense stupefaction at the universal scandal of these existences,

his own included, walking backwards into death with their gaze still fixed on life.

Resolved not to imitate such a shocking aberration, he decided, following the ancient prophets of whose renown he had been taught, to retire to the desert with some of his close friends, and he communicated this wish to his parents.

Happily, more powerful than their derision, life itself, whose sweet and fortifying milk he had not yet drunk dry, proffered her breast to dissuade him. And he settled back to drink from it anew, with an avid joy whose insistent grievances his credulous and fertile imagination took with naive seriousness, and whose dashed hopes that same imagination made amends for so magnificently.

2

*The flesh is sad, alas...*  
 – Stéphane Mallarmé\*

The day after Alexis's visit, the Viscount of Sylvania had left for the nearby chateau for a stay of three or four weeks: the presence of numerous guests might take his mind off the melancholy that often followed his attacks of ill health.

Soon all the pleasures he enjoyed there came to be concentrated in the company of a young woman who made them twice as intense by sharing them with him. He thought he could sense that she was in love with him, but kept her at a certain distance: he knew she was absolutely pure, and was in any case impatiently awaiting her husband's arrival; and then, he was not sure he really loved her, and felt vaguely what a sin it would be to lead her into temptation. When exactly their relationship had become less innocent he was never able to recall. Now, as if by virtue of a tacit understanding,