

There are so few things capable of amusing a man on the last day of his life. But it does amuse me that a sinner of my standing cannot be redeemed without paperwork.

All my life, people have been after me to sign things. My signature appears on every important treaty of this century, and now they want me to put it on a treaty with God.

Paperwork.

I flatter myself to think of it as a treaty; it is actually a recantation. It may guarantee a permanent cessation of hostilities between God and me, but in fact it merely describes three of my sins (the most trivial ones, to my way of thinking) and my regret for having committed them. I did not write this document. The one *I* wrote struck the local Church authorities as neither specific nor repentant enough to satisfy the Pope. So the monsignor and Father Dupanloup have collaborated in the preparation of this one, which they believe is dignified enough that I will not refuse signing and still abject enough that the Vatican will accept it.

But in negotiations, Father Dupanloup and the monsignor are children. I have negotiated with the Vatican, and I know what it will accept and what it will refuse. It will refuse to accept this recantation. It will demand one that is even more repentant, more apologetic, more groveling.

So I have delayed signing the document until this, my last day. My intent is that it will not reach the Pope

until I am in the ground and incapable of revising it. Oh, the planning and preparation required for a deathbed conversion.

The dark rises momentarily, but when I look, the lamp flames are unwavering in their glass chimneys, and I understand it is not darkness gathering but my eyes failing.

There is a scratch at the door. Pauline has returned. She knows how much I cherish some of the older, gentler forms of life, and she has refused to adopt the bourgeois knocking and pounding with which the spirit of modernity approaches doors.

“Welcome,” I say.

The brass handle turns, the door opens, and my precious darling enters. The lamplight makes her eyes glisten at the corners. I can see she has been weeping again. She approaches the bedside in a rustle of silk and linen and lays the back of her tender hand against my forehead. She will find nothing there. The faltering furnace of my body makes little heat these days. But I enjoy the touch of her skin on mine and the sign of her concern.

“Father Dupanloup is here, Uncle,” she says.

Her mother and I told her some months ago who I am, but she never broke the habit of calling me “Uncle.” I am glad for her sake. I will soon be far beyond the reach of scandal, but she has most of her life before her, and there are uncharitable elements who would delight in branding her the daughter of incest. It is not real incest, of course, since Pauline’s mother, Dorothee, is only the wife of my nephew. But it is 1838, and the world still

labors under the strange and ungainly moral code of our late Emperor, who prized family life above all other moral principles — the more so after he had put away his wife and married the Hapsburg princess on whom he thought he could get an heir.

“And what does Father Dupanloup want with me?”  
I tease.

“Please, Uncle.” Her eyes shine brighter. I can see they are gathering more moisture. “He has come to see you sign your confession.”

At eighteen, she is agreeably implacable. I wish I’d had her with me at Vienna. The force of her personality would have been useful in the Belgian question. And such a diplomat! She lets me think of this paper as a confession rather than a recantation. I can see she is troubled that I may not survive long enough to demean myself properly.

“Please tell him to wait,” I say.

“Please, Uncle.” Her lower lip trembles.

“Don’t be frightened, child,” I say. “I’m not.” And I am delighted to discover that I have no overwhelming need to tell the truth even on this, my deathbed.

“Oh, Uncle.” She sinks down beside the bed and lays her face against my dressing gown.

She remains in that position for a few moments, while her young body shakes briefly. She lifts her head and produces a handkerchief. My dressing gown is wet where her face was, and I find the dampness comforting.

“I wish I could remain longer with you and your mother,” I say. “But I want no more than that. A man who has outlived his enemies can have no cause for regret.”

“Uncle, you told me yourself that you regret your defiance of the Church.”

I am trapped by my own remarks. How charming! She is truly her father’s daughter. “Very well, then. Go to Father Dupanloup and tell him I will see him. But give me a moment.”

She is smiling when she leaves me. I make myself smile in return. It is a skill I have perfected in many decades of government service and diplomacy. It is not easy to do now. I have sent her away because I have found it difficult to breathe.

I lie in this bed, and I suck the air, but my lungs do not respond. A roaring rises in my ears, and I wonder if this is the time. I wish I had not sent Pauline away.

And then she is beside me again, weeping.

“Oh, Uncle, Uncle.”

She gestures to her confessor, Father Dupanloup, who is wearing his vestments and carrying a vessel of anointing oil. He steps forward eagerly, but then stops himself, shakes his head, and steps back.

Pauline looks stricken. She throws herself against my dressing gown again.

She fetches up against me like a blow to the chest. The rope around my throat has loosened, and I find myself able to make a wheezing gasp. The air, even in this closed-up room where I have been dying for months, is sweet in my throat.

“Thank you, my dear,” I manage.

She looks alarmed, and her confessor looks disappointed.

“Oh, Uncle. We thought you were gone.”

“There are doubtless others whom God wants to collect first,” I say.

“Father Dupanloup would not even have been able to administer extreme unction. Once you have signed, he will be able to anoint you.”

Father Dupanloup smiles serenely. He is a strapping young man whose whist playing is hampered by a tendency to show the contents of a hand in his face. His conversation is nearly as artless, but he means well and seems to care for the fate of my soul. And if he lacks Pauline’s unmitigated determination to get me into heaven, at least he applies as much effort to it as he does to the advancement of his career in the Church. It may well be the same thing.

The thought crosses my mind that I am a dying man and have scant time remaining. I should not have to put up with a priest at my bedside if I do not want one. But it is perhaps too late in my life to begin behaving rudely.

“Welcome, Father Dupanloup.”

“Prince Talleyrand.” Father Dupanloup approaches my bed. “I bring you my warmest regards and best wishes for your comfort.”

One can enjoy a bit of dissimulation, even from such an awkward practitioner as Father Dupanloup. He has not come out of concern for my comfort. He has come to persuade me to sign the paper. I know how treaties are negotiated, and I know we will discuss many things before we come around to the welfare of my immortal soul. Father Dupanloup thinks I am the prize in this game. Perhaps I am the opposing player.

I distort my face into a smile again. “I cherish your regards, and I am grateful for your kindness.”

“God protects us, Prince,” he says. “We have but to ask.”

Ah, he makes a strong opening move. He intends that I will now beg him to help me plead for God’s protection, which will be vouchsafed me, of course, as soon as I sign the paper recanting my three sins. God apparently does not wish to admit those who have not first given over their dignity.

“Would you care to sit down, Father?”

Father Dupanloup sits in the chair in front of the bed.

“It is through confession and repentance,” says Father Dupanloup, “that one is able to go to God as a child goes to his father — with fear perhaps, but always with faith in his justice and his love.” He glances toward the recantation on the nightstand.

I find myself wishing for a more accomplished player in this match.