

GRAZIA DELEDDA

The Mother

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CHAPTER I

TO-NIGHT again Paul was preparing to go out, it seemed.

From her room adjoining his the mother could hear him moving about furtively, perhaps waiting to go out until she should have extinguished her light and got into bed.

She put out her light, but she did not get into bed.

Seated close against the door, she clasped her hands tightly together, those work-worn hands of a servant, pressing the thumbs one upon the other to give herself courage; but every moment her uneasiness increased and overcame her obstinate hope that her son would sit down quietly, as he used to do, and begin to read, or else go to bed. For a few minutes, indeed, the young priest's cautious steps were silent. She felt herself all alone. Outside, the noise of the wind mingled with the murmuring of the trees which grew on the ridge of high ground behind the little presbytery; not a high wind, but incessant, monotonous, that sounded as though it were enveloping the house in some creaking, invisible band, ever closer and closer, trying to uproot it from its foundations and drag it to the ground.

The mother had already closed the house door and barricaded it with two crossed bars, in order to prevent the devil, who on windy nights roams abroad in search of souls, from penetrating into the house. As a matter of fact, however, she put little faith in such things. And now she reflected

with bitterness, and a vague contempt of herself, that the evil spirit was already inside the little presbytery, that it drank from her Paul's cup and hovered about the mirror he had hung on the wall near his window.

Just then she heard Paul moving about again. Perhaps he was actually standing in front of the mirror, although that was forbidden to priests. But what had Paul not allowed himself for some considerable time now?

The mother remembered that lately she had several times come upon him gazing at himself in the glass like any woman, cleaning and polishing his nails, or brushing his hair, which he had left to grow long and then turned back over his head, as though trying to conceal the holy mark of the tonsure. And then he made use of perfumes, he brushed his teeth with scented powder, and even combed out his eyebrows.

She seemed to see him now as plainly as though the dividing wall did not exist, a black figure against the white background of his room; a tall, thin figure, almost too tall, going to and fro with the heedless steps of a boy, often stumbling and slipping about, but always holding himself erect. His head was a little too large for the thin neck, his face pale and overshadowed by the prominent forehead that seemed to force the brows to frown and the long eyes to droop with the burden of it. But the powerful jaw, the wide, full mouth and the resolute chin seemed in their turn to revolt with scorn against this oppression, yet not be able to throw it off.

But now he halted before the mirror and his whole face lighted up, the eyelids opened to the full and the pupils of his clear brown eyes shone like diamonds.

Actually, in the depths of her maternal heart, his mother delighted to see him so handsome and strong, and then the sound of his furtive steps moving about again recalled her sharply to her anxiety.

He was going out, there could be no more doubt about that. He opened the door of his room and stood still again. Perhaps he, too, was listening to the sounds without, but there was nothing to be heard save the encircling wind beating ever against the house.

The mother made an effort to rise from her chair, to cry out "My son, Paul, child of God, stay here!" but a power stronger than her own will kept her down. Her knees trembled as though trying to rebel against that infernal power; her knees trembled, but her feet refused to move, and it was as though two compelling hands were holding her down upon her seat.

Thus Paul could steal noiselessly downstairs, open the door and go out, and the wind seemed to engulf him and bear him away in a flash.

Only then was she able to rise and light her lamp again. But even this was only achieved with difficulty, because, instead of igniting, the matches left long violet streaks on the wall wherever she struck them. But at last the little brass lamp threw a dim radiance over the small room, bare and poor as that of a servant, and she opened the door and stood there, listening. She was still trembling, yet she moved stiffly and woodenly, and with her large head and her short, broad figure clothed in rusty black she looked as though she had been hewn with an axe, all of a piece, from the trunk of an oak.

From her threshold she looked down the slate stairs descending steeply between whitewashed walls, at the bottom of which the door shook upon its hinges with the violence of the wind. And when she saw the two bars which Paul had unfastened and left leaning against the wall she was filled with sudden wild anger.

Ah no, she must defeat the devil. Then she placed her light on the floor at the top of the stairs, descended and went out, too.

The wind seized hold of her roughly, blowing out her skirts and the handkerchief over her head, as though it were trying to force her back into the house. But she knotted the handkerchief tightly under her chin and pressed forward with bent head, as though butting aside all obstacles in her path. She felt her way past the front of the presbytery, along the wall of the kitchen garden and past the front of the church, but at the corner of the church she paused. Paul had turned there, and swiftly, like some great black bird, his cloak flapping round him, he had almost flown across the field that extended in front of an old house built close against the ridge of land that shut in the horizon above the village.

The uncertain light, now blue, now yellow, as the moon's face shone clear or was traversed by big clouds, illumined the long grass of the field, the little raised piazza, in front of the church and presbytery, and the two lines of cottages on either side of the steep road, which wound on and downwards till it lost itself amidst the trees in the valley. And in the centre of the valley, like another grey and winding road, was the river that flowed on and in its turn lost itself amidst the rivers and roads of the fantastic landscape that the wind-driven clouds alternately revealed and concealed on that distant horizon that lay beyond the valley's edge.

In the village itself not a light was to be seen, nor even a thread of smoke. They were all asleep by now in the poverty-stricken cottages, which clung to the grassy hill-side like two rows of sheep, whilst the church with its slender tower, itself protected by the ridge of land behind it, might well represent the shepherd leaning upon his staff.

The elder trees which grew along the parapet of the piazza before the church were bending and tossing furiously in the wind, black and shapeless monsters in the gloom, and in answer to their rustling cry came the lament of the poplars and reeds in the valley. And in all this dolour of

the night, the moaning wind and the moon drowning midst the angry clouds, was merged the sorrow of the mother seeking for her son.

Until that moment she had tried to deceive herself with the hope that she would see him going before her down into the village to visit some sick parishioner, but instead, she beheld him running as though spurred on by the devil towards the old house under the ridge.

And in that old house under the ridge there was no one save a woman, young, healthy and alone....

Instead of approaching the principal entrance like an ordinary visitor, he went straight to the little door in the orchard wall, and immediately it opened and closed again behind him like a black mouth that had swallowed him up.

Then she too ran across the meadow, treading in the path his feet had made in the long grass; straight to the little door she ran, and she put her open hands against it, pushing with all her strength. But the little door remained closed, it even seemed to repulse her by an active power of its own, and the woman felt she must strike it and cry aloud. She looked at the wall and touched it as though to test its solidity, and at last in despair she bent her head and listened intently. But nothing could be heard save the creaking and rustling of the trees inside the orchard, friends and accomplices of their mistress, trying to cover with their own noises all other sounds there within.

But the mother would not be beaten, she must hear and know—or rather, since in her inmost soul she already knew the truth, she wanted some excuse for still deceiving herself.

Careless now whether she were seen or not, she walked the whole length of the orchard wall, past the front of the house, and beyond it as far as the big gate of the courtyard; and as she went she touched the stones as though seeking one that would give way and leave a hole whereby she might enter in. But everything was solid, compact, fast shut—the big entrance gate, the hall door, the barred windows were like the openings in a fortress.

At that moment the moon emerged from behind the clouds and shone out clear in a lake of blue, illuminating the reddish frontage of the house, which was partly overshadowed by the deep eaves of the overhanging grass-grown roof; the inside shutters of the windows were closed and the panes of glass shone like greenish mirrors, reflecting the drifting clouds and the patches of blue sky and the tossing branches of the trees upon the ridge.

Then she turned back, striking her head against the iron rings let into the wall for tethering horses. Again she halted in front of the chief entrance, and before that big door with its three granite steps, its Gothic porch and iron gate, she felt suddenly humiliated, powerless to succeed, smaller even than when, as a little girl, she had loitered near with other poor children of the village, waiting till the master of the house should come out and fling them a few pence.

It had happened sometimes in those far-off days that the door had been left wide open and had afforded a view into a dark entrance hall, paved with stone and furnished with stone seats. The children had shouted at this and thrust themselves forward even to the threshold, their voices re-echoing in the interior of the house as in a cave. Then a servant had appeared to drive them away.

"What! You here, too, Maria Maddalena! Aren't you ashamed to go running about with those boys, a great girl like you?"

And she, the girl, had shrunk back abashed, but nevertheless she had turned to stare curiously at the mysterious inside of the house. And just so did she shrink back now and move away, wringing her hands in despair and staring again at the little door which had swallowed up her Paul like a trap. But as she retraced her steps and walked homeward again she began to regret that she had not shouted, that she had not thrown stones at the door and compelled those inside to open it and let her try to rescue her son. She repented her weakness, stood still, irresolute, turned back, then homewards again, drawn this way and that by her tormenting anxiety, uncertain what to do: until at last the instinct of self-preservation, the need of collecting her thoughts and concentrating her strength for the decisive battle, drove her home as a wounded animal takes refuge in its lair.

The instant she got inside the presbytery she shut the door and sat down heavily on the bottom stair. From the top of the staircase came the dim flickering light of the lamp, and everything within the little house, up to now as steady and quiet as a nest built in some crevice of the rocks, seemed to swing from side to side: the rock was shaken to its foundations and the nest was falling to the ground.

Outside the wind moaned and whistled more loudly still; the devil was destroying the presbytery, the church, the whole world of Christians.

"Oh Lord, oh Lord!" wailed the mother, and her voice sounded like the voice of some other woman speaking.

Then she looked at her own shadow on the staircase wall and nodded to it. Truly, she felt that she was not alone, and she began to talk as though another person were there with her, listening and replying.

"What can I do to save him?"

"Wait here till he comes in, and then speak to him plainly and firmly whilst you are still in time, Maria Maddalena."

"But he would get angry and deny it all. It would be better to go to the Bishop and beg him to send us away from this place of perdition. The Bishop is a man of God and knows the world. I will kneel at his feet; I can almost see him now, dressed all in white, sitting in his red reception room, with his golden cross shining on his breast and two fingers raised in benediction. He looks like our Lord Himself! I shall say to him: Monsignore, you know that the parish of Aar, besides being the poorest in the kingdom, lies under a curse. For nearly a hundred years it was without a priest and the inhabitants forgot God entirely; then at last a priest came here, but Monsignore knows what manner of man he was. Good and holy till he was fifty years of age: he restored the presbytery and the church, built a bridge across the river at his own expense, and went out shooting and shared the common life of the shepherds and hunters. Then suddenly he changed and became as evil as the devil. He practised sorcery. He began to drink and grew overbearing and passionate. He used to smoke a pipe and swear, and he would sit on the ground playing cards with the worst ruffians of the place, who liked him and protected him, however, and for this very reason the others let him alone. Then, during his latter years, he shut himself up in the presbytery all alone without even a servant, and he never went outside the door except to say Mass, but he always said it before dawn, so that nobody ever went. And they say he used to celebrate when he was drunk. His parishioners were too frightened to bring any accusation against him, because it was said that he was protected by the devil in person. And then when he fell ill there was not a woman who would go and nurse him. Neither woman nor man, of the decent sort, went to help him through his last days, and yet at night every window in the presbytery was lighted up; and the people said that during those last nights the devil had dug an underground passage from this house to the river,

through which to carry away the mortal remains of the priest. And by this passage the spirit of the priest used to come back in the years that followed his death and haunt the presbytery, so that no other priest would ever come to live here. A priest used to come from another village every Sunday to say Mass and bury the dead, but one night the spirit of the dead priest destroyed the bridge, and after that for ten years the parish was without a priest, until my Paul came. And I came with him. We found the village and its inhabitants grown quite wild and uncivilized, without faith at all, but everything revived again after my Paul came, like the earth at the return of the spring. But the superstitious were right, disaster will fall upon the new priest because the spirit of the old one still reigns in the presbytery. Some say that he is not dead and that he lives in an underground dwelling communicating with the river. I myself have never believed in such tales, nor have I ever heard any noises. For seven years we have lived here, my Paul and I, as in a little convent. Until a short time ago Paul led the life of an innocent child, he studied and prayed and lived only for the good of his parishioners. Sometimes he used to play the flute. He was not merry by nature, but he was calm and quiet. Seven years of peace and plenty have we had, like those in the Bible. My Paul never drank, he did not go out shooting, he did not smoke and he never looked at a woman. All the money he could save he put aside to rebuild the bridge below the village. He is twenty-eight years old, is my Paul, and now the curse has fallen upon him. A woman has caught him in her net. Oh, my Lord Bishop, send us away from here; save my Paul, for otherwise he will lose his soul as did the former priest! And the woman must be saved, too. After all, she is a woman living alone and she has her temptations also in that lonely house, midst the desolation of this little village where there is nobody fit to bear her company. My Lord Bishop, your Lordship knows that woman, you were her guest with all your following when you came here on your pastoral visitation. There is room and stuff to spare, in that house! And the woman

is rich, independent, alone, too much alone! She has brothers and a sister, but they are all far away, married and living in other countries. She remained here alone to look after the house and the property, and she seldom goes out. And until a little while ago my Paul did not even know her. Her father was a strange sort of man, half gentleman, half peasant, a hunter and a heretic. He was a friend of the old priest, and I need say no more. He never went to church, but during his last illness he sent for my Paul, and my Paul stayed with him till he died and gave him a funeral such as had never been seen in these parts. Every single person in the village went to it, even the babies were carried in their mothers' arms. Then afterwards my Paul went on visiting the only survivor of that household. And this orphan girl lives alone with bad servants. Who directs her, who advises her? Who is there to help her if we do not?"

Then the other woman asked her:

"Are you certain of this, Maria Maddalena? Are you really sure that what you think is true? Can you actually go before the Bishop and speak thus about your son and that other person, and prove it? And suppose it should not be true?"

"Oh Lord, oh Lord!"

She buried her face in her hands, and immediately there rose before her the vision of her Paul and the woman together in a ground-floor room in the old house. It was a very large room looking out into the orchard, with a domed ceiling, and the floor was of pounded cement with which small sea-shells and pebbles had been mixed; on one side was an immense fireplace, to right and left of which stood an arm-chair and in front was an antique sofa. The whitewashed walls were adorned with arms, stags' heads and antlers, and paintings whose blackened canvases hung in tatters, little of

the subjects being distinguishable in the shadows save here and there a dusky hand, some vestige of a face, of a woman's hair, or bunch of fruit.

Paul and the woman were seated in front of the fire, clasping each other's hands.

"Oh, my God!" came the mother's moaning cry.

And in order to banish that diabolic vision she evoked another. It was the same room again, but illumined now by the greenish light that came through the barred window looking out over the meadow and the door which opened direct from the room into the orchard, and through which she saw the trees and foliage gleaming, still wet with the autumn dew. Some fallen leaves were blown softly about the floor and the chains of the antique brass lamp that stood upon the mantelshelf swung to and fro in the draught. Through a half-open door on the other side she could see other rooms, all somewhat dark and with closed windows.

She stood there waiting, with a present of fruit which her Paul had sent to the mistress of the house. And then the mistress came, with a quickened step and yet a little shy; she came from the dark rooms, dressed in black, her pale face framed between two great knots of black plaits, and her thin white hands emerging from the shadows like those in the pictures on the wall.

And even when she came close and stood in the full light of the room there was about her small slender figure something evanescent, doubtful. Her large dark eyes fell instantly on the basket of fruit standing on the table, then turned with a searching look upon the woman who stood waiting, and a swift smile, half joy, half contempt, passed over the sad and sensual curves of her lips.

And in that moment, though she knew not how or why, the first suspicion stirred in the mother's heart.

She could not have explained the reason why, but her memory dwelt on the eagerness with which the girl had welcomed her, making her sit down beside her and asking for news of Paul. She called him Paul as a sister might have done, but she did not treat her as though she were their common mother, but rather as a rival who must be flattered and deceived. She ordered coffee for her, which was served on a large silver tray by a barefoot maid whose face was swathed like an Arab's. She talked of her two brothers, both influential men living far away, taking secret delight in picturing herself between these two, as between columns supporting the fabric of her solitary life. And then at last she led the visitor out to see the orchard, through the door opening straight from the room.

Big purple figs covered with a silver sheen, pears, and great bunches of golden grapes hung amidst the vivid green of the trees and vines. Why should Paul send a gift of fruit to one who possessed so much already?

Even now, sitting on the stairs in the dim light of the flickering lamp, the mother could see again the look, at once ironical and tender, which the girl had turned upon her as she bade her farewell, and the manner in which she lowered her heavy eyelids as though she knew no other way of hiding the feelings her eyes betrayed too plainly. And those eyes, and that way of revealing her soul in a sudden flash of truth and then instantly drawing back into herself again, was extraordinarily like Paul. So much so that during the days following, when because of his manner and his reserve her suspicions grew and filled her heart with fear, she did not think with any hatred of the woman who was leading him into sin, but she thought only of