



The Death of Baldassare Silvande, Viscount of Sylvania, Marcel Proust

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

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

“Don’t cry like that, Master Alexis. Monsieur the Viscount of Sylvania may be giving you a horse.”

“A big horse, Beppo, or a pony?”

“Perhaps a big horse, like Monsieur Cardenio’s. But please don’t cry like that . . . on your thirteenth birthday of all days!”

The hope of getting a horse and the reminder that he was thirteen made Alexis’s eyes light up through his tears. Yet he was not consoled since he had to go and visit his uncle, Baldassare Silvande, Viscount of Sylvania. Granted, ever since he had heard that his uncle’s disease was incurable, Alexis had been to see him several times. But meanwhile everything had changed.

Baldassare was now aware of the full scope of his disease and he knew he had at most three years to live. Without, incidentally, grasping why the anguish had not killed his uncle, the certainty had not driven him insane, Alexis felt incapable of enduring the pain of seeing him.

Convinced that his uncle would be talking to him about his imminent end, Alexis did not think he had the strength not only to console him, but also to choke back his own sobs. He had always adored his uncle, the grandest, handsomest, youngest, liveliest, gentlest of his relatives. He loved his gray eyes, his blond moustache, his lap—a deep and sweet place of delight and refuge when Alexis had been younger, a place that had seemed as unassailable as a citadel, as enjoyable as the wooden horses of a merry-go-round, and more inviolable than a temple.

Alexis, who highly disapproved of his father's severe and somber wardrobe and dreamed about a future in which, always on horseback, he would be as elegant as a lady and as splendid as a king, recognized Baldassare as what he, the nephew, considered the most sublime epitome of a man. He knew that his uncle was handsome, that he, Alexis, resembled him; he also knew that his uncle was intelligent, generous, and as powerful as a bishop or a general.

Truth to tell, his parents' criticism had taught Alexis that the viscount had his faults. He even remembered his uncle's violent anger the day his cousin Jean Galeas had made fun of him; his blazing eyes had hinted at the joys of his vanity when the Duke of Parma had offered him his sister's hand (trying to disguise his pleasure, the viscount had clenched his teeth in a habitual grimace that Alexis despised); and the boy recalled his uncle's scornful tone when talking to Lucretia, who had openly stated that she did not care for his music.

Often Alexis's parents would allude to other things that his uncle had done and that the boy did not understand, though he heard them being sharply condemned.

But all of Baldassare's faults, his commonplace grimace, had undoubtedly disappeared. When he had learned he might be dead in two years, how indifferent he must have become to the mockeries of Jean Galeas, to his friendship with the Duke of Parma, and to his own music. Alexis pictured his uncle as still handsome, but solemn and even more perfect than he had been before. Yes, solemn, and already not completely of this world. Hence, a little disquiet and terror mingled with the boy's despair.

The horses had been harnessed long ago, it was time to leave; the boy stepped into the carriage, then climbed down again in order to ask his tutor for some final advice. When Alexis spoke, his face turned very crimson:

"Monsieur Legrand, is it better for my uncle to believe or not believe that I know that he knows that he's dying?"

"He must not believe it, Alexis!"

"But what if he brings it up?"

"He won't bring it up."

"He won't bring it up?" said Alexis, astonished, for that was the only alternative he had not foreseen: whenever he imagined his visit with his uncle, he could hear him talking about death with the gentleness of a priest.

"But what if he does bring it up after all?"

"You'll tell him he's mistaken."

"And what if I cry?"

"You've cried too much this morning, you won't cry in his home."

"I won't cry!" Alexis exclaimed in despair. "But he'll think that I don't care, that I don't love him . . . my dear, sweet uncle!"

And he burst into tears. His mother, losing patience, came looking for him; they left.

After handing his little overcoat to a servant who stood in the vestibule, wearing a green and white livery with the Sylvanian arms, Alexis momentarily halted with his mother and listened to a violin melody coming from an adjacent room.

Then the visitors were ushered into a huge, round, glass-enclosed atrium, where the viscount spent much of his time. Upon entering, you faced the ocean, and upon turning your head, you saw lawns, pastures, and woods; at the other end of the room there were two cats, plus roses, poppies, and numerous musical instruments. The guests waited for an instant.

Alexis flung himself on his mother; she thought he wanted to kiss her, but, pressing his lips against her ear, he whispered:

"How old is my uncle?"

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

Alexis wanted to ask: "Do you think he'll ever reach thirty-six?", but he did not dare.

A door opened, Alexis trembled, a domestic said: "The viscount is coming shortly."

Soon the domestic returned, with two peacocks and a kid, which the viscount took along everywhere. Then, more steps were heard, and the door opened again.

"It's nothing," Alexis thought to himself, his heart beating whenever he heard noise. "It's probably a servant, yes, quite probably a servant." But at the same time he heard a soft voice: "Bonjour, my little Alexis, I wish you a happy birthday."

His uncle, kissing the boy, frightened him. He must have sensed it, for, paying him no further heed in order to give him time to recover, the viscount started brightly chatting with Alexis's mother, his sister-in-law, who, ever since his mother's death, was the person he loved most in the world.

Now, Alexis, reassured, felt nothing but immense tenderness for this still charming young man, who was a wee bit paler and so heroic as to feign gaiety in these tragic minutes. The boy wanted to throw his arms around him but did not dare, afraid he might sap his uncle's strength and make him lose his self-control.

More than anything else the viscount's sad, sweet gaze made the boy feel like crying. Alexis knew that those eyes had always been sad and, even in the happiest moments, they seemed to implore a consolation for sufferings that he did not appear to experience.

But at this moment Alexis believed that his uncle's sadness, courageously banished from his conversation, had taken refuge in his eyes, which, along with his sunken cheeks, were the only sincere things about his entire person.

"I know you'd like to drive a carriage and pair, my little Alexis," said Baldassare, "you'll get one horse tomorrow. Next year I'll complete the

pair and in two years I'll give you the carriage. But this year perhaps you'll learn how to ride a horse; we'll try when I come back. You see, I'm definitely leaving tomorrow," he added, "but not for long. I'll be back in less than a month, and we'll go to the matinee, you know, the comedy I promised I'd take you to."

Alexis knew that his uncle was going to visit a friend for several weeks; he also knew that his uncle was still allowed to go to the theater; but Alexis was thoroughly imbued with the idea of death, which had deeply upset him prior to his coming here, and so his uncle's words gave him a deep and painful shock.

"I won't go," Alexis thought to himself. "He'll suffer awfully when he hears the buffoonery of the actors and the laughter of the audience."

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

"Oh, you found it lovely?" Baldassare exclaimed vividly and joyfully.

"It's the love song I told you about."

"Is he play-acting?" Alexis wondered to himself. "How can the success of his music still bring him any pleasure?"

At that moment the viscount's face took on an expression of deep pain; his cheeks paled, he frowned, his lips puckered, his eyes filled with tears.

"My God!" Alexis cried out mentally. "His play-acting's too much for him. My poor uncle! But why is he so scared of hurting us? Why is he forcing himself so hard?"

However, the pains of general paralysis, which at times squeezed Baldassare like an iron corset, the torture often leaving marks on his body and, despite all his efforts, making his face cramp up, had now dissipated.

After wiping his eyes he resumed chatting in a good mood.

"Am I mistaken," Alexis's mother tactlessly asked, "or has the Duke of Parma been less friendly to you for some time now?"

“The Duke of Parma!” Baldassare furiously snapped. “The Duke of Parma less friendly! Are you joking, my dear? He wrote me this very morning, offering to put his Illyrian castle at my disposal if mountain air could do me any good.”

He jumped up, re-triggering his dreadful pain, which made him pause for a moment; no sooner was the pain gone than he called to his servant:

“Bring me the letter that’s by my bed.”

And he then read in a lively voice:

“ ‘My dear Baldassare, how bored I am without you, etc., etc.’ ”

As the prince’s amiability unfolded in the letter, Baldassare’s features softened and they shone with happy confidence. All at once, probably to cloak a joy that did not strike him as very sublime, he clenched his teeth and made the pretty little grimace that Alexis had thought forever banished from that face bearing the calm of death.

With this little grimace crinkling Baldassare’s lips as it normally did, the scales dropped from Alexis’s eyes; ever since he had been with his uncle, he had believed, had wished he were viewing a dying man’s face forever detached from humdrum realities and containing only a flickering smile that was heroically constrained, sadly tender, celestial and wistful.

Now the boy no longer doubted that when teasing Baldassare, Jean Galeas would have infuriated him as before, nor did Alexis doubt that the sick man’s gaiety, his desire to go to the theater were neither deceitful nor courageous, and that, arriving so close to death, Baldassare would keep thinking only of life.

Upon their coming home, it vividly dawned on Alexis that he too would die someday and that while he had far more time than his uncle, still Baldassare’s old gardener, Rocco, and the viscount’s cousin, the Duchess of Alériouvres, would certainly not outlive him by much. Yet, though rich enough to retire, Rocco continued working nonstop in

order to earn more money and to obtain a prize for his roses. The duchess, albeit seventy, carefully dyed her hair and paid for newspaper articles that celebrated her youthful gait, her elegant receptions, and the refinements of her table and her mind.

These examples, which did not diminish Alexis's amazement at his uncle's attitude, inspired a similar astonishment that, growing by degrees, expanded into an immense stupefaction at the universal odiousness of those existences—not excluding his—that move backward toward death while staring at life.

Determined not to imitate so shocking an aberration, Alexis, emulating the ancient prophets whose glory he had been taught about, decided to withdraw into the desert with some of his little friends, and he informed his parents of his plans.

Fortunately, life, which was more powerful than their mockery and whose sweet and strengthening milk he had not fully drained, held out its breast to dissuade him. And he resumed drinking with a joyous voracity, his rich and credulous imagination listening naïvely to the grievances of that ravenousness and making wonderful amends for its blighted hopes.

My flesh is sad, alas! . . .

—STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

The day after Alexis's visit, the Viscount of Sylvania left to spend three or four weeks at the nearby castle, where the presence of numerous guests could take his mind off the sorrow that followed many of his attacks.

Soon all his pleasures there were concentrated in the company of a young woman who doubled his pleasures by sharing them. While believing that he could sense she loved him, he was somewhat reserved toward her: he knew that she was absolutely pure and that, moreover, she was looking forward to her husband's arrival; besides, Baldassare was not sure he really loved her and he vaguely felt how

sinful it would be to lead her astray. Subsequently he could never recall at what point the nature of their relationship had changed. But now, as if by some tacit agreement that he could no longer pinpoint, he kissed her wrists and put his arm around her neck.

They seemed so happy that one evening he went further: he began by kissing her; next he caressed her on and on and then he kissed her eyes, her cheek, her lip, her throat, the sides of her nose. The young woman's smiling lips met his caresses halfway, and her eyes shone in their depths like pools warmed by the sun. Meanwhile Baldassare's caresses had gotten bolder; at a certain moment he looked at her: he was struck by her pallor, by the infinite despair emanating from her lifeless forehead, from her weary, grieving eyes, which wept with gazes sadder than tears, like the torture suffered during a crucifixion or after the irrevocable loss of an adored person.

Baldassare peered at her for an instant; and then, with a supreme effort, she looked at him, raising her entreating eyes which begged for mercy at the same time that her avid mouth, with an unconscious and convulsive movement, asked for more kisses.

Overpowered again by the pleasure that hovered around them in the fragrance of their kisses and the memory of their caresses, the two of them pounced on each other, closing their eyes, those cruel eyes that showed them the distress of their souls; they did not want to see that distress, and he, especially, closed his eyes with all his strength, like a remorseful executioner who senses that his arm would tremble the instant it struck if, rather than imagine his victim provoking his rage and forcing him to satisfy it, he could look him in the face and feel his pain for a moment.

The night had come, and she was still in his room, her eyes blank and tearless. Without saying a word, she left, kissing his hand with passionate sadness.

He, however, could not sleep, and if he dozed off for a moment, he shuddered when feeling upon himself the desperate and entreating

eyes of the gentle victim. Suddenly he pictured her as she must be now: sleepless, too, and feeling so alone. He dressed and walked softly to her room, not daring to make a sound for fear of awakening her if she slept, yet not daring to return to his room, where the sky and the earth and his soul were suffocating him under their weight.

He stayed there, at her threshold, believing at every moment that he could not hold back for another instant and that he was about to go in. But then he was terrified at the thought of disturbing her sweet oblivion, the sweet and even breathing that he could perceive; he was terrified at the thought of cruelly delivering her to remorse and despair instead of letting her find a moment's peace beyond their clutches; he stayed there at the threshold, either sitting or kneeling or lying. In the morning, Baldassare, chilled but calm, went back to his room, slept for a long time, and woke up with a deep sense of well-being.

They strained their ingenuity to ease one another's consciences; they grew accustomed to remorse, which diminished, to pleasure, which also grew less intense; and when he returned to Sylvania, he, like her, had only a pleasant and slightly cool memory of those cruel and blazing minutes.

His youth is roaring inside him, he does not hear.
—MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

When Alexis, on his fourteenth birthday, went to see his uncle Baldassare, he did not, although anticipating them, fall prey to the violent emotions of the previous year. In developing his strength, the incessant rides on the horse his uncle had given him had lulled the boy's jangled nerves and aroused in him that constant spirit of good health, a sensation accompanying youth as a dim inkling of the depth of its resources and the power of its joyfulness.

Under the breeze stirred up by his gallop, he felt his chest swelling like a sail, his body burning like a winter fire, and his forehead as cool as the fleeing foliage that wreathed him when he charged by; and then, upon returning home, he tautened his body under cold water or relaxed it for

long periods of savory digestion; whereby all these experiences augmented his life forces, which, after being the tumultuous pride of Baldassare, had abandoned him forever, to gladden younger souls that they would someday desert in turn.

Nothing in Alexis could now falter because of his uncle's feebleness, could die because of his uncle's imminent death. The joyful humming of the nephew's blood in his veins and of his desires in his mind drowned out the sick man's exhausted complaints.

Alexis had entered that ardent period in which the body labors so robustly at raising its palaces between the flesh and the soul that the soul quickly seems to have vanished, until the day when illness or sorrow has slowly undermined the barriers and transcended the painful fissure, allowing the soul to reappear. Alexis was now accustomed to his uncle's fatal disease as we are to all things that last around us; and because he had once made his nephew cry as the dead make us cry, the boy, even though his uncle was still alive, treated him like a dead man: he had begun to forget him.

When his uncle said to him that day, "My little Alexis, I'm giving you the carriage along with the second horse," the boy grasped what his uncle was thinking: "Otherwise you may never get the carriage"; and Alexis knew that it was an extremely sad thought. But he did not feel it was sad, for he no longer had room for profound sadness.

Several days later, the boy, while reading, was struck by the description of a villain who was unmoved by the most poignant affection of a dying man who adored him.

That night, the fear of being the villain, in whom he thought he saw his own portrait, kept him from falling asleep. The next day, however, he had such a wonderful horseback ride, worked so well, and felt, incidentally, so much affection for his living relatives that he went back to enjoying himself without scruples and sleeping without remorse.

Meanwhile the Viscount of Sylvania, who could no longer walk, now seldom left his castle. His friends and his family were with him all day, and he could own up to the most blameworthy folly, the most absurd extravagance, state the most flagrant paradox, or imply the most shocking fault without his kinsmen reproaching him or his friends joking or disagreeing with him.

It was as if they had tacitly absolved him of any responsibility for his deeds and words. Above all they seemed to be trying to keep him from hearing the last sounds, to muffle with sweetness, if not drown out with tenderness, the final creakings of his body, from which life was ebbing.

He spent long and charming hours reclining and having a tête-à-tête with himself, the only guest he had neglected to ask to supper in his lifetime. He tried to adorn his suffering body, to lean in resignation on the windowsill, gazing at the sea, a melancholy joy. With ardent sadness he contemplated the scene of his death for a long time, endlessly revising it like a work of art and surrounding it with images of this world, images that still imbued his thoughts, but that, already slipping away from him in his gradual departure, became vague and beautiful.

His imagination already sketched his farewell to Duchess Oliviane, his great platonic friend, whose salon he had ruled even though it brought together all the grandest noblemen, the most glorious artists, and the finest minds in Europe. He felt he could already read the account of his final conversation with the duchess:

“. . . The sun was down, and the sea, glimpsed through the apple trees, was mauve.

As airy as pale, faded wreaths and as persistent as regrets, blue and rosy cloudlets drifted along the horizon. A melancholy row of poplars sank into the shadows, their resigned tops remaining in a churchly rose; the final rays, tinting the branches without touching the trunks, attached garlands of light to these balustrades of darkness. The breeze blended the three scents of ocean, wet leaves, and milk. Never had the

Sylvanian countryside softened the evening melancholy more voluptuously.

“ ‘I loved you very much, but I gave you so little, my poor friend,’ she said.

“ ‘What are you talking about, Oliviane? What do you mean you gave me so little? You gave all the more the less I asked of you, and actually a lot more than if our senses had played any part in our affection.

I worshiped you and, as supernatural as a madonna and as gentle as a wet nurse, you cradled me. I loved you with an affection whose keen sagacity was never marred by any hope for carnal pleasure. What an incomparable friendship you gave me in exchange, what an exquisite tea, a conversation that was adorned in a natural way, and how many bunches of fresh roses! You alone, with your maternal and expressive hands, knew how to cool my feverish forehead, drip honey between my parched lips, and place noble images in my life.

“ ‘My dear friend, give me your hands and let me kiss them.’ ”

With all his senses and all his heart he still loved Pia, the little Syracusan princess, who was smitten with a furious and invincible love for Castruccio, and it was her indifference to Baldassare that occasionally reminded him of a crueller reality which, however, he struggled to forget. Until the last few days, he had attended some festivities, where, sauntering with her on his arm, he thought he could humiliate his rival; but even when strolling at her side, the viscount sensed that her deep eyes were distracted by another love, which she tried to conceal only out of pity for the sick man. And now even that was beyond him.

The movements of his legs had become so unhinged that he could no longer go out. However, she came by frequently and, as if joining the others in their vast conspiracy of gentleness, she spoke to him incessantly with an ingenious tenderness that was never again belied, as it had been in the past, by the cry of her indifference or the avowal of her anger. And from her more than from anyone else, he felt the

appeasement created by that gentleness spreading over him and delighting him.

But then one day, as Baldassare was rising from his chair to go to the dining table, his astonished domestic saw him walking much better. He sent for the physician, who put off his diagnosis. The next day Baldassare walked normally. A week later, he was allowed to go out. His friends and his relatives felt an immense hope. The doctor believed that a simple and curable nervous disease might have at first shown the symptoms of general paralysis, which were now indeed starting to disappear. He presented his speculations to Baldassare as a certainty: "You are saved!"

The condemned man expressed a deep-felt joy upon learning of his reprieve. But after an interval of great improvement, a sharp anxiety began to pierce his joy, which had already been weakened by the brief habituation. He was sheltered from the inclemencies of life in that propitious atmosphere of encompassing gentleness, of forced rest and free meditation, and the desire for death began obscurely germinating inside him. He was far from suspecting it, and he felt only a dim anxiety at the thought of starting all over, enduring the blows to which he was no longer accustomed, and losing the affection that surrounded him.

He also confusedly felt that it was wrong to seek forgetfulness in pleasure or action now that he had gotten to know himself, the brotherly stranger who, while watching the boats plowing the sea, had conversed with him for hours on end, so far and so near: in himself. As if now feeling the awakening of a new and unfamiliar love of native soil, like a young man who is ignorant of the location of his original homeland, he yearned for death, whereas he had initially felt he was going into eternal exile.

He voiced an idea, and Jean Galeas, who knew that Baldassare was cured, disagreed violently and poked fun at him. His sister-in-law, who had been visiting him every morning and every evening for two months, had not shown up in two days. This was too much! He had long

since grown unused to the burden of life and he did not want to shoulder it again. For life had not recaptured him with its charms.

His strength was restored and, with it, all his desires to live; he went out, began living again, and died a second time for himself. At the end of a month the symptoms of general paralysis recurred. Little by little, as in the past, walking became difficult, impossible, gradually enough for him to adjust to his return to death and to have time to look the other way.

His relapse did not even have the quality of the first attack, at the end of which he had started to withdraw from life, not in order to see it in its reality but to view it like a painting. Now, on the contrary, he grew more and more egotistical, irascible, desperately missing the pleasures he could no longer enjoy.

His sister-in-law, whom he loved tenderly, was the only person to sweeten his approaching end, for she came by several times a day with Alexis.

One afternoon, when she was en route to see the viscount, and her carriage had almost arrived, the horses bolted; she was violently flung to the ground, then trampled by a horseman who was galloping past; unconscious, with a fractured skull, she was carried into Baldassare's home.

The coachman, who was unscathed, promptly announced the accident to the viscount, who turned livid. He clenched his teeth, his blazing eyes bulged out of their sockets, and in a dreadful fit of anger he railed and ranted against the coachman, on and on; but apparently his violent outburst was meant to smother a painful cry for help, which could be softly heard during the pauses. It was as if an invalid were moaning next to the furious viscount. Soon, these moans, initially faint, drowned out his shrieks of rage, and the sobbing man collapsed into a chair.

Next he wanted to wash his face so that his sister-in-law would not be upset by the traces of his grief. The domestic sadly shook his head; the

injured woman had not regained consciousness. The viscount spent two desperate days and nights at his sister-in-law's bedside.

She might die at any moment. The second night, the doctor attempted a hazardous operation. By the third morning her fever had abated, and the patient smiled at Baldassare, who, unable to restrain his tears, wept and wept for joy. When death had inched toward him bit by bit, he had refused to face it; now he suddenly found himself in its presence. Death had terrified him by threatening his most prized possession; the viscount had pleaded with death, had moved it to mercy.

He felt strong and free, proud to see that his own life was not as precious to him as his sister-in-law's, and that he felt as much scorn for his own life as pity for hers. He now looked death in the face and no longer beheld the scenes that would surround his death. He wanted to remain like that until the end, no longer prey to his lies, which, by trying to bring him a beautiful and wonderful agony, would have added the last straw to his profanations by soiling the mysteries of his death just as it had concealed from him the mysteries of his life.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

—SHAKESPEARE: MACBETH

Baldassare's emotions and fatigue during his sister-in-law's illness had stepped up the advance of his own disease. He had just been told by his confessor that he had only one month left; it was ten A.M., the rain was coming down in torrents. A carriage halted in front of the castle. It was

Duchess Oliviane. Earlier, when harmoniously adorning the scenes of his death, he had told himself:

“It will be on a clear evening. The sun will be down, and the sea, glimpsed through the apple trees, will be mauve. As airy as pale and faded wreaths and as persistent as regrets, blue and rosy cloudlets will drift along the horizon. . . .”

It was at ten A.M., in a downpour, under a foul and low-lying sky, that Duchess Oliviane arrived; exhausted by his illness, fully absorbed in higher interests, and no longer feeling the grace of things that he had once prized as the charm, the value, and the refined glory of life, Baldassare had his servant tell the duchess that he was too weak. She insisted, but he would not receive her.

He was not even acting out of necessity: she meant nothing to him anymore. Death had rapidly broken the bonds whose enslavement he had been dreading for several weeks. When he tried to think of Oliviane, nothing presented itself to his mind’s eye: the eyes of his imagination and of his vanity had closed.

Yet roughly a week before his death, his furious jealousy was aroused by the announcement that the Duchess of Bohemia was giving a ball, at which Pia was to lead the cotillion with Castruccio, who was leaving for Denmark the next day. The viscount demanded to see Pia; his sister-in-law was reluctant to summon her; he believed that they were preventing him from seeing her, that they were persecuting him; he lost his temper, so, to avoid tormenting him, they sent for her immediately.

By the time she arrived, he was perfectly calm, but profoundly sad. He drew her close to his bed and instantly spoke about the ball being hosted by the Duchess of Bohemia. He said:

“We’re not related, so you won’t wear mourning for me, but I have to ask you one favor: Do not go to the ball, promise me you won’t.”

They locked gazes, showing their souls on the edge of their pupils, their melancholy and passionate souls, which death was unable to unite.

He understood her hesitation; his lips twisting in pain, he gently murmured:

“Oh, don’t promise me, after all! Don’t break a promise made to a dying man. If you’re not certain of yourself, don’t promise me anything.”

“I can’t promise you that; I haven’t seen him in two months and I may never see him again; if I miss the ball, I’ll be inconsolable for all eternity.”

“You’re right, since you love him, and since death may come. . . . And since you’re still alive with all your strength. . . . But you can do a small something for me; to throw people off the scent, you’d be obliged to spend a bit of time with me at the ball; subtract that time from your evening. Invite my soul to remember a few moments with you, think of me a little.”

“I can scarcely promise you even that much, the ball will be so brief. Even if I don’t leave, I’ll barely have time to see him. But I’ll give you a moment every day after that.”

“You won’t manage, you’ll forget me; but if after a year, alas, more perhaps, a sad text, a death, or a rainy evening reminds you of me, you can offer me some altruism! I will never, never be able see you again . . . except in my soul, and this would require that we think about each other simultaneously.

I’ll think about you forever so that my soul remains open to you endlessly in case you feel like entering it. But the visitor will keep me waiting for a long time! The November rains will have rotted the flowers on my grave, June will have burned them, and my soul will always be weeping impatiently.

Ah! I hope that someday the sight of a keepsake, the recurrence of a birthday, the bent of your thoughts will guide your memory within the circle of my tenderness. It will then be as if I’ve heard you, perceived you, a magic spell will cover everything with flowers for your arrival.

Think about the dead man. But, alas! Can I hope that death and your gravity will accomplish what life with its ardors, and our tears, and our merry times, and our lips were unable to achieve?"

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

—SHAKESPEARE: HAMLET

Meanwhile a violent fever accompanied by delirium never left the viscount; his bed had been moved to the vast rotunda where Alexis had seen him on his thirteenth birthday, seen him still so joyful: here the sick man could watch the sea, the pier, and, on the other side, the pastures and the woods. Now and then, he began to speak; but his words showed no traces of the thoughts from on high which, during the past few weeks, had purified him with their visits.

Savagely cursing an invisible person who was teasing him, he kept repeating that he was the premier musician of the century and the most illustrious aristocrat in the universe. Then, suddenly calm, he told his coachmen to drive him to some low den, to have the horses saddled for the hunt.

He asked for stationery in order to invite all the European sovereigns to a dinner celebrating his marriage to the sister of the Duke of Parma; horrified at being unable to pay a gambling debt, he picked up the paper knife next to his bed and aimed it like a gun.

He dispatched messengers to find out whether the policeman he had thrashed last night was dead, and he laughingly muttered obscenities to someone whose hand he thought he was holding. Those exterminating angels known as Will and Thought were no longer present to drive the evil spirits of his senses and the vile emanations of his memory back into the darkness.

Three days later, around five o'clock, he woke up as if from a bad dream for which the dreamer is responsible yet which he barely remembers. He asked whether any friends or relatives had been here during the hours when he had presented an image of only his lowliest, most archaic, and most extinct part; and he told his servants that if he became delirious, they should have his visitors leave instantly and they should not readmit them until he regained consciousness.

He raised his eyes, surveyed the room, and smiled at his black cat, who, perched on a Chinese vase, was playing with a chrysanthemum and inhaling its fragrance with a mime-like gesture. He sent everyone away and conversed at length with the priest who was keeping watch over him.

Yet he refused to take communion and asked the physician to say that the patient's stomach was in no condition to tolerate a host. An hour later he had the servant bring in his sister-in-law and Jean Galeas. He said:

"I'm resigned, I'm happy to die and to come before God."

The air was so mild that they opened the windows facing the ocean but not seeing it, and because the wind blowing from the opposite direction was too brisk, they did not open the windows giving upon the pastures and the woods.

Baldassare had them drag his bed near the open windows. A boat was just nosing out to sea, guided by sailors towing the lines on the pier. A handsome cabin boy of about fifteen was leaning over the bow; each billow seemed about to knock him into the water, but he stood firm on his solid legs. With a burning pipe between his wind-salted lips, he spread his net to haul in fish.

And the same wind that bellied the sail blew into the rotunda, cooling Baldassare's cheeks and making a piece of paper flutter through the room. He turned his head to avoid seeing the happy tableau of pleasures that he had passionately loved and that he would never enjoy again. He eyed the harbor: a three-master was setting sail.

“It’s the ship that’s bound for the Indies,” said Jean Galeas.

Baldassare was unable to distinguish the people waving their handkerchiefs on the pier, but he sensed their thirst for the unknown, a thirst that was parching their eyes; those people still had a great deal to experience, to get to know, to feel. The anchor was weighed, shouts arose, the ship cut across the dark sea, toward the west, where, in a golden mist, the light blended the skiffs with the clouds, murmuring hazy and irresistible promises to the voyagers.

Baldassare had the servants shut the windows on this side of the rotunda and open the ones facing the pastures and the woods. He gazed at the fields, but he could still hear the farewells shouted from the three-master and he could see the cabin boy holding his pipe between his teeth and spreading his nets.

Baldassare’s hand stirred feverishly. All at once he heard a faint, silvery tinkle as deep and indistinct as the beating of a heart. It was the bells pealing in an extremely distant village, a sound that, thanks to the limpid evening air and the favorable breeze, had traveled across many miles of plains and rivers to be picked up by his infallible ear.

It was both a current and ancient voice; now he heard his heart beating to the harmonious flight of the bells, the sound pausing the moment they seemed to inhale it, then exhaling with them in a long and feeble breath. Throughout his life, upon hearing faraway bells, he had spontaneously remembered their sweetness in the evening air when, as a little boy, he had crossed the fields on his way home to the castle.

At that instant the physician beckoned everyone over, saying: “It’s the end!”

Baldassare was resting, his eyes closed, and his heart was listening to the bells, which his ear, paralyzed by imminent death, could not catch. He saw his mother kissing him upon his return, then putting him to bed at night, rubbing his feet to warm them, remaining with him if he could

not fall asleep; he recalled his Robinson Crusoe and the evenings in the garden when his sister would sing; he recalled the words of his tutor, who predicted that someday he would be a great musician, and he recalled his mother's thrilled reaction, which she tried but failed to conceal.

Now there was no time left to realize the passionate expectations of his mother and his sister, whom he had so cruelly disappointed. He saw the large linden tree under which he had gotten engaged and he saw the day on which his engagement had been broken, and only his mother had managed to console him. He believed he was kissing his old nanny and holding his first violin.

He saw all these things in a luminous remoteness as sweet and sad as the one that the windows facing the fields were watching but not seeing.

He saw all these things, and yet not even two seconds had passed since the physician had listened to his heart and said:
"It's the end!"

The physician stood up, saying:
"It's over!"

Alexis, his mother, and Jean Galeas knelt down together with the Duke of Parma, who had just arrived. The servants were weeping in the open doorway.

The end