

Customer Sorry? What do you want?

Shop Assistant (*nervously*) Those towels cost three thousand two hundred pesetas.

Customer (*firmly*) Yes, we'd already talked about that.

Shop Assistant But I'm sorry . . . you haven't paid for them yet . . .

Customer What do you mean I haven't paid for them! Didn't we agree they were in exchange for the handkerchiefs?

Shop Assistant But you haven't paid for the handkerchiefs either . . .

Customer Of course not! Am I taking them? . . . (*He exits in a determined fashion, leaving the Shop Assistant perplexed, scratching his head and looking at the audience.*)

Curtain.

The Audition

A Dialogue between an Aristocrat
and an Actor

by

Rodolf Sirera

translated by

John London

'What would we have to do to satisfy such demanding judges? [...] Merely distance ourselves from all that is natural and fall prey to the wildest fantasies.'

Jean Racine, First Preface to *Britannicus*

For Joan Brossa

Premiere in Catalan

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Premiere Production of the English translation

Gate Theatre, Notting Hill, London, 8 February 1988, directed by Astrid Hilne; designed by Helen Tulley.

Gabriel de Beaumont Carl Halling
Monsieur le Marquis de . . . Steven Dykes

Characters

Gabriel de Beaumont, actor
Monsieur le Marquis de . . .

The characters in this story are completely fictitious. The period in which the play is set should emphasise the impossibility of identifying them.

Paris, 1784. A private drawing-room in a rococo mansion. Furniture in keeping with the taste and style of the period. A section of the back wall forms a recess, framed by a large arch, the opening of which is covered by curtains. The remainder of the back wall is made up of a big latticed window, through which we can observe the inexorable advance of dusk. To the right and left, two closed doors. Seated in an armchair, **Gabriel de Beaumont** is waiting to see **Monsieur le Marquis de . . .** A **Servant**, unsure on his feet, is lighting the candelabra with almost ceremonial slowness.

Gabriel (*speaking loudly, after a long pause*) The Marquis must surely have forgotten I'm here . . . (*The Servant does not reply. Silence. Gabriel insists again, in an indifferent tone.*) I presume you've reminded him that I've been waiting to see him . . . (*Short pause.*) for almost an hour . . . ? (*Confronted by the Servant's refusal to speak, he pretends to be offended.*) Besides, it's not as if I'm the one who's particularly interested in this meeting . . . The Marquis himself . . . (*Stopping, unsure of himself. Then, with new-found confidence.*) Yes, he was the one . . . The Marquis wanted to meet me . . . Perhaps you didn't know? During the interval in yesterday's performance he sent me a message: 'I wish to speak for a few minutes with Monsieur Gabriel de Beaumont, actor . . .' However, my friend, an actor with my reputation is always busy . . . Take today, for example . . . I had to read several plays . . . (*We hear a clock strike six in the distance. With every stroke, Gabriel becomes more and more nervous.*) All right, that's enough! You're making me . . . nervous . . . You're like some kind of ghost, moving about for no reason! Do you think I give a damn whether you light twenty, or forty candles . . . ? As far as I'm concerned you can save yourself the bother. I'm leaving. (*Getting up.*) It's obvious that this is just a joke. The Marquis is clearly not going to see me today, and I still have a lot to do . . .

Servant (*in a neutral tone, continuing his work*) The Marquis begs you to forgive him. He will be with you in a moment.

Gabriel (*sarcastically*) God almighty! So you do have a tongue after all! For a moment, I thought you were a moving statue, not a human being!

Servant The Marquis hopes that you will have an enjoyable stay in his house, and that you will have no cause for complaint . . .

Gabriel (*hesitating*) I don't . . . especially . . . This room is very pleasant, but . . .

Servant Allow me . . . (*He sets up a small table with drinks and glasses, taken from behind one of the side doors, which turns out to be the door to a large cupboard embedded in the wall.*) The Marquis has entrusted me to tell you that you can have everything you want at your disposal.

Gabriel I don't want anything, thank you very much.

Servant (*as if he had not heard what Gabriel has just said*) I would in particular urge you to try this wine from Cyprus . . . It's a highly prized liqueur, with a rather exotic flavour . . . (*And he pours out a glass which Gabriel feels compelled to accept.*)

Gabriel Very well . . . (*He drinks it all in one gulp, wanting to finish the conversation. He restrains himself from showing how unpleasant he finds the drink.*) But tell your master that I would be even more honoured if I could be graced by his presence, as soon as possible. Is that understood?

Servant I will tell the Marquis . . . (*He does not move an inch.*)

Gabriel But if you stay here, I don't see how you can pass on my message! (*He becomes irritated again.*) Oh, for heaven's sake, do what I tell you!

Servant (*pouring him another glass*) The Marquis does not need my help to know everything that goes on inside this mansion. (*Short pause.*) Might I persuade you to have another glass of this wine, Monsieur?

Gabriel (*driily*) It's too sweet for my liking.

Servant (*in an impersonal tone*) But the Marquis is most fond of it.

Gabriel (*finally giving in, and taking the glass*) All right! But don't think you can shut me up with that kind of servility . . . (*He takes a sip and leaves the glass on the table.*) I've drunk it. Now what? (*His tone becomes harsher.*) What more do you all want with me? Why don't you go and carry out your duties?

Servant (*humbly*) Monsieur . . .

Gabriel You haven't stopped staring at me since you came in the room. Has the Marquis sent you to spy on me . . . ?

Servant (*taken aback*) Oh no, Monsieur . . . ! (*Change of tone.*) It's just that . . . (*As if hesitating.*) On stage you look taller.

Gabriel (*surprised*) Ah, that . . . (*Unconsciously becoming conceited.*) There's a simple reason for that. On stage, the audience is only given the points of reference we want to provide . . .

Servant (*softly*) And your voice . . .

Gabriel (*amused, in spite of everything*) It's stronger, more powerful . . . Is that what you mean? (*Didactically.*) That's only logical. Speaking with you, now, I don't have to worry about projecting my voice. There aren't any problems to do with distance or acoustics . . .

Servant (*stressing his interest*) You mean that, when you act, you don't behave on stage the same as you do in real life . . . ?

Gabriel (*finally won over by the conversation*) Of course not. That would be impossible . . . If I did, nobody would listen to me properly, and I wouldn't be able to convey the character's emotions . . .

Servant Please forgive my insisting, but I'm fascinated by anything to do with the theatre. You said the characters' emotions. Did you really mean that, or were you perhaps referring to your own emotions, which, during the performance . . . ?

Gabriel (*interrupting him*) No, no . . . They really are the character's emotions, but, in a way, they're mine as well. (*He sits down again, without stopping the flow of his speech.*) I mean that when you act, there comes a point at which you can't distinguish where fiction begins or ends . . .

Servant (*eagerly*) Then you really have to feel what you express on stage . . . ?

Gabriel Exactly: you express what you feel.

Servant But, on the other hand, you yourself argued just now that you have to resort to a certain kind of speech . . . the correct projection of your voice . . . That is conventional. Besides, how can you really experience the emotions of Racine's characters, for example, when Racine, and all the other great writers of the past, express themselves through verse in a way which, as far as I can see, is hardly natural and, what's more, with words which aren't even in common use? . . .

Gabriel (*amused*) You've turned out to be a proper philosopher, haven't you, just like Monsieur Diderot? (*Laughs.*) No, my friend, these disquisitions hardly suit your social class!

Servant (*undeterred*) Excuse my saying so, Monsieur, but social classes are also a convention, like many other things.

Gabriel Oh no; that's not true. Your Marquis, for example, exercises power . . . He has real, effective power . . . That power – and you probably realise this better than I do – is not exactly a social convention . . .

Servant Yes, but you can rise from poverty to power, just as you can sink from power into poverty. A social status can be reversed . . .

Gabriel (*surprised*) You must be one of the people who secretly subscribe to d'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia*! I've never heard a servant use such sophisticated language!

Servant I don't see why you should be so surprised, Monsieur . . . You have acquired a position for yourself in society, but you're not an aristocrat . . . You've got where you are through your effort alone, and that's an admirable achievement . . .

Gabriel (*bitterly*) A position in society . . . (*Restraining his sudden unease.*)

Servant (*concerned, wishing to be of service*) Monsieur . . .

Gabriel That sweet wine can't have agreed with me. I shouldn't have drunk it . . . It's always the same . . . (*Change of tone.*) My position in society, you were saying? My position in society is always rather precarious. It depends on my art, and art depends on the tastes of a period . . . Anyway, my background and my profession always rise up against me like a brick wall or a kind of watchdog telling me: you're entertained by kings and eat at their tables, but you'll never reach their level. You'll always be an actor.

Servant (*deeply moved*) An actor . . . The most despised and yet most envied profession in the world. Everybody feels the need to act once in a while . . . I mean, in real life, offstage . . . (*After a short pause, as if deciding to make a great confession.*) I myself . . .

Gabriel (*not realising the Servant's growing excitement*) I'm not surprised. Servants' work always involves lying. If you're a servant, you also have to act, and play a role . . .

Servant (*interrupting him, quickly*) No, I didn't mean that just now . . . It was really something much simpler. You see, I've been acting for you. I've created a character . . . and you, with all your experience, haven't been able to spot it. So my acting has been a success. And that's because I've behaved in a completely natural way.

Gabriel (*confused*) What do you mean? I don't understand . . .

Servant It's simple: I'm not the Marquis's servant . . .
(*Slowly, without looking at Gabriel.*) I am the Marquis . . . In person . . .

Gabriel (*after a pause. Unsure of himself, trying to show that he has not fallen for a joke which, moreover, he believes to be in rather dubious taste*) Don't be ridiculous . . . That's impossible . . .

Servant (*continuing in the humble, discreet tone he has maintained from the beginning*) Why is it impossible? How many times in your life have you seen the Marquis? In other words, how many times in your life have you seen me? Three or four . . . five at most; always some distance away, wearing his wig and his ceremonial robes . . . No . . . Think about it: it's very easy . . . A discreetly lit room, a different hairstyle, a plain jacket, and, above all, by carefully imitating a servant's way of talking and his mannerisms . . . That's all you need . . . (*He smiles.*) And in my innocence, I thought I wouldn't be able to keep up the fiction for a second, in front of a professional like you! Oh, did you really not realise? My conversation, what I said - not the way I said it - the . . . the depth of my arguments, my preoccupations . . . All that should have attracted your attention, all that gave me away . . . But no . . . You allowed yourself to be convinced by appearances . . . I was dressed as a servant, so I had to be a servant . . . But clothing is always a disguise.

Gabriel (*becoming more and more violent*) With or without your disguise, you're not going to trick me, if that was what you had in mind! I know your sort only too well . . . ! (*Energetically.*) I'll call your master, and we'll all get an explanation for this.

Servant (*very calmly and softly*) My friend, you shouldn't need any proof . . . You would act more wisely by believing what I tell you . . .

Gabriel (*now standing, having frantically pulled the rope for the Servant's bell, as the Servant was speaking*) Be quiet!

Servant (*after a long pause*) You see? Nobody's going to answer. Do you still think I'm lying?

Gabriel (*stubbornly ringing the bell again and again; the echoes seem to disappear in distant rooms*) I refuse to believe any of it. If nobody'll listen to me, I'll go myself! (*Goes to one of the side doors, but, in the heat of the moment, gets the wrong one, and opens the door to the cupboard from which the Servant had previously taken the drinks. He shuts it again angrily, and crosses the room to the other door.*)

Servant That is a clothes cupboard (*He smiles.*), and the other door, which leads to the hall, is locked . . .

Gabriel (*after checking to see if he is telling the truth, Gabriel comes face to face with the Servant*) Locked?

Servant From the outside. Those were the orders I gave my servant.

Gabriel (*shouting*) Locked from the outside? Have you gone out of your mind? Give me the key! (*Going towards him threateningly.*) Give me the key, or I'll take it from you! Do you hear?

Servant Yes . . . But you're not so sure of yourself as you were a moment ago . . . You're beginning to hesitate . . .

Gabriel (*violently*) The key!

Servant Gabriel de Beaumont . . . (*The change in the Servant's voice is so surprising that Gabriel is stopped in his tracks.*) If I am who I say I am, and you dare raise a finger against me . . . (*His tone is so harsh, that, even though he does not finish the sentence, it manages to create a long, intimidating silence in the room.*)

Gabriel (*recovering his calm, but now lacking his previous confidence*) I'm not threatening you! You're keeping me here against my will!

Servant (*confidently*) Unfortunately, there aren't any witnesses here to prove it. (*After a brief pause, tempering the*

severity in his voice.) But no . . . I don't want to force you to do anything. I'm just asking you to listen to what I have to say. (*Crossing the stage to the door of the cupboard embedded in the wall.*) You're still not convinced. You won't believe I'm the Marquis, because I'm not dressed as a marquis. (*While he has been speaking, he has opened the cupboard door and taken out a wig which he substitutes for the one he was wearing, and an elegant dress coat, with which he replaces the Servant's shabby jacket.*) All right: I'll do my best to satisfy you as quickly as I can. (*Once he is fully clothed, he closes the cupboard door, and turns towards Gabriel, who gazes at him in amazement.*) What's your answer now?

Gabriel (*stuttering*) I . . . don't know . . . I'm confused . . .

Marquis* (*sitting down, he makes a conciliatory gesture to Gabriel*). Please sit down, my friend . . . (*Gabriel sits down like an automaton.*) I wanted to speak to you, because I have a proposal to make . . . with reference to your profession . . . That explains the innocent game of disguises. I hope you'll forgive me, but I had to test you.

Gabriel (*following a pause. Very unsure of himself*) Monsieur le Marquis . . . Is that what I should call you from now on? Please forgive me as well, but I'm still not sure. Are you . . . I mean, are you, Monsieur, really . . . the Marquis . . . ? Or is this another joke? But . . . I'm an idiot . . . The evidence you've just given me seems conclusive. Yes, you really are the Marquis. And I should have guessed it from the start . . . (*The social conventions gradually prevail, and Gabriel begins to react accordingly.*) You really have impressed me . . . And now I'm afraid I didn't behave as I should have, before. But, you've got to see my point of view . . . How could I ever know that . . . ? I mean . . . If I've in any way offended you . . .

Marquis (*in a friendly tone*) Oh no . . . Everybody acts with other people according to their opinion of them . . . and according to the position they themselves think they have – or really do have – in society . . . Isn't that so? Now that you

*From now on, the Servant will be called the Marquis.

know I'm the Marquis, you've stopped speaking in that condescending tone . . . that tone of superiority and self-confidence with which you addressed the servant. Now you're more polite with me and call me Monsieur le Marquis. Right now, without realising it, you're also starting to act . . .

Gabriel (*objecting hyperbolically*) Monsieur! You mean to say that . . . Oh! How could you doubt my sincerity?

Marquis I don't doubt it, my friend! I was simply pointing out a fact you probably weren't aware of yourself. (*Short pause.*) In real life, as I was trying to explain before, we all act . . . all the time . . . What's more, these daily performances are vital for the survival of the social status quo . . . Even for our own survival as individuals . . . Oh, if Monsieur Rousseau's theories were taken seriously, we'd live in a kind of hell on earth . . . ! (*This he says with a certain morbid delight.*) The noble savage . . . (*Pause. He smiles.*) No . . . Man at his most primitive is not exactly kind-hearted . . . Of course, he's hardly hypocritical, I'll grant you that . . . But that sort of sincerity, Gabriel . . . exposes us for what we really are. And we're worse than the cruellest beasts in the jungle . . . I'm speaking from my own experience . . .

Gabriel Even so, Monsieur le Marquis . . . in a century as enlightened as ours, among our civilised contemporaries . . . actions of extreme cruelty have been carried out . . . by people who, given over to their most primitive instincts . . .

Marquis Of course . . . But when I spoke of hell on earth, I didn't do so with moral revulsion . . . or pious condemnation . . . I was just objectively pointing out a fact for which, I have to admit, I have a certain . . . shall we say 'aesthetic' admiration . . .

Gabriel (*surprised*) Then, I don't understand you, Monsieur le Marquis . . . How can such evil be . . . beautiful?

Marquis Oh, but . . . *(Rather disappointed.)* Don't you think it can? I'm surprised . . . Come now, when you play corrupt characters or murderers, don't you feel a certain envy deep down inside . . . ? I mean . . . when you shake off the skin of social conventions and established norms . . . and stop behaving as you're supposed to . . .

Gabriel *(very seriously)* But that is fiction . . .

Marquis *(smiling again)* Oh, yes . . . fiction . . . Of course . . . I was forgetting . . . *(Long pause. The Marquis gets up, goes to a piece of furniture, opens a drawer and takes out a book.)* I've invited you here because I want you to perform one of my plays.

Gabriel One of your plays? I didn't know you were a writer, Monsieur le Marquis. *(He shows too much surprise and is thus unconvincing. The Marquis looks at him with curiosity.)*

Marquis I've tried it out. *(Going up to Gabriel.)* Gabriel, I'd be very grateful if you could be the first person to perform it. I'll pay all the expenses. You'll be well rewarded if you agree to do it.

Gabriel It's what I do for a living. *(Pause.)* Will you let me read it?

Marquis Yes, but . . . *(Suddenly stops, without giving him the book.)* I must warn you now that my play is stylistically very different from the plays you act in. I can't guarantee you any great success.

Gabriel I don't understand. Whenever an author writes a play he always wants it to be a success.

Marquis I'm not really worried by what people think . . . *(Pause.)* No, Gabriel. My play is a piece of research. In it I want to prove – and, at the same time, demonstrate – my own theories. Monsieur Diderot states, quite categorically, that the best actors are the ones who are most distanced from their characters. Theatre is fiction, and, as such, the best way of recreating that fiction in an audience is, precisely, to

imitate it, using one's mind. By your own account, you contradict yourself on this point. You told me that you are dominated by emotion when you act, that your own personality becomes tied up with the character you're playing; but you now admit that this identification is not total because, to achieve it, you use certain techniques: the projection of your voice, the correct movements, et cetera. As far as I'm concerned, I want to argue the opposite: that the best performances are those in which the actor *becomes* the character, lives his life as intensely as his own, and even loses all awareness of his own individuality. Drama should not be fiction, art or technique . . . Drama should be feeling, emotion . . . and, above all, the joy of transgressing established norms . . . We should experience all our suffering, all our anguish, all our most intimate desires and fears on stage . . . Gabriel . . . our reality . . . What we haven't the courage to admit or accept in everyday life, that's what I'm interested in . . . And I need men like you, Gabriel . . . brave and imaginative men, prepared to play the game to its limits . . . *(Gabriel, overcome by sudden tiredness, has fallen asleep. The Marquis, who has become progressively more excited in the course of his speech, notices Gabriel and stops. Softly, without the slightest hint of reproach, he goes up to Gabriel, and almost whispers in his ear.)* You're not listening . . .

Gabriel *(coming to with a jolt)* Monsieur . . .

Marquis *(with a strange kind of affection which increases Gabriel's unease)* You fell asleep, Gabriel . . . You weren't listening to me . . .

Gabriel *(embarrassed, trying to justify himself)* Monsieur le Marquis . . . I . . . I don't know what could have come over me . . . A moment ago, I suddenly felt extremely tired . . . But . . . no . . . it's nothing . . . I feel better already . . . Just the result of overwork . . . I'm tired, that's all . . . I'll get over it . . .

Marquis *(genuinely interested)* Ah! You feel tired! *(Looking at his watch.)* Then we'll have to be quick . . . We haven't got

much time left . . . (As **Gabriel** tries to grab the glass of wine he left on the table.) No! Don't drink that wine . . . now. It would make you sleepier, and I want you to be wide awake . . . (He pours out a glass from another bottle, then hands it to **Gabriel** who anxiously drinks it. In a completely natural tone.) Anyway, don't worry. As you say, you'll soon get over your tiredness and feel better. I need you feeling better. We have to carry out a test.

Gabriel A test? (Annoyed, since he feels his professional 'amour-propre' is being offended.) You mean you don't trust my ability . . . my experience . . . ? Perhaps you think I'm some sort of amateur?

Marquis (mellifluously) Oh, no, not at all . . . Don't misunderstand me. I want to test my play, not you.

Gabriel (still annoyed) I don't understand you.

Marquis I told you before that this play wasn't in any way like those which satisfy the . . . decadent tastes . . . of our times. I . . . (Hesitating.) I've read it to myself several times . . . alone, in my room . . . I've even read it out loud, but that isn't enough. I have to hear it . . . coming from your lips . . . brought to life by you . . .

He draws back the curtains of the great archway which forms a recess in the back wall, and a kind of apse is revealed with tiny grilled windows, but no door. The walls are made of plain stone. It looks like the 'theatrical' scenery for a medieval prison. In the centre of this stage, constituting the only piece of furniture, is a great stone seat, with back and arms, also in stone, rather like a royal throne.

Look . . . I've prepared the ideal setting for you . . .

Gabriel But I . . . I can't . . . I can't act for you like this . . . without knowing the play . . . not having rehearsed it . . . I'd have to read it first, and try and understand the action and the characters . . . (Since the **Marquis** does not answer him because he is lighting the candles for the stage, **Gabriel**, now becoming progressively more nervous, goes up to the proscenium of the

little theatre.) At least tell me what it's about . . . the subject, the setting, the plot . . . something . . .

Marquis (continuing what he is doing) Do you really think that is so important . . . ? (Stops what he is doing, turns round and faces **Gabriel**. In a more gentle voice.) Oh, all right . . . It's a free adaptation of the life of Socrates, from Xenophon's Apology. But, how can I put it . . . ? I'm not really interested in the plot itself . . . I could have written the play about any other character or setting that happened to come to mind . . .

Gabriel But Socrates . . .

Marquis (stepping off the stage) Socrates is just a pretext, **Gabriel**. It's not really about his life . . . It's about his death. The process of his death, that is what I wanted to examine.

Gabriel (rather sceptically) His death? Then, the psychology . . . the historical facts we all know . . .

Marquis (self-satisfied) There you have it: we all know them. Since we all know them, it's better to ignore them. (He smiles.) Anyway, all that psychology . . . bah! it's just an excuse for philosophising . . . No . . . The only thing we don't know about Socrates – and so many other characters – is, precisely, their death. Not the fact they died, that's obvious . . . or even the way they died, and not the cause of their death . . . But their death . . . I repeat, the process of their death . . . Dying with them . . . Not seeing how they die, but feeling the intensity of their death . . . our own death . . .

Gabriel (impressed) Feeling, again . . .

Marquis Yes, feeling! Feeling, **Gabriel**! Feeling without rhetoric . . . Somehow taking part in their agony, making our bodies experience, our minds perceive, step by step, stage by stage, the inescapable advance towards self-destruction . . .

Gabriel You mean, lead the condemned man to the gallows?

Marquis (*quickly*) But I don't just mean that . . . If only we could, through some kind of imitative magic, penetrate and live their inner life while still being ourselves . . . then, what sublime delight, what pleasure for the mind! And just imagine how that pleasure would be conveyed, and spread to every part of our poor bodies! What pleasure, Gabriel, in this, our dreary age of rationalism! (*He laughs.*) But, as you can see . . . I go on and on . . . and lose myself in words . . . (*Looks at his watch again.*) I was enjoying emotions which I haven't yet even managed to stir up in you . . . (*Pause. Then, with apparent indifference.*) You still haven't said if you'll agree to play my game . . .

Gabriel (*finally giving in to his host's whims, somewhat wearily*) I don't understand you, Monsieur, but if it'll make you happy, I'll gladly perform an extract from your play. Tell me what you want me to do. (*As he climbs up on to the stage.*) However, I must warn you that, without a rehearsal, I won't be able to do anything very impressive first time round; but, since you insist . . .

Marquis Oh, yes, I do, Gabriel . . . I do . . . (*He quickly climbs up on to the stage as well and inspects everything closely.*) Wait a minute . . . (*Satisfied, having finished checking everything.*) Yes . . . yes, everything is in place . . . (*Steps down from the stage, picks up the book, opens it at the corresponding page and, going up to the proscenium, hands the book to Gabriel.*) I'm particularly interested in this scene . . .

Gabriel (*from the stage, once he has glanced at the open page*) The death scene . . .

Marquis Exactly.

Gabriel But . . . the other characters . . .

Marquis We can do without them . . .

Gabriel All right. (*Goes towards the stone throne.*)

Marquis Don't move from the throne. You no longer have any strength left.

Gabriel (*sitting down*) In a sitting position for the whole scene?

Marquis Yes.

Gabriel That'll mean I won't be able to strike certain poses . . . for example, tragic poses . . .

Marquis Forget about that. We'll assume you're dying.

Gabriel I see. (*Following a pause.*) But . . .

Marquis (*impatiently*) Why won't you begin?

Gabriel I was wondering . . .

Marquis There's no time for that now. (*Correcting his tone.*) Oh! (*Returning to a polite tone.*) What is it?

Gabriel If you're so obsessed with . . . reality . . . (*With a hidden note of sarcasm.*) aren't you surprised that I'm not wearing Greek robes?

Marquis (*without thinking*) No. You've got to . . . (*Suddenly stopping, as if taken aback by what he has just said.*) No, for the time being, no . . . (*Changes to an artificially light tone.*) I'll explain it all to you later. You wouldn't understand now . . . (*He smiles.*) or you wouldn't believe me.

Gabriel (*who obviously does not understand what the Marquis means*) Ah . . . (*Long pause. Hesitantly.*) Then . . . dressed as I am . . . ?

Marquis (*firmly*). Yes. It's essential for you to do it dressed as you are.

Gabriel All right. You're the one who's directing the performance.

Marquis (*softly*) Yes, Gabriel, I am, to all intents and purposes, the director.

Gabriel Fine. Will you give me just a few seconds to get into the scene?

Marquis Take your time.

Gabriel Thank you. (*He reads the open page quickly, but closely. Long silence. He suddenly begins to proclaim in a rather affected manner.*) Tell me, friends . . . Tell me, you who are by me in this fatal hour . . . what is expected of me . . . what pose does history require me to strike . . . in my death . . . ? A heroic pose, with an expression of eternal rest on my face . . . An example to be followed . . . But history knows nothing about death . . . about the deaths of individuals . . . History despises isolated cases. It generalises. It has no desire to know about symptoms, vital processes . . . It is only interested in the results. And what about me? What am I in all this machinery? Nothing more than a myth. And myths cannot cry out. (*Pause. The Marquis unconsciously begins to shake his head gently in disagreement, but Gabriel, gradually becoming more and more involved in the scene, does not notice.*) But men are the ones who die . . . And men die painfully, in convulsions, crying out for mercy . . . they die pathetically . . . soiling their bedclothes with excrement and the blood of their vomit . . . and they're scared . . . they're scared . . . terrified . . . not by a religious fear of what awaits them . . . no . . . by a nameless fear . . . the physical fear of the physical death everyone suffers . . . because death is consecration, it's the great ceremony of fear . . . Can't you understand that?

Marquis (*suddenly, in a tone of indifference*) No.

Gabriel (*surprised, interrupts his performance. Not knowing what to say, hesitating*) Pardon?

Marquis All I said was no; I can't. Or, at least, I can't understand that from your performance.

Gabriel (*rising from the throne, restraining his anger. Slowly*) Does that mean you don't like my acting?

Marquis What I mean is that your style of acting doesn't manage to convey what's happening to the character. (*Convinced of what he is saying.*) How can I understand, when I can't feel what you're supposed to be feeling?

Gabriel (*icily*) Your opinion of my artistic abilities, Monsieur le Marquis, seems rather personal, and is, in practice, contradicted by the overwhelming majority of Parisian audiences. And, when I say audiences, I'm obviously also referring to intelligent people . . . *people as intelligent and as learned as yourself.*

Marquis (*in a conciliatory tone*) Gabriel, please . . . Listen . . .

Gabriel (*who can no longer contain his anger, goes up to the edge of the small stage*) In other words, you invited me to your home and made me act out this absurd farce just so you could make fun of me. Well, I'm sorry, but I won't play your game any more. I don't like being insulted. And, as far as I'm concerned, questioning my artistic talent would be like questioning your nobility.

Marquis (*without raising his voice*) You're not making any effort to try and understand. My play is totally different from all other plays . . .

Gabriel (*scornfully*) I've realised that. But I don't see how the two things are connected.

Marquis It's obvious: a different literary style requires a completely new style of acting.

Gabriel (*in a tone of superiority*) Oh, of course . . . ! You're not content with making your debut as a dramatist. You also feel obliged to give me lessons about my profession.

Marquis (*patiently*) All I mean is you can't adequately perform what you haven't ever experienced . . . What you haven't experienced directly and personally. Because you've never gone through the agony of real death . . .

Gabriel (*whose sarcasm is barely restrained*) If I'd gone through the agony of real death, I would have died, and then I wouldn't be able to perform the part. (*Surprised by his own reasoning.*) Oh, you'll have me talking real rubbish in a minute! (*Trying to explain what he means.*) According to your argument, every time an actor performed the death of a

character . . . (*Stopping. Not knowing whether he should become yet angrier or burst out laughing.*) But, for heaven's sake! Do you think I'm an idiot? Characters who die on stage every night come back to life after the performance is over. And that's how plays are repeated, day after day.

Marquis (*as if thinking out loud*) But they're never exactly the same in every performance . . . There are always . . . small differences . . .

Gabriel Exactly. Small differences, that's all.

Marquis (*becoming progressively more excited as he speaks*) But I want to make my play a unique example! Just as my paintings are unique examples . . . my furniture . . . my clothes . . . (*He walks round the room excitedly.*) and my books . . . (*He points to some books, standing upright between two classical statues, on a piece of furniture.*) My books as well . . . Unique editions, of my favourite texts, made to my specifications . . .

Gabriel (*without understanding*) But in the theatre, that's impossible. With the text of a play, maybe . . . But in the performance of it . . .

Marquis (*quickly*) - In the performance as well, Gabriel . . . ! The performance is precisely what I'm interested in!

Gabriel And where are you going to keep it, then? (*Amused.*) You can't frame a theatrical performance, like a picture, or put it on a shelf . . .

Marquis I want to keep it here . . . (*Pointing to his head.*) In my memory . . .

Gabriel (*shrugging his shoulders*) If this is just one of your whims . . .

Marquis (*solemnly*) It's not a whim, it's a need.

Gabriel (*following a pause, in a tone of contrived indifference; Gabriel is about to step off the stage*) All right . . . Sorry. It seems I'm not good enough for you. You'll have to look for another actor who can attain the level of realism you

require. Though, if you don't mind my saying so, I very much doubt you'll find one. In one way or another, we are all products of the same school.

Marquis But I don't want anybody else; I need you!

Gabriel (*confused*) But you said that . . .

Marquis (*annoyed*) You won't let me finish . . . You won't let me finish, and we've both almost forgotten that time is running out . . . (*As if speaking to himself.*) Time is running out . . . And that could be very dangerous . . .

Gabriel Dangerous? Why . . . ? I don't understand.

Marquis Oh, how can you understand, when every time I try and go into details, you make me lose my train of thought, with your academic disquisitions . . . which are now completely off the point? (*Gabriel suddenly seems unable to keep his balance. He raises his hands to his head and stifles a groan. The Marquis looks at him anxiously.*) What's wrong? Are you all right?

Gabriel My head's turning . . . I feel dizzy . . . It's strange . . . It's as if my legs won't support me . . . If you'll allow me to . . . sit down . . . I need to sit down for a bit . . . (*He drowsily stumbles towards the throne, and sits down. The Marquis does not move or give the slightest indication of wanting to help him.*) Forgive me . . . but I find it very difficult . . . to concentrate . . . You'll have to forgive me . . . I can't . . . I can't follow your arguments . . . Honestly . . . I can't remember . . . I don't know what you were talking about . . . I've forgotten . . . And, really . . . now . . . I don't even know the reason why . . . I'm . . . suddenly . . . so tired . . .

Marquis (*calmly, after a short pause*) The reason? The reason is very simple, Gabriel . . . The reason is a combination of that Cypriot wine . . . and the clock . . .

Gabriel The . . . wine?

Marquis (*becoming impatient*) Oh! Do I have to spell it out to you in black and white; as if you were some kind of

schoolboy? I wanted to test you, Gabriel! You've been part of my experiment!

Gabriel (*now beginning to react and show his fear*) An . . . artistic experiment? Is that what you mean?

Marquis No, of course not! An experiment in physiology . . . applied to an actor's technique.

Gabriel Physiology . . . (*Suddenly realising everything: he is terrified, but does not have the strength to stand up.*) The wine! That's what it is . . . ! Oh, no! No! Oh, God, no! How could you do that!

Marquis (*energetically*) I had to know!

Gabriel (*panic-stricken; shouting*) You had to know? There's only one thing anybody has to know; and that's that you're a murderer!

Marquis (*with dignity*) I'm not a murderer! I'm a scientist! The realm of aesthetics is artificial, and I can't bear artificiality. The only thing I'm interested in is the study of human behaviour! Human beings are real, living things, and the study of them gives me greater pleasure than all your plays and symphonies put together!

Gabriel You're mad! You're inhuman!

Marquis (*triumphant*) You see? Your attitude towards me is changing! Now . . . Now you're really afraid! Now you're really afraid, and your fear isn't simulated! You know you're going to die . . . That you've only got a few minutes left to live . . . Oh! This is the ideal moment to carry out my experiment! You're going to die just like my character! Fiction retreats, defeated by reality! There aren't two views of the world any more! Only one view, one unique view, the truth! The truth above all emotions and social conventions . . . ! The truth, Gabriel! The truth is as precious as life itself!

Gabriel (*who has struggled to reach a standing position, takes a few steps forward towards the footlights. Having lost all self-control, in a*

hoarse voice) If I must die, I'll kill you as well! I'll use all the strength I have left to get my revenge!

Marquis (*stands firm; authoritatively*) Wait a minute, Gabriel! Stop! Let me propose . . . a pact . . .

Gabriel (*hesitant, but still stepping forward*) There's no time left . . . There's no time left for that . . .

Marquis Yes there is. (*Looking at his watch.*) Exactly eight minutes.

Gabriel (*finally stopping, without stepping off the stage*) What?

Marquis The drug is gradually taking over your body . . . your movements . . . but you'll be able to think clearly for a minute or two more . . . (*Short pause. Energetically.*) You want to save your own life, don't you? All right. Whether or not you do will depend on your own intelligence. (*Takes a small bottle out of his pocket, and shows it to Gabriel.*) You see this little bottle? It's the antidote.

Gabriel (*threatening again*) Give it to me! I'll kill you if you don't!

Marquis (*unmoved*) If you dare step off that stage, I'll smash the bottle on the floor.

Gabriel (*after a long period of silence, his will is broken and he drops down, defeated, sobbing, overcome by an attack of hysteria.*) Oh, no! No . . . ! I . . . I don't want to die . . . I didn't mean what I said before . . . ! I don't want to die . . . !

Marquis (*dispassionately, as if talking about a petty commercial transaction*) Stop crying, and listen. Will you accept my conditions? (**Gabriel**, *holding back his tears, nods humbly, without rising from his position on the floor.*) All right: you're going to give another performance.

Gabriel (*beginning to cry again, frightened*) Act . . . Oh, no! . . . I . . . couldn't . . .

Marquis (*unpitying*) You're going to have to.

Gabriel Even if I did . . . my performance would be . . . ah . . . would be . . . (*Holding back his tears.*) disastrous . . .

Marquis It's going to have to be your best performance yet, Gabriel. If I don't like it . . . If I don't like it . . . I won't give you the antidote.

Gabriel (*glimpsing in the Marquis's words a last glimmer of hope for the condemned man*) Do you swear? I mean, do you swear . . . Do you swear that if I manage to . . . ?

Marquis (*interrupting him*) I give you my word of honour. (*Brief pause. Looking at his watch again.*) You have six minutes left, Gabriel. A six-minute performance, in exchange for your life. And, if you do save your own life, I can assure you that you'll be paid more than you've earned in the course of your career. But don't waste time now. Make an effort to concentrate and be ready to begin at once. (*Opens the drawer of the little table and takes out a small sand-glass which he places on the table, beside the bottle containing the antidote.*) When all the sand has dropped into the lower half of the sand-glass, the performance will end, and you will find out if you have passed the test. (*Sits down in an armchair, next to the table on which he has placed the sand-glass and the bottle.*) I'm ready when you are.

After a pause, Gabriel drags himself up off the ground, and stumbles back to the throne. He sits down, picks up the book, and examines the open page with an impenetrable expression. Silence, Gabriel eventually nods to the Marquis, but does not look him in the face. The Marquis solemnly says:

Marquis The performance is now beginning.

Then, the Marquis, slowly and with almost ceremonial care, turns the sand-glass upside down so that the sand starts to fall. Gabriel, as if jerked into action by an invisible spring, simultaneously begins his performance.

Gabriel, in spite of his physical state, is clearly seen to be making a great effort of willpower to excel. He is tense, concentrating on his role and trying to vary each part of the speech, each word, and to imbue

every movement of his arms and head with meaning; even his slightest, most insignificant gestures are moved by a primitive desire to transcend his present wretchedness as an actor, and raise it to the category of a great sacrificial rite, offered up to the implacable categories of a supreme beauty, free from affectation. Acting against himself, contrary to his own intuition, contrary to his convictions and his artistic experience, Gabriel devotes body and soul to the search for vibrant intonations which are, at the same time, full of humility, and completely removed from the rhetorical formulations he used in his first reading of the extract. His acting thereby becomes so natural, so sincere, that his first performance of the text seems artificial by comparison. He speaks very slowly, alert even during the pauses; he is carried along by his own vital rhythm, and is brilliantly fused with his character. In his eagerness, the Marquis holds his breath and stares at the actor's face. Thick beads of sweat begin to appear on the foreheads of both men. Every pause, every new word gathers on the walls and the furniture, which echo the mysterious rhythms and forebodings of death and hope.

Gabriel Tell me, friends . . . Tell me, you who are by me in this fatal hour . . . what is expected of me . . . what pose does history require me to strike . . . in my death . . . ? A heroic pose, with an expression of eternal rest on my face . . . An example to be followed . . . But history knows nothing about death . . . about the deaths of individuals . . . History despises isolated cases. It generalises. It has no desire to know about symptoms, vital processes . . . It is only interested in the results. And what about me? What am I in all this machinery? Nothing more than a myth. And myths cannot cry out. But men are the ones who die . . . And men die painfully, in convulsions, crying out for mercy . . . they die pathetically . . . soiling their bedclothes with excrement and the blood of their vomit . . . and they're scared . . . they're scared . . . terrified . . . not by a religious fear of what awaits them . . . no . . . by a nameless fear . . . the physical fear of the physical death everyone suffers . . . because death is consecration, it's the great ceremony of fear . . . Can't you understand that?

Gabriel stops when he reaches this point. It is exactly the same point at which he was interrupted by the **Marquis** in the first reading.

Gabriel is in a state of panic because he knows that the fatal answer will soon be given; he cannot go on. The consequences of the great effort he has made to keep his self-control and act without showing his real state start to become more and more apparent.

Marquis (after a long period of silence, faced by **Gabriel's** questioning, anguished expression, and realising that the actor's resistance has reached its breaking point) There's no need for you to go on. (Pause, **Gabriel** does not dare say anything. He is afraid to ask. The **Marquis** prolongs the tension of the situation by speaking very slowly.) All of the sand hasn't yet dropped . . . (He picks up the sand-glass and leaves it in a horizontal position on the table.) But that will do.

He stands up, takes the bottle containing the antidote, and walks very slowly to the table with the drinks service. The position of his body makes it impossible to see exactly what he is doing. He prepares a glass of wine and, holding it, he slowly walks up to the stage. **Gabriel** watches the **Marquis's** every movement with a mixture of eagerness and fear. The silence is unbearable. The **Marquis** climbs on to the stage. He goes up to **Gabriel** and gives him the glass. **Gabriel** does not move or say anything. He stretches out his arm and takes the glass with a trembling hand. He lifts the glass to his lips. He drinks from it. He sighs deeply and shuts his eyes. The **Marquis** takes the glass from him and moves back towards the footlights. **Gabriel's** body begins to shake rhythmically. He is crying. His crying is stifled and quiet, like that of a child. The **Marquis** steps off the stage and looks at **Gabriel** affectionately.

Marquis Don't cry. It's hardly dignified for a man like you.

Gabriel (without looking at the **Marquis**, unable to hold back his tears) I . . . can't . . . help it . . . I'm crying for joy . . .

Marquis (softly) Then I admire your bravery. (Goes to the side of the stage from which he drew back the curtains; and presses an ornamental moulding in the wall. A large grid of bars silently starts to descend from the ceiling; in just a few seconds it reaches the floor,

thereby completely shutting off the opening to the small stage.) Yes . . . You're very brave, Gabriel. You're braver than I thought. Because you played against me . . . because you risked playing against me, Gabriel, and you've lost the game . . . and you've ended up by cheerfully accepting defeat.

Gabriel (slowly lifting up his head and seeing the bars. Does not move. Destroyed, overcome by nervous tension, now unable to raise his voice) I've . . . lost . . . ! You . . . you said that . . . You gave me . . . your word of honour . . .

Marquis (returning to his armchair. Before sitting down, he faces **Gabriel** and says) And I'm keeping it. I never said I liked your performance.

Gabriel But you . . . Oh no . . . ! You've just given me . . . the antidote . . .

Marquis (takes the small bottle out of his pocket, in the same state that it was before, and shows it to **Gabriel**. Calmly) I haven't given you any antidote, Gabriel. In fact, I've just poisoned you.

Gabriel (who can no longer react. In a weak voice) But . . . the wine . . .

Marquis I never said that wine – the first one you drank when you came here – was poisoned. No . . . Think about it . . . That was what you assumed, because of certain symptoms . . . (Sits down in his armchair.) It was only a light drug. A harmless drug to make you feel sleepy and slow down your bodily reactions. (Smiles.) I had to protect myself against the possibility of any violence on your part . . . (Brief pause. Showing him the bottle again.) If you'd taken the antidote, all of the symptoms I described would have disappeared in a few minutes. That is physiology, Gabriel. You alone, your imagination created all that visceral fiction of agony. The only real poison, the only lethal poison, for which I swear, there is no known antidote, is the one you've just drunk. (Smiles again. Softly.) You see? In no way have I deceived you. (Looking at his watch.) I told you before that you had a few

minutes left to live, and that was also true. The difference lies in the fact that you thought you had already swallowed the poison, and the last few minutes were all you had left before its full effect would be felt. But I tried to explain that what would be decided then, at the end of the test, was simply, whether you lived . . . or died. From the moment you drank the poison, you were dead, Gabriel. (*Puts his pocket watch away.*) Your time is up, and you can't make any more decisions about your life or your actions. Death is making you its slave. It's locked you in its prison . . . and made sure the doors are firmly shut.

Gabriel (*articulating with difficulty*) But . . . why . . . the . . . bars . . . ?

Marquis Because, from now on, the course of your agony starts to become dangerous. (*Gets up, and goes over to the stage.*) And I want to be able to contemplate it at my leisure, without having to worry about my safety.

Gabriel (*desperately snatching at a last, futile hope*) 'Contemplate' the death of a human being . . . No . . . That's impossible . . . You . . . you couldn't do that . . . You've played another trick on me . . . It's a game . . . another lie . . . (*He tries to laugh, his face contorted in a grotesque grimace.*) You want to frighten me, that's all . . . You love making me suffer . . . don't you? (*His voice ends up betraying what he really feels. He is crying; all his 'élan' has disappeared; choking, exhausted.*) Please tell me . . . Tell me it's not true . . . Tell me I'm dreaming . . .

Marquis (*unmoved*) No, Gabriel . . . you're not dreaming . . . Unfortunately for you, and fortunately for me. I said I wanted you to give a unique performance. But perhaps I didn't use the right words. You're not going to act for me. You'll be playing for real. Now do you understand? The only way of adequately acting out your own death — you said so before, but you were only joking — is, precisely . . . when you actually die . . .

Gabriel Before . . . I was . . . acting . . . acting out my fear . . . I was scared, I . . . thought I was dying . . .

Marquis Oh, yes, before . . . Before you were scared, yes . . . there's no doubt about that. You were very scared, but that wasn't enough for me. You still had a glimmer of hope left. You were playing against me. You wanted to win. And, so, because you were playing, you still didn't think you had definitely lost. You weren't completely beaten as you are now. (*He laughs.*) Ah, Gabriel . . . ! You've kept your acting instinct till the finale. Right up until the end you've pretended to be a character. (*Gabriel sighs deeply and his head falls lifelessly down on to his chest.*) What's wrong? Poor Gabriel, you've fallen asleep again . . . You've fallen asleep, because you've no other way of escaping . . . Because you can't bear to see your life slipping helplessly through your fingers, as each minute goes by . . . each breath . . . each heartbeat . . . each pause . . . (*Changes to an impersonal tone.*) But no. It doesn't matter. In a few moments you'll wake up again. The effects of the first drug will have worn off, and you'll be full of energy and thinking clearly. And the poison, the real poison, will gradually begin to act on your body . . . very slowly . . . and painfully . . . for several hours . . . But let's not rush things, Gabriel. Let's respect the conventions and the formality of our art . . . We'll go and sit down. (*Sits down again in the armchair.*) And now, Gabriel, if you don't mind, I will stop talking. The curtain has just risen. A rather delicate piece of music is being played on violins which are concealed from view. The stage is lit by scores of candles, and the leading actor, dressed for the ceremony, is getting ready to make a dramatic entrance . . . Ah, this moment of expectation is sublime . . . Just think of the tension which can be concentrated in these few seconds before the first speech . . . But let's stop talking now . . . Will members of the audience kindly remain in their seats? . . . Let's respect all the ritual and be quiet. Not a word. Tonight is the opening night and the performance is about to begin . . . right now. (*Very slowly, all the lights go out until darkness covers the stage.*)