

*Pleasures and Days*

Marcel Proust

Translated by Andrew Brown

Foreword by A.N. Wilson



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## Foreword

Marcel Proust had completed the stories, poems and fragments in this volume before he was twenty-two years old. He wrote them in the intervals of being a bored and unwilling law student who would rather read Ruskin than jurisprudence, and who, rather than revise for exams, would prefer to cultivate artists and *grandes dames*. Indifferent to his legal studies, he pursued his social life with the dedication of an academic anthropologist or natural historian. Just as the youthful Darwin had painstakingly observed the minute gradations of finches' beaks in the Galápagos Islands – an observation which would eventually turn into the most earth-changing scientific theory ever propounded – so the young Proust, noting how a certain social species might turn up now in a great salon, now in an artist's studio, and again in a low dive – had begun the process of accumulating knowledge which would produce the greatest masterpiece of French fiction: *In Search of Lost Time*.

What will immediately strike any reader of this volume of short stories is how surely, and from the first, Proust knew his theme. The death of the eponymous hero in the first story is so – what other word can one use? – Proustian. As the young nobleman lies back on the pillows, there comes to him on the evening air the sound of a church bell from a distant village, and it brings to him the involuntary recollection of those times, during childhood, when his mother came to kiss him goodnight, slipping into his bedroom before she herself retired to sleep, and how, knowing that he was restless, she would warm his feet with her hands. If not actually

the experience of the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, such a memory, at such a moment, reverberates with Proustian association. So, also, do at least two other of the story's leitmotifs, the Platonic adoration felt by the Viscount for the Duchess, which seems to foreshadow young Marcel's love for the Duchesse de Guermantes; and – much more vividly – the theme of the foreseen death, intruding itself into the trivial calendars of human appointments and diversions.

The little boy, Alexis, in this early story, is given a horse each year for his birthday. If his uncle is truly mortally ill, will he live long enough to give the youth the promised carriage to go with these horses on his sixteenth birthday? A signal comes, on Alexis's fourteenth birthday, that the uncle's death is near, since he offers him a carriage as well as a second horse. The boy knows that the man is thinking, "as otherwise you'd risk never having the carriage at all".

The question of whether the Duchess of Bohemia will or will not attend a ball after his death, or whether she will stay away as a mark of mourning and respect, looms larger in the young Viscount's mind than mortality itself. All this tragicomedy is of a piece with the man who would one day write that scene about the Duchesse de Guermantes's red shoes, which is not merely one of the high points of the novel, but also, arguably, one of the greatest scenes ever devised by any writer. In the juvenile scene, the callousness of the Duchesse is of a Firbankian brittleness: "nothing would ever console me, in all eternity", not because of her admirer's death, but "if I didn't go to that ball".

One of the recurrent themes in this volume is Proust's empathy with Van Dyck, "prince of tranquil gestures", about whom he wrote a poem. "You triumph [...] / In all the lovely things that will soon die". He sees in the seventeenth-century Court painter

the model of the type of artist he will himself become. Just as Van Dyck immortalized the generation who were defeated in the English Civil War, so Proust's Long Gallery of canvas holds in immortal imagination the transitory lives of those whose way of life – and, in many cases, actual existence – was eliminated by the First World War.

Perhaps the Van Dyck poem reflects elements of Proust's friendship with Jacques-Émile Blanche, then a young painter and a keen frequenter, like Proust himself, of the *salons* of the rich and fashionable. Blanche was a much less skilful painter than Proust was a writer, but to visit the gallery at Rouen and see his paintings of the friends he had in common with the novelist is to be visited by a frisson of recognition. If not our old friends in their rounded perfection, here are recognizable sketches for portraits which would on the canvases of the master Proust become Robert de Saint-Loup and Mme Verdurin and the Baron de Charlus.

As in the *Search*, there are recurring characters and themes throughout the volume. Presumably the callous Duchess so beloved of the Viscount in the first story is the same as the country bumpkin Violante in the second. She meets a young Englishman on the hunting field and he despises her simplicity. She discovers how ridiculously easy it is to penetrate "society" and how empty are the rewards of social success. There both is and isn't irony in Proust's use, as chapter headings, of epigrams from Thomas à Kempis. If he had followed the counsels of *The Imitation of Christ* – "Be afraid of contact with young or worldly persons. Never have any desire to appear before the great" – we should have had no *Search*. Nevertheless, when he reaches the end of his chronicle, Marcel, like a ideal monk, is confined to his cell, and contemplates the lives of the *faubourgs* with the purest *contemptus mundi*.

Purest? No. For the abiding fascination of snobbery – and Proust is Grand High Priest of snobs – is that snobs are not necessarily more trivial than the unworldly. “Your soul is indeed, in Tolstoy’s turn of phrase, a deep dark forest. But the trees in it are of a particular species – they are genealogical trees. People say you’re a vain woman? But for you the universe is not empty, but full of armorial bearings.” As Proust observes in his notes “To a Snobbish Woman”, the dedicated social climber is steeped in history. The new friends acquired by the snob come accompanied by a great gallery of their ancestors’ portraiture. In mastering the names of all the aristocrats sitting at her table, the hostess has also learnt the names of the chivalry of France, assembled on medieval battlefields. This perception will mature into one of the central reveries of Proust’s masterpiece as he gazes at the Guermantes heraldic stained glass in the Combray parish church, watching the sun stream through it onto the wedding guests and illuminate the pimple on the face of his beloved Duchesse.

Proust, as well as being a great storyteller, is also a sage. There are more wise maxims in Proust’s pages than in La Rochefoucauld, and as many wise *pensées* as in Pascal. It is remarkable that even in these early stories he had developed this faculty. “The libertine’s desire to take a virgin is still a form of the eternal homage paid by love to innocence.” Or, “Women incarnate beauty without understanding it.” (Discuss!) Or, “The abuse of alcohol and women is the very condition of their inspiration, if not of their genius.”

His critical faculties are as sharp in youth as in maturity too: witness the witty exchanges about music in ‘Bouvard and Pécuchet on Society and Music’. When one speaker points out that Saint-Saëns lacks content and Massenet form, the tennis ball is very firmly whacked back over the net: “That’s the reason why the one educates us and the other delights us, but without elevating us.”

## FOREWORD

Proust dedicated his little book to Willie Heath, a young English dandy whom he encountered in the Bois de Boulogne in the spring of 1893 and who died some months later. In what amounts to an artistic manifesto, Proust dismissed the fragments in his book as the empty froth on a life which had been agitated but which was now settled down (aged twenty-four!). He promises to wait until the day when the surface of life's water is so calm and limpid that the muses themselves can admire their reflections, and see their own smiles and dances. This promise, broadly speaking, was kept.

– A.N. Wilson

# Pleasures and Days

## Preface

Why did he ask me to present his book to curious minds? And why did I promise to take on this highly agreeable but quite unnecessary task? His book is like a young face full of rare charm and elegant grace. It is self-recommending, tells us about itself and presents itself in spite of itself.

True, it is a young book. It is young as its author is young. But it is an old book too, as old as the world. It is the spring of leaves on ancient branches, in the age-old forest. One is tempted to say that the new shoots are saddened by the long past of the woods and are wearing mourning for so many dead springs.

The grave Hesiod recited his *Works and Days* to the goatherds of Helicon.\* It is a more melancholy task to recite *Pleasures and Days* to our high society gentlemen and ladies if, as the well-known English man of state claims, life would be quite tolerable if it were not for pleasures.\* So our young friend's book has weary smiles and postures of fatigue that are deprived neither of beauty nor of nobility.

Even his sadness will be found to be pleasing and full of variety, conducted as it is and sustained by a marvellous spirit of observation, and a supple, penetrating and truly subtle intelligence. This calendar of *Pleasures and Days* marks both the hours of nature, in its harmonious depictions of the sky, the sea and the woods, and the hours of humankind in its faithful portraits and its genre paintings, with their wonderful finish.

Marcel Proust delights equally in describing the desolate splendour of the sunset and the agitated vanities of a snobbish soul. He excels in recounting the elegant sorrows and the artificial sufferings that are at least the equal in cruelty of those which nature showers on us with maternal prodigality. I must confess that I find these invented sufferings, these pains discovered by human genius, these sorrows of art, enormously interesting and valuable, and I am grateful to Marcel Proust for having studied and described a few choice examples.

He lures us into a greenhouse atmosphere and detains us there, amid wild orchids that do not draw the nourishment for their strange and unhealthy beauty from this earth. Suddenly there passes, through the heavy and languid air, a bright and shining arrow, a flash of lightning which, like the ray of the German doctor,\* can go right through bodies. At a stroke the poet has penetrated secret thoughts and hidden desires.

This is his manner, and his art. He here shows a sureness of touch surprising in such a young archer. He is not at all innocent. But he is so sincere and so authentic that he appears naive, and as such we like him. There is something in him of a depraved Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and an ingenuous Petronius.\*

What a fortunate book is his! It will go all round the town adorned and perfumed by the flowers strewn on it by Madeleine Lemaire,\* with that divine hand which scatters the roses with their dew.

— Anatole France  
Paris, 21st April 1896

## 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