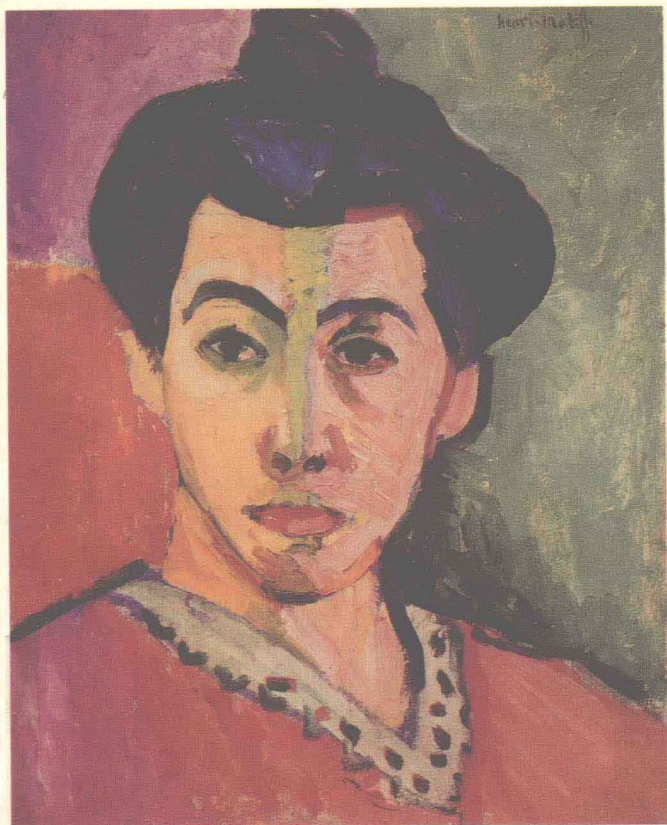


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THE WOMAN OF THE PHARISEES

François Mauriac



Translated by Gerard Hopkins

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Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc.
New York

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First Carroll & Graf edition 1988

Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc.
260 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10001

ISBN: 0-88184-371-7

Manufactured in the United States of America

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1

"COME here, boy!"

I turned round, thinking that the words were addressed to one of my companions. But no, it was to me that the one-time Papal Zouave had spoken. He was smiling, and the scar on his upper lip made the smile hideous.

Colonel the Comte de Mirbel was in the habit of coming once every week into Intermediate School yard. On these occasions his ward, Jean de Mirbel, who was almost always in a state of being "kept in," would move away from the wall against which he had been made to stand, while we, from a distance, watched the arraignment to which his terrifying uncle subjected him. Our master, Monsieur Rausch, called upon to act as witness for the prosecution, replied obsequiously to the Colonel's questions. The old man was tall and vigorous. On his head he wore one of those caps known as a "cronstadt," and his coat, buttoned up to the neck, gave him a military air. He was never to be seen without a riding-switch, probably of raw-hide, tucked under his arm. When our friend's conduct had been particularly bad, he would be marched away across the yard between Monsieur Rausch and his guardian, and the three of them would disappear into a staircase in the left wing of the building, which led to the dormitories. We would stop whatever game we were playing and wait until a long-drawn wail struck sharply on our ears. It sounded like the yelp of a beaten dog (though that may have been due to our imaginations). A moment

later, Monsieur Rausch would reappear, accompanied by the Colonel, the scar showing livid in his purple face. His blue eyes would look faintly bloodshot. Monsieur Rausch was all attention. He kept his head turned towards his companion and his lips were stretched in a servile grin. That was the only occasion on which we ever saw that pale, terrifying face, topped by its red, crimped hair, distorted into a grimace of laughter. Monsieur Rausch, the terror of our lives! Whenever we went into class and found his seat still empty, I used to pray: "O God, please let Monsieur Rausch be dead! Blessed Virgin, please let him have broken his leg, or make it so that he's ill—not seriously, but just a little!". . . But he had an iron constitution, and his hard, dry hand at the end of its skinny arm was more to be feared than a slab of wood. Jean de Mirbel, fresh from the mysterious punishments inflicted upon him by his two executioners (vastly exaggerated, no doubt, in our boyish fancies), would come back into the form-room with his eyes red and his grubby face streaked with tears, and make his way to his desk. The rest of us kept our eyes fixed firmly on our notebooks.

"Do as you're told, Louis!" barked Monsieur Rausch. It was the first time he had ever called me by my Christian name. I stayed hesitating on the threshold of the parlor door. Jean de Mirbel was standing inside the room, his back towards me. On a small table there lay an open parcel containing two chocolate éclairs and a bun. The Colonel asked me whether I liked cakes. I nodded my head.

"Well, those are for you, then . . . Go on; what are you waiting for? It's young Pian, isn't it?—know his family well—doesn't look as though he had any more spunk than his poor father. . . . Brigitte Pian, his stepmother, now there's a woman for you—reg'lar Mother of the Church. . . . You, there! stop where you are!"—this he shouted at

Jean, who was trying to slink away. "You're not going to get off as lightly as that! You've got to watch your young friend having a good time. . . . Come on, make up your mind, you little fool!" he added, his two eyes fixing me, from either side of the short, firm nose, with a stare in which a glint of anger already showed.

"He's shy," said Monsieur Rausch; "don't wait to be asked twice, Pian."

My friend was looking out of the window. His turn-down collar had come unfastened, and I could see his dirty neck above it. No one in the world had such power to frighten me as the two men now bending down and smiling into my face. I knew from of old the harsh, animal-like smell that hung about Monsieur Rausch. I stammered out that I wasn't hungry, but the Colonel retorted that a boy didn't have to be hungry to eat cakes. Seeing that I was persisting in my obstinacy, Monsieur Rausch told me to go to the Devil, adding that there were plenty of others who wouldn't be so stupid. As I was making my escape into the yard, I heard him call to Mouleyre, an unnaturally fat boy who always ate anything on which he could lay his hands in the dining-hall. He ran up at the summons, sweating. Monsieur Rausch shut the parlor door, from which Mouleyre emerged later, his mouth smeared with cream.

It was a June evening, and still swelteringly hot. When the day-boys had gone home we were allowed to remain outside for a bit because of the heat. Mirbel came up to me. We could hardly be described as friends, and I am pretty sure that he despised me because, in those days, I was a rather spiritless and well-behaved boy. He took from his pocket a pill-box and half raised the lid.

"Look!"

It contained two stag-beetles. He had given them a cherry for food.

"They don't like cherries," said I. "They live on the rotten bark of old oaks."

We used to catch them on Thursdays, near the School Lodge, on our way out. These particular insects always start flying at sunset.

"You can have one of them. Take the bigger, but be careful—they're not tame yet!"

I couldn't tell him that I didn't know where to put the beetle. But I was pleased that he should speak so kindly to me. We sat down on the steps that led to the main block of the school buildings. Two hundred boys and about twenty masters were crowded into what had once been a beautifully proportioned town-house.

"I'm going to train them to pull a cart," said Jean.

He took from his pocket a small box which he fastened with thread to the beetle's claws. We played with it for a while. During these special recreation periods on summer evenings no boy was ever kept in, and there was no insistence on community games. Elsewhere on the steps other boys were busy spitting on apricot stones and polishing them. This done, they made a hole in each and took out the kernel, using the empty shell as a whistle. The heat of the day was still intense within the space surrounded on four sides by buildings. Not a breath of air stirred the leaves on the sickly plane trees. Monsieur Rausch, his legs apart, was in his usual place over by the outdoor toilets, to see that we didn't stay too long in them. They gave off a powerful stench which fought a losing battle with the smell of chlorine and disinfectant. From the other side of the wall came the sound of a cab bumping over the rough cobbles of the rue Leyteire. I was filled with envy of the unknown passenger, of the

coachman, and even of the horse, because they were not shut away in school, and didn't have to go in fear of Monsieur Rausch.

"I'm jolly well going to thrash Mouleyre," said Jean suddenly.

"I say, Mirbel, what's a Papal Zouave?" I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not quite sure, but I think he was one of the chaps who fought for the Pope before 1870, and got beaten." He was silent for a few moments, and then added: "I don't want him and Rausch to die before I'm grown up."

Hatred made him look ugly. I asked him why he was the only one of us who was treated as he was.

"My uncle says it's for my good. He says that when his brother was dying, he swore by God that he'd make a man of me. . . ."

"And your mother? . . ."

"Oh, she believes everything he says . . . or maybe she doesn't dare contradict him. She didn't really want me to be a boarder here. She would have liked me to stay at home at La Devize with a tutor. But he wouldn't allow that. He said my character was too bad."

"My mother," said I proudly, "has come to live in Bordeaux for my education."

"But you're a boarder just the same."

"Only for these two weeks, because Vignotte—he's the agent over at Larjuzon—is sick, and my father's got to do his work. But she writes to me every day."

"Madame Brigitte Pian isn't your real mother, is she?"

"It's the same thing, though . . . it's just as if she were."

I stopped at that and felt my cheeks burning. Had my real mother heard? Are the dead always listening to find out

what the living are saying about them? But if Mamma knew everything, she would realize that no one had ever taken her place in my heart. It didn't matter how kind my stepmother was to me. It was quite true that she wrote to me every day, but I hadn't even opened the letter that had come from her that morning. And when I cried that night, in the stifling dormitory, before going to sleep, it would be because I was thinking of my father, of my sister Michèle, or of Larjuzon, and not of Brigitte Pian. Still, my father would have liked me to be a boarder all the year round, so that he could have gone on living in the country. It was my stepmother who had insisted. They had taken a little flat in Bordeaux, to make it possible for me to go home every evening. My sister Michèle, who hated our father's wife, always maintained that she had used me as an excuse for breaking the promise she had made when she married, that she would live at Larjuzon. No doubt Michèle was right. If my stepmother never tired of saying that I was "too nervous and too sensitive to be sent to boarding-school," it was because this was the only argument that could persuade my father to stay on in Bordeaux. I knew that well enough, but it didn't make any difference. The grown-ups could settle their own affairs. It was enough for me that my stepmother had had the last word. But I knew that Papa was unhappy when separated from his woods, his horses, and his guns. He must be enjoying himself now. . . . That thought was a great comfort to me during this fortnight of trial. Besides, it would soon be Prize Day, and then Brigitte Pian would have to resign herself to going back to Larjuzon.

"Prize Day soon!" I exclaimed.

Mirbel had a beetle in each hand and was pressing them together.

"They're kissing!" he said, and added without looking at

me: "You don't know what a rotten trick my uncle's thought up if I don't get a good report: I'm not going to be allowed to spend vacation with my mother. I'm not to go to La Devize at all. I'm to be sent to board with a priest, the Curé of Baluzac. It's actually only a few miles from where you live. He's been told to make me work six hours a day and to break me in. . . . I gather that's his line."

"Then why not try to get a good report?"

He shook his head. It couldn't be done; not with Rausch. He'd often tried.

"He never takes his eyes off me. You know my desk's just under his nose. You'd almost think he had nothing to do but watch me. All I have to do is glance out of the window . . ."

It was true enough, and nothing could be done to help Mirbel. I promised that if he spent his holidays at Baluzac I'd see a lot of him. I knew Monsieur Calou, the Curé, very well. There was nothing especially terrible about him. As a matter of fact, he was very decent.

"No, he's horrible. My uncle says that bad boys are sent to him to be broken in. I've heard that he drove the two Bailaud boys nearly crazy. But I won't let him lay a finger on me."

Perhaps the Curé of Baluzac was kind only to me? I didn't know what to say to Mirbel. I suggested that perhaps his mother, who never saw him, wouldn't give up the chance of having him home for the holidays.

"She will, if he says so. She does everything he wants!" replied Mirbel in a fury. I realized that he was very close to tears.

"How about letting me help you with your lessons?"

He shook his head. He had too much back work to make

up. Besides, Rausch would spot it. "Whenever I hand in a decent exercise he always accuses me of cribbing."

At that moment Rausch put a whistle to his lips. He wore a long frock-coat with stains down the front. In spite of its being summer, he still had his feet stuffed into padded felt slippers. His crinkled, carrotty hair grew well back from a bony forehead covered with pimples. His eyes were of different colors and blinked from beneath reddened lids. We marched off in a long line towards the dining-hall. I hated the smell of greasy soup that came from it. It was still broad daylight but no sky was visible through the dirty windows. I noticed that Mirbel was the only boy at our table who did not eat ravenously. The Papal Zouave had hit on the one punishment that could get under his ward's skin—spending the holidays with the Curé of Baluzac, away from his mother. I should be able, with my bicycle, to see him every day. I felt a little stab of happiness. I would speak about Jean to the Curé who was so kind to me and let me gather nuts in his garden. True, I was "young Pian," the stepson of Madame Brigitte, his "benefactress." But that made it all the better. I would ask my stepmother to intercede on Jean's behalf. I told him as much on our way upstairs to the dormitory. Twenty of us slept in a room that was ventilated by one window only, which gave on to the rue Leyteire. At the foot of each bed stood a washstand with a basin. In this we put our tooth-glasses in such a way that the man who came round with a jug could fill both glasses and basins at the same time. In five minutes we were all undressed and in bed. The assistant master, Monsieur Puybaraud, lowered the gas, and in a trembling voice recited three prayers which brought the tears to my eyes. I cried because I was lonely, because some day I should have to die, because I was thinking of my mother. I was thirteen. She had been dead for six years. She

had vanished so quickly! One evening she had kissed me, so full of life and sweetness, and the next day . . . the horse had bolted and brought home the trap empty. I never knew how the accident had happened. No one had told me much about it, and my father, now that he had married again, never mentioned his first wife's name. As though to make up for that, my stepmother often exhorted me to pray for the dead woman. She used to ask me each evening whether I had a thought for her. She seemed to believe that Mamma had more need of prayers than other dead people. She had always known my mother, who had been her cousin, and had sometimes invited her to the house during the holidays. "You ought to ask your cousin Brigitte to come to Larjuzon," said my father. "She can't afford a holiday: she gives away all she has. . . ." My mother would do her best to stand out against this appeal, although she professed to admire Brigitte. Perhaps she was afraid of her. That, at any rate, was what my sister Michèle thought. "Mamma saw through her: she knew only too well what an influence her cousin had over Papa."

I attached little importance to such statements. But my stepmother's exhortations made an impression on me. It was only too true that Mamma had had no time in which to prepare herself for death. The sort of education I had had helped me to understand Brigitte's insistence. It was indeed necessary that I should intercede for that poor departed spirit.

That evening, snuffling beneath the sheets, I had begun to tell my beads for Mamma while Monsieur Puybaraud lowered the gas until he had reduced the butterfly of flame to no more than a bluish flicker. He took off his frock-coat and started on a last round of the beds. The rhythmic breathing of the sleepers was already audible. As he passed close

by me he must have heard the sob that I was doing my best to smother, for he came close and laid his hand on my tear-stained cheek. With a sigh he tucked me in as Mamma used to do, and then, bending down suddenly, kissed me on the forehead. I flung my arms round his neck and kissed his bristly cheek. He crept away very quietly to his cubicle. I could see his shadow moving behind the thin curtain.

Almost every evening Monsieur Puybaraud consoled me in the same way. "Much too soft-hearted, and dangerously oversensitive," said my stepmother, who had a good deal to do with him, since he acted as general secretary to the Charity Organization.

A few days later when my parents returned to Bordeaux and the butler came at about six to take me home, I ran into Monsieur Puybaraud, who seemed to have been on the lookout for me, in the yard. After smoothing back my hair from my forehead with his rather damp hand, he gave me a sealed letter which he begged me to post. This I promised to do, astonished that he had not given the letter to the censor, whose business it was to take charge of the school correspondence.

I waited until I was in the street before reading the address. The envelope bore the name of Mademoiselle Octavia Tronche, teacher at the Free School, rue Parmentade, Bordeaux. I knew her well. She used to come to the house between her classes, and my stepmother employed her on various tasks. On the reverse side of the envelope, in a fair round hand, Monsieur Puybaraud had written: *Go, little letter, and bring to my heart a gleam of hope. . . .* Walking a few paces behind the butler, who had put my satchel under his arm, I read and reread this strange invocation. I pondered over it there on the pavement of the Cours Victor-Hugo, just

where it joins the rue Sainte-Cathérine, in the dusk of the evening before Prize Day. And in my nostrils was the faint smell of absinthe.

2

IT was then that I was guilty of the first bad action of my life—of an action, I mean, the thought of which even now fills me with a sense of remorse. Monsieur Puybaraud had made no attempt to extract from me any promise about the letter, but I knew, nevertheless, that he regarded me as more deserving of his trust than any of my comrades. I tried later to persuade myself that I had not realized what was at stake for the assistant master. That is not true. I understood perfectly well what was involved, and had a pretty shrewd idea of the dramatic touch that his semireligious cast of mind gave to the incident. It was a matter of common knowledge that he belonged to a lay society (now long since dispersed), a sort of Third Order, the members of which were bound by no vows. Sometimes, indeed quite frequently, one or other of the so-called “Brethren” would, with the consent of his superiors, leave the Community in order to marry. But Monsieur Puybaraud’s position was rather peculiar. His work kept him in close contact with the diocesan officials of the Charity Organization Society, and with several of the boys’ parents. Everyone in the town knew him, and not only the higher clergy and the rich middle-class families. He was a familiar figure in the poorest slums, where the children flocked round him as soon as he appeared at the corner of a street: for he always brought them candy. His frock-coat and the curious high beaver hat that he

affected drew no surprised glances. His kindly face looked longer than it was by reason of the short whiskers that stopped at the level of his cheekbones. In summer he held his hat in his hand, and continually mopped his bald forehead and the sparse, silky hair which he wore long behind. His small features were almost too "pretty" for a man. There was about his eyes something of the look of a wounded animal, and his hands were always damp. My stepmother was loud in praise of his virtues, though she held strong views on the subject of his "excessive and morbid sensibility." I, of all people, should have kept myself from mentioning to her the secret of his letter, but it was precisely to her that I burned to impart my knowledge. The possession of it filled me with a sense of self-importance. Young as I was, I wanted to shock, to scandalize. Nevertheless, I was too frightened to say anything so long as other members of the family were present.

I have a vivid recollection of that evening. The flat that my father had consented to lease was on the second floor of a house in the Cours de l'Intendance. On summer evenings the noise of traffic on the cobblestones and the clang of the electric cars—which had only recently begun to operate in the city—made conversation difficult. A fortnight spent in the country had brought the color back to my father's cheeks, and the prospect of the approaching holidays had put him in a good humor. At a word from his wife, however, he left the table to put on a bow tie and a black coat. She could not bear the untidy clothes that he always wore at Larjuzon.

In spite of the heat she had on a high-necked dress with a lace collar that swathed her to the ears. Her large face, with its heavy, lusterless cheeks, was surmounted by a mass of hair puffed out with curls, and kept in place by an almost