

The Death of Lully, Aldous Huxley

The Death of Lully

THE sea lay in a breathing calm, and the galley, bosomed in its transparent water, stirred rhythmically to the slow pulse of its sleeping life. Down below there, fathoms away through the crystal-clear Mediterranean, the shadow of the ship lazily swung, moving, a long dark patch, very slowly back and forth across the white sand of the sea-bottom—very slowly, a scarcely perceptible advance and recession of the green darkness. Fishes sometimes passed, now hanging poised with idly tremulous fins, now darting onwards, effortless and incredibly swift; and always, as it seemed, utterly aimless, whether they rested or whether they moved; as the life of angels their life seemed mysterious and unknowable.

All was silence on board the ship. In their fetid cage below decks the rowers slept where they sat, chained, on their narrow benches. On deck the sailors lay sleeping or sat in little groups playing at dice. The fore-part of the deck was reserved, it seemed, for passengers of distinction. Two figures, a man and a woman, were reclining there on couches, their faces and half-bared limbs flushed in the coloured shadow that was thrown by the great red awning stretched above them.

It was a nobleman, the sailors had heard, and his mistress that they had on board. They had taken their passage at Scanderoon, and were homeward bound for Spain. Proud as sin these Spaniards were; the man treated them like slaves or dogs. As for the woman, she was well enough, but they could find as good a face and pair of breasts in their native Genoa. If anyone so much as looked at her from half the ship's length away it sent her possessor into a rage. He had struck one man for smiling at her. Damned Catalonian, as jealous as a stag; they wished him the stag's horns as well as its temper.

It was intensely hot even under the awning. The man woke from his uneasy sleep and reached out to where on a little table beside him stood a deep silver cup of mixed wine and water. He drank a gulp of it; it was as warm as blood and hardly cooled his throat. He turned over and, leaning on his elbow, looked at his companion. She on her back, quietly breathing through parted lips, still asleep. He leaned across and pinched her on the breast, so that she woke up with a sudden start and cry of pain. "Why did you wake me?" she asked.

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders. He had, indeed, had no reason for doing so, except that he did not like it that she should be comfortably asleep, while he was awake and unpleasantly conscious of the heat.

"It is hotter than ever," he said, with a kind of gloomy satisfaction at the thought that she would now have to suffer the same discomforts as himself. "The wine scorches instead of cooling; the sun seems no lower down the sky."

The woman pouted. "You pinched me cruelly," she said. "And I still do not know why you wanted to wake me,"

He smiled again, this time with a good-humoured lasciviousness. "I wanted to kiss you," he said. He passed his hand over her body possessively, as a man might caress a dog.

Suddenly the quiet of the afternoon was shattered. A great clamour rose up, ragged and uneven, on the air. Shrill yells pierced the dull rumbling

growl of bass voices, pierced the sound of beaten drums and hammered metal.

"What are they doing in the town?" asked the woman anxiously of her lover.

"God knows," he answered. "Perhaps the heathen hounds are making some trouble with our men."

He got up and walked to the rail of the ship. A quarter of a mile away, across the smooth water of the bay, stood the little African town at which they had stopped to call. The sunlight showed everything with a hard and merciless definition. Sky, palms, white houses, domes, and towers seemed as though made from some hard enamelled metal. A ridge of low red hills rolled away to right and left. The sunshine gave to everything in the scene the same clarity of detail, so that to the eye of the onlooker there was no impression of distance. The whole thing seemed to be painted in flat upon a single plane.

The young man returned to his couch under the awning and lay down. It was hotter than ever, or seemed so, at least, since he had made the exertion of getting up. He thought of high cool pastures in the hills, with the pleasant sound of streams, far down and out of sight in their deep channels. He thought of winds that were fresh and scented—winds that were not mere breaths of dust and fire. He thought of the shade of cypresses, a narrow opaque strip of darkness; and he thought too of the green coolness, more diffused and fluid and transparent, of chestnut groves. And he thought of the people he remembered sitting under the trees—young people, gay and brightly dressed, whose life was all gaiety and deliciousness.

There were the songs that they sang—he recalled the voices and the dancing of the strings. And there were perfumes and, when one drew closer, the faint intoxicating fragrance of a woman's body. He thought of the stories they told; one in particular came to his mind, a capital tale of a sorcerer who offered to change a peasant's wife into a mare, and how he gulled the husband and enjoyed the woman before his eyes, and the delightful excuses he made when she failed to change her shape. He smiled to himself at the thought of it, and stretching out a hand touched his mistress. Her bosom was soft to his fingers and damp with sweat; he had an unpleasant notion that she was melting in the heat.

"Why do you touch me?" she asked.

He made no reply, but turned away from her. He wondered how it would come to pass that people would rise again in the body. It seemed curious, considering the manifest activities of worms. And suppose one rose in the body that one possessed in age. He shuddered, picturing to himself what this woman would be like when she was sixty, seventy. She would be beyond words repulsive. Old men too were horrible. They stank, and their eyes were rheumy and rosiny, like the eyes of deer. He decided that he would kill himself before he grew old. He was eight-and-twenty now. He would give himself twelve years more. Then he would end it. His thoughts dimmed and faded away into sleep.

The woman looked at him as he slept. He was a good man, she thought, though sometimes cruel. He was different from all the other men she had known. Once, when she was sixteen and a beginner in the business of love, she had thought that all men were always drunk when they made love. They were all dirty and like beasts; she had felt herself superior to them. But this man was a nobleman. She could not understand him; his thoughts were always obscure. She felt herself infinitely inferior to him. She was

afraid of him and his occasional cruelty; but still he was a good man, and he might do what he liked with her.

From far off came the sound of oars, a rhythmical splash and creak. Somebody shouted, and from startingly close at hand one of the sailors hallooed back.

The young man woke up with a start.

"What is it?" he asked, turning with an angry look to the girl, as though he held her to be responsible for this breaking in upon his slumbers.

"The boat, I think," she said. "It must be coming back from the shore."

The boat's crew came up over the side, and all the stagnant life of the ship flowed excitedly round them. They were the centre of a vortex towards which all were drawn. Even the young Catalonian, for all his hatred of these stinking Genoese shipmen, was sucked into the eddy. Everybody was talking at once, and in the general hubbub of question and answer there was nothing coherent to be made out. Piercingly distinct above all the noise came the voice of the little cabin-boy, who had been to shore with the boat's crew.

He was running round to everyone in turn repeating: "I hit one of them. You know. I hit one. With a stone on the forehead. Didn't he bleed, ooh! didn't he just!" And he would dance with uncontrollable excitement. The captain held up his hand and shouted for silence. "One at a time, there," he ordered, and when order had a little been restored, added grumblingly, "Like a pack of dogs on a bone. You talk, boatswain."

"I hit one of them," said the boy. Somebody cuffed him over the head, and he relapsed into silence.

When the boatswain's story had rambled through labyrinths of digression, over countless obstacles of interruptions and emendations, to its conclusion, the Spaniard went back to join his companion under the awning. He had assumed again his habitual indifference.

"Nearly butchered," he said languidly, in response to her eager questions. "They" — he jerked a hand in the direction of the town — "they were pelting an old fellow who had come there preaching the Faith. Left him dead on the beach. Our men had to run for it." She could get no more out of him; he turned over and pretended to go to sleep.

Towards evening they received a visit from the captain. He was a large, handsome man, with gold ear-rings glinting from among a bush of black hair.

"Divine Providence," he remarked sententiously, after the usual courtesies had passed, "has called upon us to perform a very notable work,"

"Indeed?" said the young man.

"No less a work," continued the captain, "than to save from the clutches of the infidels and heathen the precious remains of a holy martyr."

The captain let fall his pompous manner. It was evident that he had carefully prepared these pious sentences, they rolled so roundly off his tongue. But he was eager now to get on with his story, and it was in a homelier style that he went on: "If you knew these seas as well as I—and it's near twenty years now that I've been sailing them—you'd have some knowledge of this same holy man that — God rot their souls for it!—these cursed Arabs have done to death here.

I've heard of him more than once in my time, and not always well spoken of; for, to tell the honest truth, he does more harm with his preachments to good Christian traders than ever he did good to black-hearted heathen dogs. Leave the bees alone, I say, and if you can get a little honey out of them quietly, so much the better; but he goes about among the beehives with a pole, stirring up trouble for himself and others too. Leave them alone to their damnation, is what I say, and get what you can from them this side of hell. But, still, he has died a holy martyr's death. God rest his soul! A martyr is a wonderful thing, you know, and it's not for the likes of us to understand what they mean by it all.

"They do say, too, that he could make gold. And, to my mind, it would have been a thing more pleasing to God and man if he had stopped at home minting money for poor folks and dealing it round, so that there'd be no need to work any more and break oneself for a morsel of bread. Yes, he was great at gold-making and at the books too. They tell me he was called the Illuminated Doctor. But I know him still as plain Lully. I used to hear of him from my father, plain Lully, and no better once than he should have been.

"My father was a shipwright in Minorca in those days—how long since? Fifty, sixty years perhaps. He knew him then; he has often told me the tale. And a raffish young dog he was. Drinking, drabbing, and dicing he outdid them all, and between the bouts wrote poems, they say, which was more than the rest could do. But he gave it all up on the sudden. Gave away his lands, quitted his former companions, and turned hermit up in the hills, living alone like a fox in his burrow, high up above the vines. And all because of a woman and his own qualmish stomach." The shipmaster paused and helped himself to a little wine. "And what did this woman do?" the girl asked curiously.

"Ah, it's not what she did but what she didn't do," the captain answered, with a leer and wink. "She kept him at his distance—all but once, all but once; and that was what put him on the road to being a martyr. But there, I'm outrunning myself. I must go more soberly.

"There was a lady of some consequence in the island—one of the Castellors, I think she was; her first name has quite slipped my memory—Anastasia, or something of the kind. Lully conceives a passion for her, and sighs and importunes her through I know not how many months and years. But her virtue stands steady as the judgment seat. Well, in the end, what happens was this. The story leaked out after it was all over, and he was turned hermit in the mountains. What happened, I say, was this. She tells him at last that he may come and see her, fixing some solitary twilight place and time, her own room at nightfall. You can guess how he washes and curls and scents himself, shaves his chin, chews anises, musks over whatever of the goat may cling about the body. Off he goes, dreaming swoons and ecstasies, foretasting inconceivable sweets.

Arrived, he finds the lady a little melancholy—her settled humour, but a man might expect a smile at such a time. Still, nothing abashed, he falls at her feet and pours out his piteous case, telling her he has sighed through seven years, not closed an eye for above a hundred nights, is forepined to a shadow, and, in a word, will perish unless she show some mercy.

She, still melancholy — her settled humour, mark you—makes answer that she is ready to yield, and that her body is entirely his. With that, she lets herself be done with as he pleases, but always sorrowfully. ' You are all mine,' says he — ' all mine '—and unlaces her gorgeret to prove

the same. But he was wrong. Another lover was already in her bosom, and his kisses had been passionate—oh, burning passionate, for he had kissed away half her left breast. From the nipple down it had all been gnawed away by a cancer.

"Bah, a man may see as bad as that any day in the street or at church-doors where beggars most congregate. I grant you that it is a nasty sight, worm-eaten flesh, but still — not enough, you will agree, to make yourself a hermit over. But there, I told you he had a queasiness of the stomach. But doubtless it was all in God's plan to make a holy martyr of him.

But for that same queasiness of his, he would still be living there, a superannuated rake; or else have died in very foul odour, instead of passing, all embalmed with sanctity, to Paradise Gate.

"I know not what happened to him between his hermit-hood and his quest for martyrdom.

I saw him first a dozen years ago, down Tunis way. They were always clapping him into prison or pulling out his beard for preaching. This time, it seems, they have made a holy martyr of him, done the business thoroughly with no bungling. Well, may he pray for our souls at the throne of God. I go in secretly to-night to steal his body. It lies on the shore there beyond the jetty. It will be a notable work, I tell you, to bring back so precious a corpse to Christendom. A most notable work. . . ."

The captain rubbed his hands.

It was after midnight, but there was still a bustle of activity on board the galley. At any moment they were expecting the arrival of the boat with the corpse of the martyr. A couch, neatly draped in black, with at its head and foot candles burning two by two, had been set out on the poop for the reception of the body. The captain called the young Spaniard and his mistress to come and see the bier.

"That's a good bit of work for you," he said, with justifiable pride. "I defy anyone to make a more decent resting-place for a martyr than that is. It could hardly have been done better on shore, with every appliance at hand. But we sailors, you know, can make anything out of nothing. A truckle-bed, a strip of tarred canvas, and four tallow dips from the cabin lanterns—there you are, a bier for a king."

He hurried away, and a little later the young man and the girl could hear him giving orders and cursing somewhere down below. The candles burned almost without a tremor in the windless air, and the reflections of the stars were long, thin tracks of fire along the utterly calm water.

"Were there but perfumed flowers and the sound of a lute," said the young Spaniard, "the night would tremble into passion of its own accord. Love should come unsought on such a night as this, among these black waters and the stars that sleep so peacefully on their bosom."

He put his arm round the girl and bent his head to kiss her. But she averted her face. He could feel a shudder run her through the body. "Not to-night," she whispered. "I think of the poor dead man. I would rather pray."

"No, no," he cried. "Forget him. Remember only that we are alive, and that we have but little time and none to waste."

He drew her into the shadow under the bulwark, and, sitting down on a coil of rope, crushed her body to his own and began kissing her with fury. She lay, at first, limp in his arms, but gradually she kindled to his passion.

A splash of oars announced the approach of the boat. The captain hallooed into the darkness: "Did you find him?"

"Yes, we have him here," came back the answer.

"Good. Bring him alongside and we'll hoist him up. We have the bier in readiness. He shall lie in state to-night."

"But he's not dead," shouted back the voice from the night.

"Not dead?" repeated the captain, thunderstruck. "But what about the bier, then?"

A thin, feeble voice came back. "Your work will not be wasted, my friend. It will be but a short time before I need your bier."

The captain, a little abashed, answered in a gentler tone, "We thought, holy father, that the heathens had done their worst and that Almighty God had already given you the martyr's crown."

By this time the boat had emerged from the darkness. In the stern sheets an old man was lying, his white hair and beard stained with blood, his Dominican's robe torn and fouled with dust. At the sight of him, the captain pulled off his cap and dropped upon his knees.

"Give us your blessing, holy father," he begged.

The old man raised his hand and wished him peace.

They lifted him on board and, at his own desire, laid him upon the bier which had been prepared for his dead body. "It would be a waste of trouble," he said, "to put me anywhere else, seeing I shall in any case be lying there so soon."

So there he lay, very still under the four candles. One might have taken him for dead already, but that his eyes, when he opened them, shone so brightly.

He dismissed from the poop everyone except the young Spaniard. "We are countrymen," he said, "and of noble blood, both of us. I would rather have you near me than anyone else."

The sailors knelt for a blessing and disappeared; soon they could be heard weighing the anchor; it was safest to be off before day. Like mourners at either side of the lighted bier crouched the Spaniard and his mistress. The body of the old man, who was not yet dead, lay quiet under the candles. The martyr was silent for some time, but at last he opened his eyes and looked at the young man and the woman.

"I too," he said, "was in love, once. In this year falls the jubilee of my last earthly passion; fifty years have run since last I longed after the flesh—fifty years since God opened my eyes to the hideous-ness of the corruption that man has brought upon himself.

"You are young, and your bodies are clean and straight, with no blotch or ulcer or leprous taint to mar their much-desired beauty; but because of your outward pride, your souls, it may be, fester inwardly the more.

"And yet God made all perfect; it is but accident and the evil of will that causes defaults. All metals should be gold, were it not that their elements willed evilly in their desire to combine. And so with men: the burning sulphur of passion, the salt of wisdom, the nimble mercurial soul should come together to make a golden being, incorruptible and rustless. But the elements mingle jarringly, not in a pure harmony of love, and gold is rare, while lead and iron and poisonous brass that leaves a taste as of remorse behind it are everywhere common.

"God opened my eyes to it before my youth had too utterly wasted itself to rottenness. It was half a hundred years ago, but I see her still, my Ambrosia, with her white, sad face and her naked body and that monstrous ill eating away at her breast.

"I have lived since then trying to amend the evil, trying to restore, as far as my poor powers would go, some measure of original perfection to the corrupted world. I have striven to give to all metals their true nature, to make true gold from the false, the unreal, the accidental metals, lead and copper and tin and iron. And I have essayed that more difficult alchemy, the transformation of men. I die now in my effort to purge away that most foul dross of misbelief from the souls of these heathen men. Have I achieved anything? I know not."

The galley was moving now, its head turned seaward. The candles shivered in the wind of its speed, casting uncertain, changing shadows upon his face. There was a long silence on the poop. The oars creaked and splashed. Sometimes a shout would come up from below, orders given by the overseer of the slaves, a curse, the sound of a blow. The old man spoke again, more weakly now, as though to himself.

"I have had eighty years of it," he said— "eighty years in the midst of this corroding sea of hatred and strife. A man has need to keep pure and unalloyed his core of gold, that little centre of perfection with which all, even in this declination of time, are born. All other metal, though it be as tough as steel, as shining-hard as brass, will melt before the devouring bitterness of life. Hatred, lust, anger—the vile passions will corrode your will of iron, the warlike pomp of your front of brass. It needs the golden perfection of pure love and pure knowledge to withstand them.

"God has willed that I should be the stone-weak, indeed, in virtue—that has touched and transformed at least a little of baser metal into the gold that is above corruption. But it is hard work—thankless work. Man has made a hell of his world, and has set up gods of pain to rule it. Goatish gods, that revel and feast on the agony of it all, poring over the tortured world, like those hateful lovers, whose lust burns darkly into cruelty.

"Fever goads us through life in a delirium of madness. Thirsting for the swamps of evil whence the fever came, thirsting for the mirages of his own delirium, man rushes headlong he knows not whither. And all the time a devouring cancer gnaws at his entrails. It will kill him in the end, when even the ghastly inspiration of fever will not be enough to whip him on. He will lie there, cumbering the earth, a heap of rottenness and pain, until at last the cleansing fire comes to sweep the horror away.

"Fever and cancer; acids that burn and corrode. ... I have had eighty years of it. Thank God, it is the end.'"

It was already dawn; the candles were hardly visible now in the light, faded to nothing, like souls in prosperity. In a little while the old man was asleep.

The captain tiptoed up on to the poop and drew the young Spaniard aside for a confidential talk.

"Do you think he will die to-day?" he asked.
The young man nodded.

"God rest his soul," said the captain piously. "But do you think it would be best to take his body to Minorca or to Genoa? At Minorca they would give much to have their own patron martyr. At the same time it would add

to the glory of Genoa to possess so holy a relic, though he is in no way connected with the place. It's there is my difficulty. Suppose, you see, that my people of Genoa did not want the body, he being from Minorca and not one of them. I should look a fool then, bringing it in in state. Oh, it's hard, it's hard. There's so much to think about. I am not sure but what I hadn't better put in at Minorca first. What do you think?" The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders. "I have no advice to offer." "Lord," said the captain as he bustled away, "life is a tangled knot to unravel."

The End