An Excerpt from the Novel *La Maison du Joueur de Flûte*

by Alexander Vialatte

Translation and Commentary: Sylvie Blum-Reid

These were such happy times when uncle Anselme had the pavilion built! I was somebody then. I was giving music lessons. I was the musical consciousness of the entire household. At the time, the occupants were few. They would all come; or when they were too many in the large living room, they would arrive in family groups or by age groups, or even in alphabetical order, or still linked by a deep kinship (I use different systems). What method, always! What organization!

We would put the lights on. They would fall into line in front of me, the small ones in the first row, the tallest ones behind. It looked like a family picture taken for some solemn occasion. I had composed small tunes that were quite successful: the 'Mazurka of the Swallows' always made an impression. Noémie would sing it so nicely! She would sing it with Rodolphe. As Noémie was taller, to avoid a funny contrast and upset their performance, we would place little Rodolphe on top of two bricks. At the moment when the C was sung in chest voice, it was so delicious that it made up for all my troubles; and for the refrain, everyone would sing, even General Chaiserue who had a glass eye, and Mr. Natural who needed to be led. We could see all the adults, in the darkness at the back, opening their mouths like O's. It was magnificent. I could not see this without being moved.

Uncle Anselme would sometimes grace us with a visit wearing his large red dressing gown with gold patterns. He would wear a black velour skullcap with a big tassel hanging above his ear. He would walk in slowly, with a nice and proud face, an air of gentle ease, prosperity and a natural grace about him, he would look at the room with satisfaction. Everyone would stop singing out of respect, and I would blush. But he would gesture for me to continue. I would timidly protest. He would insist in such a flattering way that I would protest even more. He would speak in such spirit, such good manners and delicacy, that it was a pleasure to hear and reject his phrases just to hear some of the new ones more delicately and well put together. We could not stop congratulating each other. Good education would flourish between us like a rose tree at the *Jardin des Plantes.*

Finally, he would sit in the big armchair and we would resume our chorus. He would look at the wall for the harmonious shadow that would trace with its stick some large cabalistic signs, shuffle, knead the music, slow it down all of a sudden, spread it, press it, blow it, raise it, and let it fall again into an abyss, recover it in a dry and precise stroke, bring it up in the shape of a spiral, and throw it finally towards heaven

as a frantic rocket while I would be sponging off my forehead. The linden trees smelled nice. The hour was solemn. I thought I was seeing the rainbow.

Then after a while, uncle Anselme would meditate, eyes closed for concentration. (One could have said that the music was repeating inside him, and that he was listening to it from within.) He would only reopen his eyes, all of a sudden, in a bit of a jump, while listening to Mrs. Petitprince's A. It must be said that Mrs. Petitprince, very gifted with rhythm and feeling- was only able to give the A from high up while kicking the floor with her high heels, which would help the note emerge out of limbo through the twitch of a limb, like a horse kicked forward with a spur. This shock, which would break a bit of the charm, when not used to it, would startle uncle Anselme. It might be said that his ears were jumping, and despite the dignity of his brisk gestures, it made you think of a milksman horse meeting a locomotive at a railroad crossing. But this is where the resemblance stopped for uncle Anselme instead of galloping would let a surprised or marveled gaze at the audience, would caress in a flattering look the last row's mouths, in the darkness, a row of slightly different O's that looked like a line of writing in a child's notebook; his eye would follow the invisible curve that was coming out like a golden dotted line, out of all these open throats, -that was bigger for the general- and would finally stop at the ceiling where a flock of birds was passing.

Next, he would swing his head from right to left, and left to right, just for two or three measures, and he would fall back again in his passionate listening, so much so that one would ask General Chaiserue (a trained cavalry man) to hold onto Mme Petitprince at the moment of the kick. She would then call him a 'smotherer' of talents. Generally speaking, all would go well. Afterwards, uncle Anselme would leave. He would gently assure us that he could not sleep without one of these beautiful auditions, and leave, followed by a sad whisper, always leaving behind him a trail of good manners, and beautiful expressions. When he was no longer there, it was not the same thing, one did not feel the same enthusiasm; I would try to play the *Polka of Mosquitoes*, or the *Celebration of the Warblers*, but I could sense a difference. Uncle Anselme's consecration of the ceremony was amiss, and his presence in his large throne-like armchair was missing, along with his large shiny and slightly balding forehead, covered with shimmering silk, his shaven double chin, similar to the Pope in the Chinese pavilion, so much so that when he would get up, one would involuntarily look for the pewter spur embossed on his dressing gown or in the hollow of the armchair.

At nights, I would see him in my dreams: he had the head of a horse that would *praise* to the skies, follow my stick and raise its ears following the A. This solemn frivolity matched marvelously the red dressing grown, and its golden arabesques. Such happy times! These flattering visits, and large compliments that would unfold like some long

parchments adorned with elaborate letters, his large graciousness, and his distinguished meditation in the musical sanctuary, all of this no longer exists…. It was, I dare say, like a smoking herbal tea soothing a stomach ache. What an era! These polite people, these scales, arpeggios, and melodies close to obstacle races, this sweetness, these gathered tenants, musical and docile, their mouths open into Os in the warm darkness, what an era! What a time! What civilization! And in summertime, just before the evening meal, when the smell of the linden trees would waft in through the two large windows!….

Commentary:
Alexandre Vialatte (1901-1971) was born in the mountainous Auvergne region of France. He spent five years in Germany (Spire and Mayenz) as a civil translator in the army. In 1922 he became a collaborator and translator for the *Cahiers Rhénans: Rheinische Blätter.* He did his military service in Berlin in 1924-1925, and discovered Kafka. He eventually became the French translator of Kafka, Goethe, and Thomas Mann. His first novel *Battling le ténébreux* was published in 1928 (Gallimard). A writer and journalist, he taught French at the Franco-Egyptian high school near Cairo (1937-1939). During the war, he was mobilized and made prisoner. He later spent time in an asylum in 1941, suffering from hallucinations. His world was that of childhood, imagination and time. "To read Vialatte is to find again the kingdom of childhood" wrote Pascal Sigoda, a Vialatte researcher (*Cahiers de l'Herne* 8). He is said to have invented a genre, the chronicle, or the art of the short literary piece; these were about performances, but also philosophical essays about the times. Although he started writing during the war, many of his novels were published posthumously: *La Dame du job*, *La Maison du joueur de flûte*. In 1950, he obtained the Swiss prize Charles Veillon for *Les Fruits du Congo.* His chronicles were assembled into different volumes *Dernières nouvelles de l'Homme*, *La Porte de Bath-Rabbim*, *Et c'est ainsi qu'Allah est grand*, *L'éléphant est irrefutable*, *Éloge du homard et autres insectes utiles* and *Chroniques de la montagne.* Vialatte wrote about painting, paying special attention to his friend Jean Dubuffet who illustrated some of his work as well.

In *La Maison du Joueur de Flûte* (1986, posthumously) a nostalgic narrator returns to his roots, and his childhood house in a village. The house keeps changing, as do the inhabitants over time. Many of them are children. The fantastic takes over. The owner or narrator, also a photographer, captures them in photographs, but somehow the shutter stops working and the shots are superimposed meanwhile all the household characters remain elusive. The narrator claims to be the 'musical consciousness' of the entire household. Musical references abound in the house, which haunts its inhabitants.

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