

PRISONER OF GOD

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ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD
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243–253 Lower Mortlake Road
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United Kingdom
www.almabooks.com

Prisoner of God first published in French as *Prisonnier de Dieu*
by Fixot in 1994
First published by Alma Books Limited in 2008
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Printed in Great Britain by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading

ISBN: 978-1-84688-052-0

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*To the memory of my uncle Maurice, who is dead.
To Monique, who is living.
To Isabel Ellsen, my sister,
without whom I should never have had
the courage for this book.*

All resemblance to characters or situations in real life is inescapable. The identity of persons still living has therefore been disguised. For the dead – may God preserve their souls – real names are used.

PRISONER OF GOD

I've set the alarm for five in the sixth-floor bedroom I'm using. Yesterday I lunched with Uncle. He asked me:

“It's to be tomorrow then?”

His tone was anxious, with a pretence of detachment.

“Yes.”

“Does your mother know?”

“No. Please don't tell her.”

The alarm has gone off. It's still dark. I'm acting like a robot, with all the time in the world... I sit down at the table and write my mother a note. The manner is theatrical, like everything that's been said this last year: “When you read these lines I shall be gone...”

I've descended the dark staircase and placed the keys by the kitchen sink. The bedroom upstairs is empty now, just a sheet of paper on the table...

I've not been able to eat. It's as though the climax of so much tension and strife has left me crushed. Every action is charged with significance: I'm leaving the keys where she'll notice them. She'll understand, go upstairs. I don't want to think of her shock at seeing the empty room. Without closing the door, she'll go to the table; sit down sideways, uncomfortably, to read. She'll not finish, as tears will cloud her eyes. Then she'll slam the door shut, collapse onto the bed, and sob.

She'll go downstairs and start boiling a kettle for tea, looking away – moving slowly, wiping the lonely tears.

I've taken the metro: the station's grey and cold. The carriage is empty to start with, then one passenger, I think. I'm leaning against the window, letting the suburbs and dismal countryside pass before my gaze. I'm carrying within me a whole world of longings and of struggles.

* * *

Suddenly there before me stands the abbey, utterly still, awesome. A moment of hesitation: I step forward and ring the monastery bell. Nothing but silence.

It's Brother Roger who's let me in. Once inside, I put down my suitcase and say simply: "Right, then." He's wearing a broad smile that lights up his pale face beneath a close-shaven scalp. I wait for the Father Guest Master; his mysterious whisper is my introduction to the world of the abbey. He leads me to a reception room – bare, cold, where the voice makes weird echoes. We don't know what to say: he jokes, I give mechanical replies.

The Novice Master arrives: a large man in a black habit, he seems to take everything as a matter of course. He picks up my case, not heavy. He conducts me to an internal chapel and kneels; I copy him, my mind a blank. Then up a well-lit staircase, the treads covered in dark-green plastic.

On the first floor, at the end of a vast, broad corridor, is a glazed partition labelled in yellowish letters "Novices". We've not exchanged a word since the reception room. Six doors open onto this area (from which there's no other exit), and into each door at eye level is set a window of rough glass. He stops at the first door on the right and opens it. From now on this is my cell.

I'm twenty-two years old, with two degrees and work experience. I speak four languages. I'm what they call a "bright lad", with a high market value.

I step gingerly into the cell ahead of the Novice Master. He puts my case down near the door.

I have chosen death.

In my suitcase are just two shirts, so convinced am I that I can't stay more than a week: they'll get me out again; it can't last...

It lasted twenty-one years.

Part One

Can do better

1

The vestiges of a childhood are of interest only if they clarify what is to follow: there is little remaining to me from those early years that might explain the strangeness of my life.

When Chancellor Hitler decided on war, my grandfather, sensible man, sent his barely married daughter off overseas. My father had a family in the French colony of Madagascar: those youngsters would be safe there, more so than in Paris. They were put onboard ship at Toulon a few hours after the wedding. My mother was in tears. It must have been in the Suez Canal that I was conceived. A good start.

Madagascar afforded me an infancy of aromas and affection. My grandfather there, a genuine count from old Bordeaux nobility, was a bank manager at Tamatave on the coast. We often used to visit him, for the holidays – was I three, or four? Well, one memorable day my countess-grandmother took me onto a sun-drenched station platform. We boarded a small local train; the only people in the carriage were whites. The blacks were on the platform – you could see little caps and frizzy hair. My grandmother leant out of the window and reappeared with some lychees, warm and well rounded, which she cut open with a small penknife. There was no forgetting it: a spurt of juice, and then a sweetness in the mouth, soft and firm, like a tongue that rested on my tongue and fondled it. And a flavour, a penetrating flavour that spread right into my head. There were several opportunities to repeat the experience, as the train jolted from side to side, but I remained conscious only of that sensation, the first to teach me what pleasure might be.

Madagascar – it meant, first, the joy of being alive. My parents were young and dependent on their family, but it did not cost

much to live well, and my mother had the services of three or four “boys”. Each of them had his function and would have felt demeaned to perform another. Every day I used to see the boy who did the floors scrubbing them with a half-coconut strapped to his right foot: he hummed to himself as he hopped along on his left leg, burnishing the floorboards to a fine sheen with his nut. Then there was the cook, who treasured up the handkerchiefs that my mother gave him and went on blowing his nose with his fingers as he cooked.

I was the first baby of the family: so I was king, and made the most of it. I was put in the care of a “*nénène*”, who might elsewhere have been called my governess, but who was first and foremost all my own, just as I became more than her child: her little blond idol. She enveloped me in a love that matched herself: generous, buxom, overpowering, full of laughter and kisses. My mother was just a young girl: Razanne, older than her, was my African mummy, anxious, protective, life bursting from her at every moment. When it was time to go out, it was she who checked that the red lining of my straw hat was properly tucked inside:

“You must un’stand, Missel dear, zat ze red, it ssades you better from ze sun; zat’s what your gran’mozer said.”

Whenever I achieved something for the first time she went into raptures, exploding with laughter: she would move away from me clapping her hands, then turn round and do a little dance on her bare feet before covering me with kisses.

It was you, my Razanne, who used to take me to Tamatave beach. We would go along paths bordered with clove trees, their strong scent mingling with that of the sea-spray, for the surf was close by, the waves as high as houses, the sound deafening. There you took off my clothes, and we would lie down on the wet sand where the tongues of foaming water would come to caress us. You never took off your dress; it clung to your body, to its heavy contours. *For the Negro, to be naked is neither good nor bad; it’s a matter of convenience. But the Whites have taught us that it’s shameful, something to hide like a deformity.* So, in the presence

of her little blond idol on the empty beach, Razanne kept her dress well wrapped round her and then dashed with him into the ocean foam. If I ran away, she would run after me raising ramparts of water:

“Missel, Missel, Missel!”

I think she relished my first name: she had only to use it for me to belong to her completely.

The day would come for us to leave the island of aromas and return home to France. A photograph taken a little while before our departure shows Razanne hugging in her arms a child already big, blond and good-looking. But her eyes show a kind of wild despair, a sadness beyond measure.

A year and a half after our return to France, a letter informed us that Razanne had just died. She was perhaps between thirty and forty and had a family, I suppose. But I knew nothing of her outside my home.

For the present it was war. Madagascar having remained loyal to the Vichy government, our number-one enemies were the British, who had told themselves that the big island would make a useful addition to their staging posts to India.

Well, the British landed one day, at the time when I was just beginning to speak. So it was that my first words were uttered from a pram pushed by Razanne, as I passed three of His Majesty’s soldiers crossing the road, baton beneath the arm:

“You British pigs!”

This did not actually change the course of the war; but Razanne spent the whole evening touring the town:

“And zen ’e looked zem full in ze face, my Missel, and zen ’e said to zem you know what? ’E said to zem: ‘You Britiss pigs’ – zat’s what ’e said!”

And there were hoots of laughter and dancing.

My father, having nothing else to do, joined the forces – never mind which forces or what they were fighting for. What was for sure was that the army took up his time and he was often away. And already my mother’s voice was becoming hollow with an