

Foreword

Calèse. A country house set deep amid the pines and vines of Bordeaux. In one of the bedrooms an old man is writing a kind of letter to his wife, who moves about in the rooms and garden below, with their children and grandchildren. It is a letter she will receive only after his death, an event he does not expect to be long postponed. Louis is a successful advocate, speculator, landowner. The grandson of peasants, he married into the bourgeoisie and now presides over an extended family of dependants who hate and fear him as heartily as he despises them. They are afraid that he is going somehow to cheat them of their inheritance – rightly so, for that is exactly what he is plotting. The letter is to explain to his wife the how and the why – especially the why – of this vindictive plan. When she opens his safe after his death, hoping to find securities, she will find only a gloatingly malevolent epistle from beyond the grave.

Evidently Louis is not a very nice man. Nor does he claim to be one. He is well aware of his emotional frigidity, his lack of grace and physical charm, his mean and miserly habits. There was a brief period, in the early days of his marriage, when the conviction that he was loved gave him a glimpse of that normal, uncomplicated human happiness from which he had always felt himself excluded. But Isa's rash confession, one sleepless summer night, of an aborted romance with another man before their engagement, and a hint of her parents' self-interested motives for encouraging that engagement, were enough to disillusion Louis. From that moment their relationship began to cool. Isa withdrew into motherhood and conventional Catholic piety. Louis accumulated wealth, resorted discreetly to prostitutes, and made a point of missing Mass on Sundays and eating meat on Fridays.

We learn all this from Louis's own account, for his letter turns

into a confessional autobiography. And in the process, a strange thing happens: the deeper he probes into old emotional wounds – the death of his beloved daughter Marie, his one *affaire* with a grateful client, his dangerous attraction to his unhappy sister-in-law, Marinette, and his genuine love for her son Luc – the more his narrative comes to seem like a confession in the original, religious sense of the word: an admission of guilt, an acknowledgement of some source of transcendent value beyond the purely selfish and materialistic. Louis actually reaches the point of pondering a different use for his lengthening manuscript.

Suppose I don't wait until I am dead to let you see these pages? Suppose I beg you, in the name of your God, to persevere with them to the end? Suppose I wait until you have reached the last word? Suppose I saw you come into my room with tear-stained face and open arms? Suppose I asked your pardon? Suppose we knelt down, side by side, and prayed?

“God,” François Mauriac wrote elsewhere, “is the good temptation to which many men in the end succumb.” But before Louis can bring himself to do so, he overhears his children conspiring against him, and his desire for vengeance returns. There are many twists and turns in the story, many ploys and counter-ploys by the embattled miser and his rapacious family, before Louis is startled into a total reevaluation of “that lost cause, my life”.

Originally published in 1932, *The Knot of Vipers* was the first novel François Mauriac wrote following a spiritual crisis of his own in middle life. He had, of course, been brought up as a Catholic, like most members of the French provincial bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century, and practised a more than nominal Catholicism as an adult. His early novels manifested a deep imaginative interest in religion, especially as it affected sexual behaviour and morality. But to many of Mauriac's co-religionists these novels were morally

compromised by the seductive concreteness with which they portrayed the temptations of the flesh and the workings of desire in the human psyche; and they were often condemned by Catholic commentators on this account.

Mauriac seemed to admit, in an essay entitled “Sufferings of a Sinner”, published in 1928, that he found the claims of sensuality and spirituality irreconcilable; and to renounce the former in favour of the latter in another essay, “Sufferings of a Christian”, the following year. Thenceforth he tried consciously to write fiction that would not be contaminated by the sin it described. Many critics (especially non-Catholic ones) have deplored the effect of this “conversion” on Mauriac’s later fiction (see, for example, Conor Cruise O’Brien’s *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Catholic Writers* 1954; revised edition 1963). But they invariably make an exception of *The Knot of Vipers*, which is therefore Mauriac’s last undisputed masterpiece. If there was ever such a thing as the “Catholic novel”, this is a classic example of the genre. It has all the ingredients: the idea of the sinner being “at the heart of Christianity” (Péguy’s phrase), the idea of “mystical substitution” (little Marie’s self-sacrifice), the implied critique of materialism, the tireless pursuit of the erring soul by God, “the Hound of Heaven” in Francis Thompson’s famous metaphor. Yet it is also a novel that has proved readily accessible and deeply rewarding to readers of various religious persuasions, or none. How was this achieved?

Partly, perhaps, because the moral focus of the book, the “sin” with which it is primarily concerned, is avarice rather than lust – the destructive effect of avarice on human relationships – and the human spirit being a less controversial theme than the evil consequences of illicit sexual passion. Not that sexuality (mostly guilty or frustrated) is excluded from the moral landscape of *The Knot of Vipers*, but its manifestations are symptomatic of a more deep-seated *malaise*, which runs through the entire social milieu of the novel. Acquisitiveness,

possessiveness, greed, and an obsessive concern with consolidating family fortune at any cost, were deeply characteristic of the class and region from which Mauriac himself came, and in this novel he draws a deadly portrait of these things. If the reader is able to sympathise, even to identify, with Louis, it is because of the venality and hypocrisy of those who oppose him. “They have spent their lives giving high-sounding names to sordid instincts,” he observes. One of the most memorable images in the novel is that of his son, Hubert, leaving the church where he has been conspiring against his father, dipping his finger in the holy-water stoup, turning to the High Altar, and making “a flamboyant sign of the cross”. Louis’s long, stubborn resistance to religious faith is partly explained and justified by the ugly face of nominal Christianity exhibited by most of his relations, as Mauriac himself observes in a prefatory note.

This authorial comment is, however, redundant, and regrettable inasmuch as it seems to betray the writer’s loss of faith in his own method. This method – making Louis the narrator of his own story – is perhaps the most important single key to the novel’s effectiveness. Religious testimony is far more persuasive, especially to a secular audience, from the lips of an ostensibly sceptical and irreligious witness (a lesson Graham Greene learned and applied to outstanding effect in *The End of the Affair*). Furthermore, the complex interweaving of past and present in Louis’s narrative, the restless shuttling of his thoughts between what happened years ago, what happened a few hours or moments ago, and what he expects to happen in the future, involves the reader in a process of constant interpretation and (as fresh facts come to light) reinterpretation that mirrors the central character’s quest for truth and peace.

Finally, one must mention the “sense of place” for which Mauriac is justly famous, but which is evoked with incomparable vividness in *The Knot of Vipers*. Calèse was based on Mauriac’s

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own family home. The sultry, suffocating heat of summer afternoons, the cool and fragrant mornings, the smell of distant heath-fires, the dreaded rumble of thunder above the ripening grapes – with such details Mauriac creates a landscape which is both realistically convincing and subtly symbolic of the shifting moods and seasons of a man’s inner life. The best short description of Mauriac’s art is his own: “I am a metaphysician who works in the concrete.”

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